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Aporetic Experience in Contemporary British Speculative Theatre. Towards Another Mode of Utopian Thinking

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**Aporetic Experience in Contemporary British
Speculative Theatre
Towards Another Mode of Utopian Thinking**

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INTRODUCTION

We are always already entangled in webs of narratives. They are integral to the world that precedes us, and they make it possible for us to develop into subjects who are capable of narrating their experiences, sharing them with others, and telling their own versions of the stories they have inherited. Each cultural and historical world functions as a *space of possibilities* that encourages certain modes of experience, thought, and action, and discourages or disallows others, and stories play a constitutive role in establishing the limits of these worlds—both enabling experience and delimiting it.

(Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History and the Possible*)

MOE It's *all* real.
All of it.
Everything bad is real.

...

And this is where the roads meet. This is an inevitability.

...

And I don't care what happens to me.
But you're in this. You're involved.

(Alistair McDowall, *Pomona*)

The title of this thesis contains three key elements: 'aporetic experience', 'speculative theatre' and 'utopian thinking'. These terms denote the embodied practices of three different but interconnected concepts: aporia, speculation and utopia. The definition and application of these concepts have gone through a long process of transformation. Despite the emergence of dominant theories and interpretations in certain parts of the world or during specific historical periods, 'aporia', 'speculation' and 'utopia' remain relevant in contemporary society, not by providing claims of certainty but by their ability to accommodate contradictions and stimulate critical reflection. In linking the three concepts, this thesis examines how speculative theatre of the twenty-first century reconfigures utopianism by embracing aporia; simultaneously, it strives to elucidate the implications of this paradigm shift in utopian theory and practice on the question of theatre's social and political engagement.

The urge to speculate, to envision different worlds, is perhaps as old as the human imagination itself. The plausibility of what is speculated or imagined does not determine its political relevancy. The significance of the speculating act lies in its capacity to explicitly or implicitly interrogate the *status quo*, through the content and form of the narratives but also through the reception and interpretation of these narratives at a particular time. In other words,

speculation, as understood in this thesis, denotes a participatory act that occupies a fictive or in-between space neither wholly removed from reality nor a mere extension of existing conditions. The traditional theatre medium, due to its performative nature, its emphasis on the materiality of the body and the stage as well as on representation, is said to be representative of this state of in-betweenness.¹ Accordingly, the theatre presents itself as one of the most suitable media and venues to explore the expressions and implications of speculation. Within the field of contemporary British theatre alone, in the last five years, there have been many articles discussing various aspects of speculative fiction seen on stage, which attests to the growing interest in the topic among playwrights, the audience and critics alike.² Nevertheless, to my knowledge, there has yet to be any study that attempts to unify these aspects under the inclusive category of ‘speculative theatre’. As a result, this thesis is written in the hope of enriching and corroborating existing critical works while also suggesting future directions for the studies of ‘speculative theatre’.

All nineteen contemporary British plays selected for this research fall under the encompassing and loosely defined category of speculative fiction, which comprises many genres and subgenres in various media rather than the kind generally taken to be anonymous

¹ Michel Foucault specifically mentions theatre as an example of heterotopia in his lecture note: theatre ‘has the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves’. Michel Foucault, ‘Different Spaces’, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 2 *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 181.

² See for instance, Merle Tönnies, ‘The Immobility of Power in British Political Theatre after 2000: Absurdist Dystopias’, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 5, no. 1 (2017): 156-72; Ian Farnell, ‘Utopian Dreams, Dystopian Realities in Lucy Kirkwood and Anne Washburn’, *Foundation* 46, no. 128 (2017): 38-47; Dan Rebellato, ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Theatre: British Drama, Violence and Writing’, *Sillages critiques* 22 (2017); Carlo Vareschi, ‘The Discreet Charm of Apocalypse: Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* at the Royal Court’, *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 181-92; Kelly Jones, Benjamin Poore, and Robert Dean, ed. *Contemporary Gothic Drama: Attraction, Consummation and Consumption on the Modern British Stage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Ian Farnell, ‘Science Fiction and the Theatre of Alistair McDowall’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 29, no. 2 (2019): 121-37; Dorothee Birke, ‘(Play)Houses of Horror: Addressing the Anxieties of the Housing Crisis’, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 7, no. 1 (2019): 89-106; Trish Reid, ‘The Dystopian Near-future in Contemporary British Drama’, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 7, no. 1 (2019): 72-88; Ian Farnell, ‘Science, Science Fiction, and Nick Payne’s *Elegy*: A Conceptual Third Way’, *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 40, no.2 (2020): 206-23; Eckart Voigts and Merle Tönnies, ‘Posthuman Dystopia: Animal Surrealism and Permanent Crisis in Contemporary British Theatre’, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 8, no. 2 (2020): 295-312; Hoda Salem, ‘Science Fiction on Stage: Dystopia in Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away*’, *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies* 9, no.2 (February 2021): 33-39; Aleks Sierz and Merle Tönnies, “‘Who’s Going to Mobilise Darkness and Silence?’: The Construction of Dystopian Spaces in Contemporary British Drama”, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 9, no. 1 (May 2021): 20–42 (the whole 2021 issue *Performing the Future* in general). Going back a little further, there is Ralph Willingham’s *Science Fiction and the Theatre* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), which is a historical survey of science fiction drama that catalogues 328 plays.

with the novel. Theatre critics and researchers have sometimes characterised these plays as dystopian, science fiction, psychological thriller, alternative history, apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic. While these labels are not inaccurate, it appears that by overcoming the division based on generic conventions, we may reach a more comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic, ethical and political implications of a particular type of theatre as heterogeneous as it is consistent. The playwrights included in this thesis occupy very different standings in British theatre: some are well established, others emerging; some more vocal about the political and ethical implications of their plays, others prefer to leave the interpretation to the audience; some frequently associated with speculative writings, others less. In other words, there is no conscious collective attempt at creating a movement known as ‘speculative theatre’, and it would be erroneous to assemble these playwrights under any one label, even though a corpus of speculative plays can still be delineated. It is important to stress that the selected plays converge at several major points, which makes it possible to consider them an evolving category whose ‘becoming’, emergent and subversive nature corresponds to Raymond Williams’s notion of a ‘structure of feeling’.³

One of the most noticeable characteristics of these plays is a return to narrative and fiction, which puts a strong emphasis on language rather than on theatre’s visual imperative. This does not signal an atavistic movement since the return to the dramatic in contemporary speculative theatre is at once non-prescriptive and non-logocentric. These plays’ commitment to language does not reinforce existing power relations inherent in language use but unsettles and undermines these relations by exposing language to the force of deconstruction.

Second, the extreme conditions of life and unlikely circumstances in many speculative plays give the impression that this type of theatre embraces an escapist mindset, dwelling on the imaginary instead of actively discussing struggles and problems of the present. Current political and social contexts are invoked, but obliquely, through a process of abstraction, and it is this abstraction that gives these plays a surreal, futuristic appearance. Furthermore, the lack of a coherent message contributes to the claim that speculative theatre is apolitical or, at the very least, striving for a relative and often ambiguous political stance. To reach a fair assessment of contemporary speculative theatre’s political commitment, it is crucial to keep in mind that the definition of political theatre in the twenty-first century is no longer limited to that of the post-war era—that is, ‘a kind of theatre that not only depicts

³ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

social interaction and political events but implies the possibility of radical change on socialist lines: the removal of injustice and autocracy and their replacement by the fairer distribution of wealth and more democratic systems'.⁴ The utopian dimension of political theatre from the late 1950s to the 1980s is unmistakable. Not only that the possibility of radical changes leading to a better, fairer society is affirmed, but there is also a strong sense of conviction and confidence in theatre's own ability to instigate such changes by supplying the public with revolutionary inspiration.

This type of political theatre, written and performed with organised certainty and didactic intents, has been in decline since the 1990s; thereupon, the form of political theatre has become much more diverse, its message less direct, positive or imposing. Among these new forms is verbatim theatre, which has often been chosen by dramatists with a clear political agenda. At first glance, verbatim theatre seems to stand at the opposite end of the spectrum compared to speculative theatre, at least in two aspects: current political issues are tackled head-on and the narrative contains well-researched, reliable information that best reflects reality.⁵ However, even in its most explicit political manifestation, verbatim theatre refuses to commit the same mistake as the political theatre in the post-war era by refraining from spoon-feeding the audience with any readily drawn conclusion or political lesson. In this respect, verbatim and speculative theatres are on the same page, and it would be more accurate to consider these two types of theatre as supplementing rather than opposing each other in their political commitment.

It is my contention that speculative theatre constitutes another form of political theatre in the twenty-first century, which is not entirely cut off from the traditional Marxist theatre in terms of its utopian aspiration even though it is not usually perceived as utopian at first sight. In many speculative plays, the possibility of radical social restructuring is negated, either because revolution is impossible in the context of systematic oppression (Edward Bond's *The Chair Plays*, Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five*) or because even a successful revolution is incapable of producing sustainable, meaningful changes (Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door*). However, it does not mean that speculative theatre completely renounces utopian thinking or prefers to convey a pessimistic,

⁴ Michael Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights*, Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-4.

⁵ We should keep in mind that what verbatim theatre presents to the audience, far from being the definitive Truth, is an intersubjective version of truth, which has been constructed by all those who are involved in the process of creating and performing any verbatim play.

hopeless outlook about the future. On the contrary, the mode of utopian thinking exemplified by speculative theatre envisions a space of openness for unknown potentials and critical reflection, made possible through the experience of aporia.

This leads to the third and central feature that unites the plays included in this research: speculative theatre is traversed with the question and expression of aporia on the levels of form and content. In this thesis, aporia is understood as both process and product. At times, it is used as a rhetorical device and a mode of enquiry, other times, characterised as an impossible experience, a moment of suspension of judgement, a space in which paradoxes thought of as irresolvable contradictions can be articulated, or an affective expression that resists the binary logic of opposition.⁶ Through its engagement with all these aspects of aporia to create an aporetic encounter, speculative theatre gives rise to a utopian vision that neither delineates a concrete project nor pronounces a clear break between the present and the utopian future. Unlike traditional utopian thinking (both religious and secular, as in the case of messianic Marxism), speculative theatre's utopian thinking does not identify with perfection, prosperity or social vitality, much less with the redemptive paradigm. Instead of focusing on identifying, defining or measuring utopia, this process of utopian thinking does not have a definitive goal to achieve because the utopian aspiration is invested in the commitment to this mode of thinking rather than any subsequent outcome. Such a utopian practice is political precisely because it negates the *status quo* and, despite the lack of specific political messages, it does constitute a call to action, starting with imagining radically different modes of existence, social organisation and relationality.

It must be noted that the utopian vision of speculative theatre does not strive to establish its dominance by dismissing other modes of utopian thinking, such as realistic or concrete utopia. In the same way that contemporary political theatre can accommodate incompatible approaches, some more widely accepted than others, utopian thinking should not be limited to only one direction. Here, it is important to make a distinction between the respect for multiplicity and differences—which is a distinct feature of the postmodern perspective—and absolute relativism. Itself an oxymoron, 'absolute relativism' is another form of tyranny that renders meaningless the quest for meaning and denies the possibility of truth since all truths are relative. With absolute or infinite relativism, the appearance of a society of tolerance and cohabitation conceals the reality of divided, isolated groups and a

⁶ In this thesis, I will focus on examining these aspects of aporia in the sophistic tradition and the writings of Jacques Derrida. See Chapter 1—III for more details.

dangerous void of responsibility. What emerges is a precarious situation in which discourse is foreclosed, the need for criticism eliminated—a culture of stagnation that leaves the *status quo* unchallenged. It is not unusual for contemporary speculative theatre to be accused of being relativist on many accounts, especially concerning ethics. The extreme circumstances that form the context of many speculative plays are often seen as premise and justification for violence and immoral behaviour. On the one hand, excessive representation of violence is denounced as encouraging voyeurism and participating in the vulgarisation and commercialisation of suffering. On the other hand, in blurring the demarcation between victim and perpetrator, right and wrong, these plays seem to communicate a message of ethical ambiguity that precludes judgement and accountability.

These critiques are essential in the sense that they emphasise the need for theatre to be constantly preoccupied with the question of ethics within the context of the widespread popularity of a detrimental form of relativism known as post-truth. However, rather than accusing speculative theatre of being complicit in the normalisation of violence and the equivocation of responsibility, I would suggest acknowledging its emphasis on uncertainty as a sign of theatre's self-awareness and an attempt at negotiating the aporia of social engagement faced by artistic practices. Speculative theatre gives no illusion of being outside the social and cultural contexts it is dramatising and, because of this implication, it cannot provide any meaningful insight into existing problems without incorporating these problems into its content and form.⁷ That is not to say that speculative theatre condones the unethical practices encouraged in our advanced capitalist society. In addition to exposing the entrenched ideology of neoliberal capitalism and the emergence of postfascism in a fictive setting, the plays included in this research also propose strategies of resistance that are prone to failure or being reincorporated into the hegemonic system but nonetheless signal a moment of possibility. These strategies range from replacing graphic violence with linguistic violence (Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone*, Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur*), performing multidirectional temporality (Alistair McDowall's *X* and Nick Payne's *Elegy*), employing the meta-theatrical device of role-playing (Alistair McDowall's *Pomona*, Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* and Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*) and invoking the modern gothic sensibility through the use of the double (Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly*), haunted domestic space (Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*, Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*)

⁷ For instance, in its criticism on the commercialisation of the myth of the apocalypse, speculative theatre also takes part in this very cultural economy.

and the gothic pastoral (Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* and Stef Smith's *Human Animals*). Together, they form a series of dramaturgical experimentations converged at the notion of uncertainty. It is not the sort of debilitating uncertainty that impedes thought and action; on the contrary, it is a space of uncertainty instilled with a sense of urgency. This aporetic experience, in which the need to suspend judgement and the imperative of decision are equally palpable, is emblematic of the mode of utopian thinking that characterises contemporary speculative theatre. While aligning with the current 'processual turn' in utopian studies, speculative theatre's utopian expressions give rise to a kind of hope particular in its aporetic nature—a hope that is sceptical and lacks confidence but nonetheless demands nurture.

In terms of methodology, this research strives for an inclusive approach that combines literary and dramaturgical analysis, performance studies and scenography. Even though my primary approach is text-based, I also work with archival sources such as video recordings of several plays available at the Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archive, photographs and reviews of different productions, as well as published interviews of playwrights, directors and stage designers. One obvious benefit of this approach is that it allows me to take into consideration the richness of speculative theatre's visual and performance vocabulary even though, paradoxically, there is strong resistance to theatre's visual imperative in representing crisis, catastrophe and violence. I believe that the tension between the visual and the audible, between the play text and the performance, further contributes to the affects characteristic of speculative theatre's aporetic and utopian experience.

The body of this thesis is organised into four chapters. Chapter 1 serves as an extended introduction that contains more detailed background and theoretical information. To begin with, I will trace the development of the term 'speculative fiction' to contextualise 'speculative theatre'. This is followed by an overview of British speculative theatre, in which I will demonstrate that speculation, far from being a modern phenomenon, has always been an element of British theatre, even though the approach to language and formal experimentation during each historical period remains different. The third part of this chapter summarises the various definitions and applications of 'aporia', which inform my usage of the concept in this research. In addition, I will briefly address recent developments in utopian studies to demonstrate the presence of an emerging utopian 'structure of feeling' which

closely, actively engages with the notion of aporia and whose expression can be clearly observed in contemporary British speculative theatre.

Moving on to the main analysis, Chapter 2 explores the prominence of myth in contemporary speculative theatre and the particularities of its mythopoeic operation. The entire chapter is devoted to the topic of myth, first, because of the historical connection between theatre and myth, which persists well into the twenty-first century. Second, it is to show that contrary to the claim of a decline in contemporary society, the power of myth has never been more perceptible, its presence more ubiquitous than in the present day. Myth-making is a process that converges with utopian thinking at many points. It is by exploring the ways speculative theatre engages with myth—not only the content of the myths it alludes to, which myths are made, unmade or remade but also how these myths are framed and structured—that we can gain a better understanding of the new mode of utopian thinking that underscores many speculative plays. In particular, I will examine how speculative theatre reconfigures the myth of the Apocalypse through strategies that interrogate the possibility of a definitive end; how it discloses the mechanism of the modern mythological machinery in politics and, more specifically, in the socio-economic sphere; and how it denaturalises mythical speech by deconstructing the mythical object and the hero figure. What emerges from speculative theatre's approach to myth is a utopian impulse characterised by indeterminacy, multiplicity, and a desire to overcome the limitations of fixed identity categories.

The interruption of the mythical speech is crucial for a new mode of living-together to emerge, and it is towards the exploration of this utopian mode of existence that Chapter 3 is directed. In the twenty-first century, crisis, real and imagined, identified and yet to be recognised, is no longer an exception but has become an integral part of normality. The pervasiveness of crisis in speculative theatre is not simply an affirmation of this normalisation but a reminder of the danger inherent in the concept of perpetual crisis. In particular, speculative theatre unveils how such an understanding of crisis serves as justification for violence, both systemic and individual, in the way ordinary people relate to themselves, others and their environment. Heavily charged with the question of ethics, speculative theatre pushes forward with an aporetic-utopian vision concerning the agency of the marginalised and the dispossessed, the process of working through trauma and loss, and the possibility of new interpersonal relationships within the family and the community. What speculative theatre proposes is not simply a reversed hierarchy of power structures or the

erasure of all boundaries—between the human and the nonhuman, perpetrator and victim, the self and the other—but the possibility of a nonidentity and dialogic community characterised as *idiorrhhythmic*.⁸

While chapters 2 and 3 place a stronger emphasis on textual analysis, Chapter 4 explores the particularities of the theatre medium in instigating the spectator's 'experience of the impossible'⁹ or the 'ordeal of the undecidable'.¹⁰ The visual language of speculative theatre, whether impoverished or excessive, is invariably imbued with meanings. In the same way meanings of the play text are destabilised to carve out a space for resistance, reflection and freedom of imagination, the visual language of the actor's body on stage and of the stage setting draws the audience in, inviting them to interpret the signs but simultaneously refusing any fixed or dominant interpretation. From the staging of the postmodern subject who is at times split into body and voice, at times the embodiment of multiple voices/identities, the representation of the gothic pastoral that problematises the notion of hospitality and the power relation between human beings and nature, to the disorganisation of space and time in interwoven temporal and spatial structures, speculative theatre presents itself as a theatre of diversity. While this diversity is a result of openness to differences, it must be noted that this openness contains a strong element of scepticism since it is extended towards considering and interrogating different claims rather than accepting all claims as equally valid. Against the backdrop of post-truth politics in the twenty-first century, this theatre of scepticism engages the audience in a *parrhesiastic* (truth-telling) game¹¹ that promotes a form of critical thinking already attuned to emotions, a way of communicating and relating built upon the ethics of care. In bringing into relief the complexity of the network of relations, speculative theatre draws our attention to the role of the implicated subject and the question of responsibility that emerges from acknowledging one's implication in systemic injustice and violence.

In an age already plagued by uncertainty and anxiety, people turn to arts and cultural products for comfort and reassurance. As such, it seems counter-intuitive for speculative theatre to exacerbate the situation by imposing on the audience an aporetic experience that is,

⁸ Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (Routledge, 2016), 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II)—Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-84*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

more often than not, disorienting rather than guiding. Nevertheless, by the end of this thesis, I hope to have demonstrated how contemporary British speculative theatre fulfils its social responsibility through its contribution to the reconfiguration of utopianism, its insistence on remaining a ‘theatre of questions’ that is heuristic, not didactic or propagandist. The complexity of current and coming social, political, environmental and ethical problems urgently calls for solutions, but it is neither theatre’s capability nor function to come up with these solutions. What theatre is capable of, however, is to provide a space where the implicated spectator can rehearse strategies for change and resistance—in short, a space of utopian speculation.

CHAPTER 1. BACKGROUND AND THEORIES

I. CONTEXTUALISING SPECULATIVE THEATRE

To better understand the particularities of speculation in contemporary British theatre, it is essential to first look at the broader picture of speculative thoughts and practices, specifically in literature. In this section, I will examine how the definition of ‘speculative fiction’ has evolved from a subtype to a genre and then a manifestation of a structure of feeling. It is my belief that speculative theatre can only be meaningfully situated once it is made clear that it reflects the utopian structure of feeling that characterises contemporary speculative fiction of various media.

In the twenty-first century, the term ‘speculation’ has frequently been associated with disparaging meanings: as a conjecture or surmise that is, most times, opposed to fact or action, otherwise, as a financial practice of a dubious ethical connotation.¹² A conclusion based solely on speculation holds little validity and, therefore, can be casually dismissed in any rational debate where facts are valued and required. Even though it is true that speculation is not entirely devoid of reason, the manner with which it engages reasoning is usually characterised as hypothetical at best, fanciful thinking at worst. Consequently, many come to view speculative thoughts, unaccompanied by proofs or plausible explanations, as having no practical use if the goal is to initiate palpable changes based on newly acquired knowledge. This is especially true in the area of scientific enquiry, where the margin for error and uncertainty is to be reduced as much as possible, if not eradicated altogether.

In economic and financial contexts, speculation has remained a continuous target of criticism because of the detrimental effects it may produce. In 1774, speculation was first used to indicate ‘engagement in any business enterprise or transaction of a venturesome or risky nature, but offering the chance of great or unusual gain’, even though the practice it describes has a much older history.¹³ Ethically, the distinction between speculation and regular trading or investment is similar to that between usury and normal business interest.

¹² ‘Speculation, n.’, in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/186113>.

¹³ In *Politics*, Aristotle recounts the story of Thales, who, expecting a large olive harvest, gained control of all the olive presses in the region in advance. At harvest time, as demand for the presses was increased, Thales rented them out at high prices and acquired large profits. Aristotle considers Thales’ gains as ‘unnatural’ and ‘justly censured’. See Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Thomas Alain Sinclair (New York: Penguin, 1981), 90. In fact, speculative trading or investment is historically linked to the market system and the practice must have come into existence as soon as humans started exchanging goods and money.

As summarised by James Angel and Douglas McCabe, speculation is condemned by those who argue that speculators produce nothing, that their action hurts both consumers and producers, making the market more volatile, creating bubbles that are unjustified by any economic fundamental or that speculation is just gambling.¹⁴

At first sight, both the practice of speculation and its potential consequences, despite different semantic registers, are imbued with negativity. Yet, the driving force behind this kind of speculation is anything but negative. Whether used as a statement, in an argument, or on the market, its ultimate goal is to *affirm*, to gain something. When one raises a claim based on speculation, it is one's intention to disprove one's opponent and assert one's position at the same time. Even when there is no adversary, speculation is typically performed in the belief that a new proposition previously unthought-of is being formulated and, in a certain way, the action contributes to the advancement of knowledge even if later on it is to be proved completely erroneous. In a similar fashion, financial speculation may not produce anything, but the speculator's eyes are definitely set on the expected gain. In the economic context, speculation undergoes further distortion as it is turned into a solely future-oriented activity, even though initially the term has no temporal specification. This is but another example of capitalism's (mis)appropriation of concepts in its endeavour to monopolise time and, more specifically, the future. All things considered, the intention behind speculation is always positive and derives from self-interest. This self-interest presents itself as individual most of the time, but underlying the seemingly private phenomenon is a collective mentality that captivates all human activities under the spell of affirmationism and progress.

It is not my purpose to dwell on this type of speculation. The subject of my investigation is a different kind of speculative practice, one that does not seek to affirm but to disrupt and challenge the dominant structures and established ideologies. Rather than destructive, this type of speculation is better characterised as deconstructive. In bringing together the known and the unknown, the knowable and the unknowable, reason and fantasy, it occupies a fictive space in which the preoccupation with progress and knowledge is momentarily relieved. What emerges from one's engagement with this mode of speculation is an experience of instability and uncertainty that makes it possible to think about the possibility of a radically different future to come. It is in this sense that speculative fiction in

¹⁴ James J. Angel and Douglas M. McCabe, 'The Ethics of Speculation', *Journal of Business Ethics* 90, no. 3 (1 December 2009): 279-80.

general and speculative theatre, in particular, fulfil their social function, against the charges of nihilism, escapism or political paralysis.

The first appearance of the term ‘speculative fiction’ dates back to 1889 when it was briefly mentioned in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, even though it is Robert A. Heinlein who is usually given credit for popularising it in his 1947 essay ‘On the Writing of Speculative Fiction’.¹⁵ Heinlein writes:

In the speculative science fiction story, accepted science and established facts are extrapolated to produce a new situation, new framework for human action. As a result of this new situation, new *human* problems are created—and our story is about how human beings cope with those new problems.¹⁶

Based on this conception, the ‘speculative’ quality of science fiction is restrictive in two aspects. First, the story must be grounded in ‘accepted science and established facts’. The process of extrapolation, which distinguishes science fiction from hard science, refers to ‘the technique of basing imaginary worlds or situations on existing ones through cognitive or rational means’.¹⁷ In short, Heinlein’s definition of speculative fiction effectively excludes fantasy, horror and all other non-mimetic genres that feature various systems of intellectual and practical activities aimed at understanding the physical and natural world but do not conform to scientific facts or rational deduction. From the epistemological point of view, the emphasis on known and proved knowledge as well as on rationality in Heinlein’s definition, ironically, resituates speculative fiction in a position both inferior to and dependent on scientific development. Imagination is allowed, provided that it remains a mechanistic extension of realism.

We should note that Heinlein conjures up ‘speculative fiction’ not only to draw a boundary between science fiction and the fantasy or horror genre but also to distinguish the so-called ‘simon-pure science fiction story’ from a ‘fictionalized essay’ or a ‘straight adventure story’ disguising under ‘pseudo-scientific double-talk’. Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) is named by Heinlein as the prime example of a fictionalised essay in

¹⁵ Earlier, in 1941, Heinlein already used the term ‘speculative fiction’ in his address in the World Science Fiction Convention. See Gary K. Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 122.

¹⁶ Robert A. Heilein, ‘On the Writing of Speculative Fiction’, in *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, ed. Rob Latham (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 19.

¹⁷ Gary K. Wolfe, ‘Coming to Terms’, in *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn and Matthew Candelaria (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 16. Wolfe also notes that the term ‘extrapolation’ is probably derived from ‘interpolation’, which is used by statisticians to refer to the process of predicting a value beyond a known series by detecting patterns within the series.

which human beings and their problems are not the focus of the narrative but rather secondary elements used to illuminate a fictionalised framework about the future of technology. Another type, one which Heinlein regards as pulp science fiction, contains stories, despite being set in different worlds, different eras, filled with different technologies and conditions, fail to present any novelty in the way human beings encounter emerging problems.¹⁸ In comparison, speculative fiction, identified as a first-rate subset, places emphasis not so much on the new situation *per se* but on ‘coping with problems arising out of the new situation’.¹⁹ Heinlein’s insistence on the importance of human behaviour marks the second debatable point in his definition of speculative fiction. In exhibiting an overt anthropocentric world view, the author intentionally overlooks all nonhuman agents that necessarily participate in the process of creating and solving problems. In a sense, such attitude reverberates the age-old belief that takes humans to be the master of the world and the only existence worth consideration.

Based on Heinlein’s definition, many plays included in the corpus of this thesis would fail the speculative check. For one thing, they do not contain any science-related elements and, even when they do, the science is often represented unscientifically. Thomas Eccleshare’s *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, for instance, stages an alternative world in which common people can purchase humanoids as conveniently as we purchase furniture from IKEA. Despite this very science-fictional premise, the play violates rather than affirming ‘accepted science and established facts’. In one scene, the human character simply removes the chip from the humanoid and put it in his head, thus transforming himself into a cyborg through a simplistic self-performed operation. The unexpected mixture of high and low technologies—a sophisticated robot whose appearance and speech (when he does not malfunction) are indistinguishable from human beings on the one hand and, on the other, the use of an almost archaic device like a physical remote control to regulate this robot—betrays the imperative to construct an imaginary situation based on an existing one ‘through cognitive or rational means’. There are, however, some exceptions. Nick Payne’s *Elegy* and Jennifer Haley’s *The Nether* seem to correspond quite well with Heinlein’s conception of

¹⁸ Commenting on this type of science fiction, Heinlein writes, ‘Change the costume back to now, cut out the pseudo-scientific double-talk and the blaster guns, and it turns out to be straight adventure story, suitable, with appropriate facelifting, to any other pulp magazine on the news stand.’ Heinlein, ‘On the Writing of Speculative Fiction’, 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

speculation. Among the five defining requirements for a speculative science fiction story, Heinlein emphatically stresses the last point, which demands that

no established fact shall be violated, and, furthermore, when the story requires that a theory contrary to present accepted theory be used, the new theory should be rendered reasonably plausible and it must include and explain established facts as satisfactorily as the one the author saw fit to junk. It may be far-fetched, it may seem fantastic, but it must not be at variance with observed facts.²⁰

In *Elegy*, Payne incorporates knowledge in neuroscience to describe a procedure in the future that can cure all mental illnesses and degenerative diseases, with the only setback being parts of the patient's memory are removed in the process. Several scenes of the play revolve around a doctor explaining, in highly technical terms, the various aspects of this new procedure. It is in these scenes that we find the most recognisable manifestation of extrapolation: some details in the explanation are drawn from existing research while others are rationally fabricated. Compared to *Elegy*, *The Nether* does not present much technical information; nevertheless, it follows the same methodology of extrapolation in its exploration of the evolution of the Internet into the Nether—a virtual reality, immersive space in which people pursue legal activities such as learning and working but can also seek to fulfil their forbidden desires. In both plays, the imaginary worlds and situations are not real, but it can be agreed that given enough time, it is highly probable for them to become a reality.

To return to the timeline of speculative fiction, in 1966, Judith Merrill proposed another definition, one that focuses considerably less on the scientific element and reverses the hierarchy previously set by Heinlein. As a result, the term is elevated from a subtype to a genre, a mode of writing in which the essence of science fiction lies. According to Merrill, the objective of speculative fiction is 'to explore, to discover, to *learn*, by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper-experimentation, something about the nature of the universe, of man, of "reality"'.²¹ While still making use of the traditional 'scientific method' including observation, hypothesis and experimentation, speculative fiction also 'introduc[es] a given set of changes—imaginary or inventive—into the common background of "known facts," creating an environment in which the responses and perceptions of the characters will reveal something about the inventions, the characters, or both'.²² Merrill's

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Judith Merrill, 'What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?', in *SF: The Other Side of Realism—Essays on Modern Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Thomas D. Clareson (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971), 60.

²² *Ibid.*

definition attempts to lift the limitation imposed on imagination by Heinlein; at the same time, it advocates the hybridisation of ‘scientification’ and the Lovecraftian elements, the latter of which has often been excluded from standard discussions on science fiction. Among the plays included in this research, Alistair McDowall’s *Pomona* and *X* are perhaps most remarkable in the attempt to weave together scientific and fantastic imagination. *Pomona*, while realising the Mobius strip through a dramatic structure in which role-playing games and reality entangle, also makes extensive references to Lovecraftian horror, the most obvious of which being the presence of a character wearing a Cthulhu mask. *X* is set in a post-apocalyptic future, in a research base on Pluto, where five astronauts are stranded and restlessly waiting for rescue. The gravity of the situation skyrockets as it is discovered that the main clock of the base has malfunctioned. Things get stranger when a huge bloody X suddenly appears outside a window, and one of the crew encounters a mysterious girl with an X at the place of her mouth. In both plays, the exploration of human’s temporal and spatial perception in extreme conditions cannot be separated from the horror and fantastical elements.

The move toward blurring generic boundaries proposed by Merril, while being enthusiastically embraced and put into practice by many, most notably by those associated with the New Wave ‘movement’²³ of the 1960s and 70s or female writers like Ursula K. Le Guin, Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood, is met with resistance from writers and critics belonging to the science-fetishizing pole. Isaac Asimov, for instance, shows strong disapproval against the intention to replace ‘science fiction’ with ‘speculative fiction’, not only because ‘speculative’ ‘seems a weak word’ that is ‘four syllables long and is not too easy to pronounce quickly’.²⁴ His greatest concern lies in the fact that in allowing the cross-breeding between traditional science fiction and horror or fantasy, the term ‘speculative fiction’ can be exploited and become a mere tool ‘seized on by a number of people who know very little science and who feel more comfortable speculating freely and without having to raise a sweat by learning the rules of the game’.²⁵ In the like manner, academic and author David Ketterer remarks that the term ‘has been used somewhat confusedly’ and considers the act of grouping together works of fantasy and science fiction as blurring ‘a vital

²³ To describe New Wave as a movement, however, is not completely accurate. The American New Wave was ‘no more than a concatenation of talent occurring at the same time and bringing new ideas and new standards to the writing of sf’. See Edward James, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127. As for the British New Wave, even though it is composed of writers associated with the magazine *New Worlds* with a particular programme, many of those writers reject the label since it was usually used to denote a subgenre of science fiction.

²⁴ Isaac Asimov, *Asimov on Science Fiction* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 301.

distinction'.²⁶ However, Ketterer later suggests that instead of defining speculative fiction as an encompassing category, we could retain the term to describe 'those works on the *bordering* areas between SF and other aspects of the apocalyptic imagination or, indeed, of the fantastic and mimetic imaginations.'²⁷

Here, I do not want to fall into the trap of generalisation by hastily expounding how the gender issue is implicated in the debate, even though it is true that there seem to be many more female writers who promote the inclusive approach while the opposing group is comprised mostly of male authors and critics. For the simple reason that numerous male authors did support the progressive definition, one of whom is J. G. Ballard—probably the first to be associated with the New Wave. At the beginning of his career, in the second half of the 1950s, Ballard sat uncomfortably in the science fiction mainstream because of his outspoken inclination to challenge the *status quo*. In an interview with George MacBeth in 1967, Ballard defines as following the 'new science fiction' in comparison to the 'extrovert, optimistic literature of technology' that is normative science fiction:

I think the new science fiction, which other people apart from myself are now beginning to write, is introverted, possibly pessimistic rather than optimistic, much less certain of its own territory. There's a tremendous confidence that radiates through all modern American science fiction of the period 1930 to 1960; the certainty that science and technology can solve all problems. This is not the dominant form of science fiction now. I think science fiction is becoming something much more *speculative*, much less convinced about the magic of science and the moral authority of science. There's far more caution on the part of the new writers than there was.²⁸

The speculative quality of Ballard's 'new science fiction', like Merrill's definition of speculative fiction, situates the author in a humble position when it comes to knowledge, not because they are incapable of grasping or explaining a certain scientific principle but because science itself is a much less certain discipline than the image it projects through traditional science fiction narrative. The call to shift the emphasis from scientific accuracy to literary style, to rethink the nature of speculative writing as a whole, is not illegitimate and would have gained the term 'speculative fiction' more currency if it had not been for the dismissive tone it incorporated. In a counterargument, Ballard identifies as fantasy the overestimation of and certainty in the power of science.

²⁶ David Ketterer, 'Science Fiction and Allied Literature', *Science Fiction Studies* 3, no. 1 (1976): 65.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 66. Emphasis mine.

²⁸ J. G. Ballard, 'The New Science Fiction', in *The New S.F.: An Original Anthology of Modern Speculative Fiction*, ed. Langdon Jones (London: Hutchinson, 1969). Emphasis mine.

In a sense Asimov, Heinlein and the masters of American SF are not really writing of science at all. They're writing about a set of imaginary ideas which are conveniently labelled 'science'. They're writing about the future, they're writing a kind of fantasy-fiction about the future, closer to the western and the thriller, but it has nothing really to do with science.²⁹

Such a serious claim undermines the whole premise of traditional science fiction and proves to be problematic. It appears that Ballard, while promoting a new speculative science fiction, has yielded to the risky practice of denouncing the genre's tradition completely.³⁰ It is true there were certain restrictive aspects in the conception of science fiction in the 1960s; still, one cannot deny the fact that even the most conventional science fiction narratives have continued to be a source of inspiration for young people to explore science or that, thanks to these narratives, science fiction was able to claim a place in literature, no matter how marginal that position remains to be. It is this wholesale rejection of tradition that contributed to the failure of speculative fiction to replace science fiction as a genre when the New Wave movement failed to achieve popularity and eventually died down by the end of the 1970s.³¹

The whole episode of the 1960s reflects the radical revolutionary spirit of the era. On the one hand, there were established writers who preferred to maintain a high degree of clarity in categorisation. On the other stood the emerging voices who strived to upset the accepted norms, to revitalise and experiment with new narrative modes by incorporating unconventional elements. Such intensified friction between the old and the new is not something that pertains to science fiction alone but can be found in the historical development of almost any literary genre. In fact, this antagonistic movement is the underlying force that creates dynamics in all disciplines of the humanities and science alike.

The failure to define speculative fiction as a genre is not only predictable but also preferable, as it maintains an openness that has allowed much more diversity in the reconceptualisation of the term since the 1990s. At present, speculative fiction is increasingly

²⁹ J. G. Ballard, quoted in Jannick Storm, 'An Interview with J. G. Ballard', *Speculation* 21 (February 1969): 5.

³⁰ Ballard's remark falls in line with Csicsery-Ronay's argument, which holds that 'exaggeratedly rationalistic theories ignore SF's fundamentally playful performance of scientific thinking'. Csicsery-Ronay further adds, 'Most SF writers, far from pushing an agenda of scrupulous respect for scientific truth, toy with it, making it a source of metaphors, rationalized by realistic representation, and embedded in quasi-mythic narrative traditions that express social concerns.' See Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 112.

³¹ It is important to note that the New Wave did produce many positive results that remain till today, such as 'a more profound awareness of the political and moral complexities of the world, a more sophisticated and self-conscious literary approach, a more realistically pessimistic attitude to human nature and to the ability of technology to improve the human condition'. See James, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, 127.

identified as a conceptual framework, a manifestation of a ‘structure of feeling’ that is not limited to the realm of literature but extended to other media such as graphic novels, film, television, computer game and indeed, theatre. In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams explains the notion of ‘structure of feeling’ as ‘social experiences in solution’³² and changes of presence which can be emergent or pre-emergent but do not have to ‘await definition, classification or rationalisation before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action’.³³ Based on Williams’ explanation, speculative thinking and practice qualify as and remain a structure of feeling as long as they demonstrate a reluctance to be moulded into a precise definition. Consequently, the elusiveness of the term ‘speculative fiction’, in denying the satisfaction usually found in the seeming certainty of traditional literary genres, prevents it from becoming another fixed and dominant paradigm.

It is for this reason that speculative fiction in the twenty-first century has been increasingly identified not for what it is but for what it is not. As a blanket term, it includes not only the super-genres of fantasy and science fiction but also

[...] utopia, dystopia, eutopia, horror, the gothic, steampunk, slipstream, alternative history, cyberpunk, time slip, magic(al) realism, supernatural romance, weird fiction, the New Weird, (post)apocalyptic fiction, myth, legend, traditional, retold, and fractured fairy tale, folktale, ghost fiction, New Wave fabulation, and other interstitial genres as long as they are informed by the non-mimetic impulse—that is, by the broadly conceived *departure from* verisimilitude to consensus reality.³⁴

One may be alarmed by the number of genres and subgenres mentioned in the above list and for the right reason. After all, there is no practical use for a label if it is to encompass almost anything. In formulating a definition on the basis of negation, the contemporary conception of speculative fiction appears to adopt a counter-intuitive approach that deliberately associates itself to vagueness rather than to clarity. In the same manner that speculative narratives aim to create cognitive dissonance in the reader/audience, the looseness of the category’s definition preconditions a feeling of frustration for those who seek to pin down the shared characteristics among the composing elements, which, in reality, do not exist most of the time. It is not what they have in common that unifies these seemingly distinct modes of narrative under one blanket, but what they refuse to be a part of—‘the verisimilitude to consensus reality’. In this sense, the term ‘speculative fiction’ negates not to exclude or

³² Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 133.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Marek Oziewicz, ‘Speculative Fiction’, Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature, 29 March 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78>. My emphasis.

privilege any particular genre, nor does it intend to conjure up a new operational definition. At the same time, as a multi-generic category, it invites a relative rather than definite individual generic definition, which does not completely erase boundaries but simply transforms these boundaries into something much more flexible in their recognition of intersection. ‘Speculative fiction’ is indeed a convenient and useful term to denote a territory ‘free from the legacy of genre wars and hostile taxonomies’.³⁵ Furthermore, by shifting the focus from hierarchy to relationality, it calls attention to other non-mimetic expressions that have not been adequately recognised because they do not conform to the traditional Western non-mimetic mindset, such as speculative visions formulated from a postcolonial or minority perspective or those found in ‘world literature’. In other words, the term not only accommodates diverse genres or subgenres but also sets the condition for a multicultural approach to thrive. Last but not least, speculative fiction, in its willingness to acknowledge otherness, brings into relief the importance of nonhuman agents and expands the scope of narrative beyond an anthropocentric concern.

As enticing as it may sound, there are lingering questions that need to be tackled. The problem being, even when speculative fiction is embraced as a broad category for its inclusiveness, we cannot help but wonder about the function of a narrative whose main goal is claimed to be the representation of various modes of being that oppose to the general understanding of ordinary reality. To put it differently, what does speculative fiction aim to achieve through the process of challenging the established norms, exposing the porousness of the present and resisting definite closure? How can this be of any relevance in today’s world of perpetual crisis?

It is tempting to view speculative fiction as a sort of premonition, to warn us against the future so that we can make appropriate adjustments to avoid the undesirable consequences to come. A large part of speculative narratives radiates with a predictive light in the sense that they present visions of possible futures. As a result, they have been identified as future-oriented, and the plausibility of these predictions has become a subject of retrospective scrutiny, which is extremely common in the case of hard science fiction or dystopian narratives.³⁶ This tendency to attribute specific practical values to speculative

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Such is the problem with Margaret Atwood’s definition of speculative fiction. In her attempt to distinguish speculative fiction from science fiction, she claims that while the former treats ‘things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the book’, the latter deals with ‘things that could not possibly happen’. In focusing on the probability of the plot of speculative

fiction brings us back to the problematic dynamics between ‘extrapolation’ and ‘speculation’. According to Brooks Landon, there exist three different constructed relationships between them. The first posits extrapolation and speculation as opposite binaries, ‘with the former term suggesting the fidelity to known and possibly even existing science and technology [...] and the latter suggesting the more sociologically focused and less obviously plausible narratives of H. G. Wells’.³⁷ The second and third relationships position the two terms as sequential stages, one starting from speculation and then becoming the baseline for extrapolation, the other in reverse.³⁸ In actual usage, however, it is not always possible to identify a single clear relationship, for ‘as frequently as they are cast in opposition to each other, they are used as if they are interchangeable.’³⁹ To further complicate matters, Stanley Schmidt defines extrapolation as ‘speculation based on extensions, developments, and applications of well-established knowledge’,⁴⁰ which effectively views speculation as a broader category to which extrapolation belongs. While it is true the two terms cannot be separated completely, a crucial distinction must be made to gain a better understanding of the function of speculative fiction. There is no denying that extrapolation conveys a defiant willingness to go beyond the known and the present. Unfortunately, the manner in which it engages with existing knowledge already forecloses the possibility of arriving at anything truly new, as it simply reinforces and perpetuates the present. From a political point of view, extrapolation monopolises the future by posing it as a seamless extension of present conditions. It is against this form of structural violence that speculative thinking seeks to contest. If speculative fiction is to be used as a subversive instrument against hegemonic ideologies that exploit growth, security and stability as excuses for oppression, domination or reification, it needs to steer away from identifying itself as an attempt to govern the unpredictability of the future. Speculative narratives are not a crystal sphere through which one can get a glimpse of things to come.

Consequently, many contemporary speculative plays, whether set in the future or a fictional present, employ various strategies to resist foreclosing the future. Chris Thorpe’s

fiction becoming reality in the future, Atwood invests in works belonging to this category a predictive power, which may cause them to be interpreted as a warning and/or a call for change. Once again, this proves to be a restriction in imagination for speculative writings. See Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (London: Hachette, 2011), 6.

³⁷ Brooks Landon, ‘Extrapolation and Speculation’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 24.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Stanley Schmidt, ‘The Science in Science Fiction’, in *Many Futures, Many Worlds: Theme and Form in Science Fiction*, ed. Thomas D. Clareson (Ohio: Kent State University, 1977), 30.

Victory Condition makes an interesting reference to the simulation theory, which hypothesises that reality as we know it is but a simulation run by some higher form of intelligence. However, rather than conveying a pessimistic outlook of a helpless subject caught in a predetermined world, the play puts a strong emphasis on the possibility of choice, starting with something as small as deciding whether one should help a homeless woman when one steps out of the theatre. Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone* expose language to the force of deconstruction to test the limits of its meaning-making function, while Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door* invokes the carnival sense of the world and incorporates various aspects of Menippean satire, all to ensure that the futures they depict are free from any ideological constraint.

As part of the attempt to preserve the openness of the future, it also follows that speculative theatre and speculative fiction often refrain from communicating any clear political message. It would be erroneous to equate this refusal to take a stance within a binary framework with an attempt to escape from reality and responsibility, either through laughter or despair. Within the process of cultural production, the object of speculation and how it is speculated have always been influenced by the external conditions at the time the act of speculation is performed. In contemporary speculative theatre, for instance, no matter how extraordinary or far-fetched the imaginary worlds and situations appear to be, they always echo or reflect concerns very much familiar to the audience: the immigration crisis (Edward Bond's *The Under Room*), the danger of nuclear power (Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*), ecological crisis (Stef Smith's *Human Animals* and Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral*), the ageing population (Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five*), the housing crisis (Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*), biological warfare or civil war in general (Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur*), and the proliferation of post-truth politics (Edward Bond's *Have I None* and *Chair*, as well as Dawn King's *Foxfinder*). Just because these plays do not directly tell the audience how to think or what the solutions to these problems should be, does not mean that they are to be judged as lacking political commitment.

To understand the function of speculative fiction, we need to turn to its contemporary definition as a 'structure of feeling'. From the juxtaposition of 'structure' and 'feeling', one can already perceive the contradiction inherent in the notion. Raymond Williams acknowledges this oxymoronic word choice: the experience the term denotes is 'as firm as "structure" suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our

activity’.⁴¹ According to Williams, structures of feeling are most readily accessible in the art and literature of a specific period. The emphasis on historical specificity should not be mistaken as a claim for deterministic structuralism, which denies art its autonomy and agency, even though it is true that a work of art does not exist in a vacuum, nor the artist outside of society. A structure of feeling is always a process, a trajectory of the power struggle between the totality and the particular, between the hegemonic ideology—also known as the official consciousness or ‘common sense’—and the subversive thought articulated in a form that has not been fully worked out but is nonetheless perceptible.

Speculative fiction, theorised as the manifestation of a structure of feeling, is not apolitical precisely because of its emphasis on non-mimetic imagination. Its lack of a unified form of articulation attests to its commitment to remain a process rather than a final product, while its insistence on addressing unthinkable crises rather than presenting solutions for existing problems stems from a high degree of reflexivity and awareness of its function as a symbolic representation. If the interests of capitalism lie in productivity, control and concrete results, speculative fiction’s disinterestedness in these matters is, paradoxically, proof of its political responsibility. The seeming indifference of speculative narrative in *solving* social, political or ethical problems, therefore, should not be mistaken for escapism or nihilism. In the like manner, the focal point of speculation is not the future, despite its frequent futuristic setting. As a structure of feeling, speculative fiction is an attempt to unveil the hidden aspects of the present. It would be more accurate to characterise speculative fiction as ‘afformance art’, which ‘locates the political in perception itself, in art as a poetic interruption of the law and therefore of politics’.⁴² In short, speculative fiction functions as a form of self-reflexive, suspensive and pervasive negation that not only undermines the *status quo* of the present by exposing its vulnerabilities and inconsistencies but also interrogates the ideological framing of negation as associated with revolutionary aspiration and novelty.

It is within this framework of speculative fiction that I would situate contemporary British speculative theatre. As a component of an encompassing category, speculative theatre shares the defining characteristic of all speculative works, which is the rejection of mimetic realism. At the same time, the manner in which it demonstrates its non-mimetic dimension is

⁴¹ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* [1961] (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001), 64.

⁴² Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.

distinct compared to other mediums. I will now turn towards the history of British speculative theatre in my examination of the particularities of theatre's approach to speculation.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF BRITISH SPECULATIVE THEATRE

1. *Proto-Speculative Theatre*

Even though this thesis focuses on speculative theatre in the twenty-first century, it must be noted that speculative elements (myth, utopia, dystopia, fantasy, science-fiction, to name but a few) have always been part of the theatre. My purpose in reaching back to examine some British plays written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as those by William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe and the lesser-known Thomas Shadwell, is not only to disclose these elements and illustrate a sort of continuity in the speculative tradition of British theatre but also to highlight the distinction between these proto-speculative plays and contemporary ones due to the evolving conceptualisation of ‘speculation’.

In his 1973 volume of essays, *Strong Opinions*, Vladimir Nabokov conveyed his dissatisfaction with the tendency to identify a writer or a literary creation through generic labelling, claiming that ‘if we start sticking group labels, we’ll have to put the *Tempest* in the SF category, and of course thousands of other valuable works.’⁴³ Nabokov’s scorn for the category SF is quite evident, and it is implicitly understood that being characterised as science fiction is demeaning to ‘valuable works’. Putting aside this problematic point for the moment, we cannot help but acknowledge that, written in 1610-1611, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* already incorporates elements which, under retrospective consideration, qualify it as a speculative play. For instance, early readings of *The Tempest* usually bring into relief the utopian aspiration epitomised in Gonzalo’s speech concerning the creation of an ideal commonwealth. On the other hand, more recent interpretations, especially those from a postcolonial perspective, have focused on the dystopian dimension, with Caliban as the oppressed native and the whole play as an allegory of European discovery and colonisation.⁴⁴ Moreover, while the presence of magic, witchcraft and supernatural spirit situates *The Tempest* in the fantasy genre, the play also presents proto-science fiction tropes that continue to be a source of influential inspiration in various forms of artistic production. From Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931), the 1956 film *Forbidden Planet*, to the highly acclaimed series *Westworld* (2016-present), the explicit reference to the figure of Prospero or the

⁴³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* [1973] (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 87.

⁴⁴ Some examples of the post-colonial interpretations include Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête*—a 1969 theatrical adaptation, or Jonathan Miller’s groundbreaking 1988 production of Shakespeare’s play in which Prospero is presented as a white colonist and Caliban a black slave.

discovering and conquering theme that is central to *The Tempest* has been widely acknowledged. What distinguishes these modern narratives from Shakespeare's is simply the replacement of magic with science.

It would be an unfortunate omission, however, to overlook the extent to which science was textually incorporated in Shakespeare's work. More than just foregrounding the structure of modern science fiction narrative, many of his plays demonstrate the playwright's awareness of new scientific discoveries and his intention to communicate them to a larger audience.⁴⁵ Shakespeare's knowledge touches upon anatomy, botany, physics, astronomy and early forms of 'social sciences' such as geography, history, anthropology, psychology or political science.⁴⁶ Yet, it is crucial to note that since the methods of what comes to be known as 'science' today were still largely under construction during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the idea of art and science as opposing domains of knowledge practice must have been unfamiliar to Shakespeare. As noted by Carla Mazzio, the term 'science' at the time 'was not yet distinguished from artisanal practices and technologies through which cultural artefacts, be they words or things, were made, and through which various aspects of nature were subject to scrutiny'.⁴⁷ Accordingly, it may be strenuous to claim that Shakespeare's interest in science and the speculative was an attempt to blur the boundary between empirical and artistic knowledge, as that division was still very much in the making.⁴⁸ The juxtaposition of fantastic elements and scientific facts in Shakespearean plays,

⁴⁵ The connection between Shakespeare and science has garnered interest from many scholars in recent years. *Shakespeare & Science*, the 2009 special double issue of the *South Central Review*, edited by Carla Mazzio, has come to be regarded as a seminal study on the topic. Other notable publications include *The Science of Shakespeare: A New Look at the Playwright's Universe* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2014) by science journalist Dan Falk, or *Spectacular Science, Technology and Superstition in the Age of Shakespeare* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), edited by Sophie Chiari and Mickael Popelard.

⁴⁶ For additional reference, see Edward Tabor, 'Plant Poisons in Shakespeare', *Economic Botany* 24, no.1 (1970): 81-94; Marcus Nordlund, 'The Problem of Romantic Love: Shakespeare and Evolutionary Psychology', in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and David S. Wilson (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 107-25; François Laroque, "'Old Custom": Shakespeare's Ambivalent Anthropology', *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* 33 (2015); or Natalie Elliot, 'Shakespeare's Worlds of Science', *New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society*, no. 54 (Winter 2018): 30-50.

⁴⁷ Carlo Mazzio, 'Introduction: Shakespeare and Science, c. 1600', *South Central Review* 26, no. 1/2 (2009): 3.

⁴⁸ In her introduction to the issue, Mazzio notes that 'science' in Shakespeare's time was significantly different from the modern understanding of the word: 'Whereas it is now common to distinguish between the arts and sciences within university curricula, as a disciplinary rubric, "science" was often used interchangeably with "art." That the "seven liberal arts" were also called, in the Renaissance, the "seven liberal sciences" [...] indicates a great deal of fluidity between the "arts" and "sciences" at the basic level of terminology.' See Mazzio, 'Introduction: Shakespeare and Science, c. 1600', 2. She also carefully

which renders them the speculative quality, was not a subversive operation; rather, it should be considered as something that came up naturally in the playwright's creative process.

Written two decades before *The Tempest*, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1588-1593) presents a different approach to theatre's scientific engagement, which has prompted many scholars to regard it as the archetype of the modern 'science play'. The epistemological shift, from the Renaissance's conception of knowledge in which art and science were used interchangeably, to fact-based scientific knowledge that marked the departure of science from art, did not occur at once but was a process that was already under way by the end of the sixteenth century. Even though the demarcation between science and art remained ambiguous and would continue to be so for another century, the move towards a clear disciplinary division was far from being imperceptible. Many artists were keenly aware of such a movement, and Marlowe was perhaps one of the first to bring the issue to the forefront. Unlike many Shakespearean plays, in which science is employed as a mere metaphor for political problems and, therefore, assumes a secondary place, *Doctor Faustus* focuses on science as a problem in itself, as a subject matter, with the figure of the 'scientist' occupying a central place. The target of criticism in Marlowe's play is not the emerging realist epistemology but human weaknesses. It was not science *per se* but greed and hubris *in the name of* science that drove Faustus to bargain with the Devil and fall into the trap of illusionistic practices.⁴⁹ Consequently, the play demonstrates not so much a suspicious, antagonistic attitude towards science's claim for knowledge and progress, as sometimes misinterpreted, but a warning against the potential danger of pseudo, sham science.

In the like manner, Thomas Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* (1676) should not be read as a blanket indictment of the Royal Society or experimental philosophy but, as noted by Joseph M. Gilde in his close reading of the play, 'Shadwell is in fact in general accord with the principles of the Royal Society' and the institution, 'far from being the object of the play's satire, provides a standard for judging the follies of the two principal fools',⁵⁰ namely Sir

underlines the fact that acknowledging the fluidity between art and science in terms of terminology in Shakespeare's time is not synonymous with conflating the two in an act of retrospective superimposition.

⁴⁹ Faustus prides himself for having mastered all human forms of knowledge and dismisses philosophy, medicine, law and religion as studies worthy of further investigation. While it is true that the desire for more knowledge is usually considered admirable, the case of Faustus presents an extreme, distorted aspect of intellectual pursuit. As noted by Ladegaard, 'Faustus' story is not the fall of a noble soul, but the drama of a mind traversed by unbounded material desire.' See Jakob Ladegaard, 'The Comedy of Terror: Ideology and Comedy in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*', *Textual Practice* 31, no.1 (2017): 179-195.

⁵⁰ Joseph M. Gilde, 'Shadwell and the Royal Society: Satire in *The Virtuoso*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 10, no.3 (1970): 469.

Nicholas Gimcrack and Sir Formal Trifle. The case of Shadwell's play demonstrates that theatre's interest in science and their mutual relationship manifests itself not only in canonical works but also in plays written by lesser-known playwrights. In its early days, the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, founded in 1660, was less intellectually homogeneous than is sometimes thought. Richard Foster Jones makes an important distinction between mechanical philosophers and experimental philosophers, who were all active participants in the scientific movement during the second half of the seventeenth century. For the mechanical philosopher, 'the purpose assigned to scientific activity [...] is consistently and emphatically declared to be the satisfying of intellectual curiosity', against the experimental philosopher's belief that 'their own observations and experiments would furnish aid to the practical activities of their humble associates'.⁵¹ In other words, the former kind of philosophers is devoted to knowledge as an end in itself, while the latter places a strong emphasis on the utilitarian aspect of their intellectual pursuit. The coexistence of these two groups generated many disputes surrounding the practical implication of science; however, it is far from being the only debatable issue within the Royal Society. Its motto *Nullius in verba*, which means 'take nobody's word for it', represents the Fellows' determination to 'withstand the domination of authority and to verify all statements by an appeal to facts determined by experiment'.⁵² Yet, the manner in which the Fellows' experiments were displayed was fraught with problems. On the one hand, the theatrical, spectacular dimension of these presentations unfortunately fed into popular distrust and prompted many to condemn the Society for its hypocritical claim of fact abiding. On the other hand, the unnecessary complex language employed by many members betrayed the institution's aim to 'withstand the domination of authority' by morphing it into an authoritative organisation that excluded women and all those without a privileged background.⁵³

Shadwell's attitude towards the Royal Society is more nuanced than initially thought, for he does not ridicule the institution as a whole but only pokes at specific problematic

⁵¹ Richard F. Jones, 'The Rhetoric of Science in England of the Mid-Seventeenth Century', *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop*, ed. Carroll Camden (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 16-20.

⁵² 'History of the Royal Society | Royal Society', accessed 19 September 2021, <https://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/>.

⁵³ According to Tita Chico, in fraught tension with the virtuoso, the Royal Society's theory of the modest witness 'envisages a category of identity that works to render its privileges both invisible and paramount, a fantasy of self-control, gentility, and prestige'. See Tita Chico, 'Gimcrack's Legacy: Sex, Wealth, and the Theater of Experimental Philosophy', *Comparative Drama* 42, no. 1 (2008): 46. To be a modest witness, one needs wealth, leisure, and being male.

aspects in the discursive and experimental practice within the early scientific community, including its use of language, dogmatism and the departure from utility in scientific enquiry. *The Virtuoso*, therefore, strives to present a constructive criticism that does not seek to undermine the Society's validity but to implicitly advocate the desirable direction it should follow to be taken seriously. Even though it is true the material for 'scientific' discourse in *The Virtuoso* is drawn from three main sources—Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society of London* (1667), Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665) and *Philosophical Transactions*, the Society's journal, first published in March 1665⁵⁴—we should not overlook the fact that the target of criticism in Shadwell's play is the virtuoso—a figure that, by the time the Royal Society received its charter in 1662, had come to be associated with 'futile and indiscriminate study', to be distinguished from the 'Men of Gresham'—a reference to the Society's members, whose study was deemed selective and useful.⁵⁵ Ironically, the argument for utility was employed by Margaret Cavendish, often considered one of the most prominent virtuosi of the time, to attack experiments conducted by some members of the Society, most notably Hooke's work with the microscope.⁵⁶ Shadwell's satirical use of the Society's abstruse scientific language, like Cavendish's critique, is a clear indication of the problematic and heterogeneous nature of early attempts to establish the discipline of science as we know it today.

Nevertheless, unlike Cavendish's writings, which assign significant values to speculation,⁵⁷ Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* treats the notion as something undesirable and detrimental. The audience first encounters Sir Nicholas Gimcrack in his study, where he is learning to swim on a desk. Yet, when asked about his plan for practising in water, he scoffs at the idea, arguing that 'I content myself with the speculative part of swimming; I care not for the practice. I seldom bring anything to use, 'tis not my way. Knowledge is my ultimate

⁵⁴ Claude Lloyd, 'Shadwell and the Virtuosi', *PLMA* 44, no. 2 (1929): 475.

⁵⁵ David Walton, 'Copernicus or Cheesecake? Faultlines and Unjust Des(s)erts: Notes towards the Cultural Significance of the Virtuosa', *Cuaderno de Filología Inglesa* 9, no.2 (2001): 48.

⁵⁶ See Margaret Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, ed. Eileen O'Neill, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁵⁷ Cavendish writes, 'experimental and mechanic philosophy cannot be above the speculative part, by reason most experiments have their rise from the speculative, so that the artist or mechanic is but a servant to the student.' *Ibid.*, 49. Many scholars have noticed the role of 'fancy' in Cavendish's approach to science. See Sylvia Bowerbank, 'The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the "Female" Imagination', *English Literary Renaissance* 14, no. 3 (1984): 392–408; Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy During the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

end' (II.ii.84-86).⁵⁸ Here, 'speculative' is used mockingly to denote the opposite of utility, practicality. Shadwell portrays it as a sort of negation that breaks with reality to affirm itself as superior to all mundane worldly concerns. The privileging of abstract theory over praxis and the obsession with minutiae and trifles prevent Gimcrack from perceiving the obvious phenomena around him, and this ignorance of men and manner eventually leads to his financial, sexual and social demise. As his niece Miranda rightly remarks, the virtuoso is one 'who has broken his brains about the nature of maggots, who has studied these twenty years to find out the several sorts of spiders, and never cares for understanding mankind' (I.i.7-13). Being 'the finest speculative gentleman in the whole world' (I.i.269), Gimcrack is also the most absurd, laughable figure in Shadwell's play because of his questionable priority. As knowledgeable as he is about insects, he is completely clueless when it comes to human connection and observation.

While it is true the history of British speculative theatre is closely linked to the history of science plays, we should be aware that not all science plays belong to the speculative category. Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* is a good example of plays that mobilise discourses of science but do not qualify as speculative drama, for the simple reason that its conception of speculation is in disaccord with the characterisation this thesis aims to expound, namely speculation as a subversive practice that unsettles established norms and calls for a reconsideration of the binary opposition between rationality and imagination. Contemporary plays such as Nick Payne's *Elegy*, Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, and Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* incorporate elements in the fields of neuroscience, virtual reality technology, robotics and artificial intelligence. These plays are engaged in a speculating operation that interrogates rather than simply affirming the superiority of rationality in constructing our understanding of reality. For instance, in *Elegy*, the scientist Miriam's conception of love clearly demonstrates the limit of scientific enquiry in the face of abstract notions.

MIRIAM From a neurological point of view, love affects the brain like, for example, anger, or fear, or grief. Like cocaine. You take a hit, and it lights up. The amygdala, you remember we talked about the, it's the almond-shaped, the epicentre of fear, and some would say, though I'm sceptical myself, that falling in love sends the amygdala haywire, but—
LORNA Hold on, this is, is ridiculous. Isn't it? Either she does or doesn't, how can you—

⁵⁸ Thomas Shadwell, *The Virtuoso* [1676], ed. Marjorie H. Nicolson and David S. Rodes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).

MIRIAM Carrie would certainly attest to loving you, yes. But as to whether or not that may be true, it's impossible—I can look at the available evidence and deliver the most likely hypothesis, for example, but I don't—Because if I can't tell you *what* something is, then I certainly can't testify to its existence.⁵⁹

Miriam's refusal to testify the existence of love because she cannot define what it is draws the audience's attention to the problematic aspect of the empirical principle of knowledge and the obsession with certainty and precision, which are often said to be foundational in scientific inquiry. On the contrary, the act of ridiculing the speculative nature of Gimcrack's experiments in Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* presages and indirectly contributes to the consolidation of the Royal Society's theory of the modest witness—the prototype of the modern scientist, in contrast to the virtuoso or the amateur. In other words, the prevailing understanding of science and scientists as associated with credibility, transparency, reflexivity and objectivity can be traced back to the late seventeenth century's emphasis on the virtue of modesty.⁶⁰ As Donna Haraway reasons, the reconfiguration of modesty marks the emergence of a highly privileged modern scientific culture in terms of gender, class and race. It enhances the epistemological agency of the white upper-class males, renders their power invisible and, therefore, gradually thought of as natural. Haraway explains how damaging this can be to other groups in their attempt to enter the scientific scene.

Depleted of epistemological agency, modest women were to be invisible to others in the experimental way of life. The kind of visibility—the body—that women retained glides into being perceived as 'subjective', that is, reporting only on the self, biased, opaque, not objective. Gentlemen's epistemological agency involved a special kind of transparency. Colored, sexed, and laboring persons still have to do a lot of work to become similarly transparent to count as objective, modest witnesses to the world rather than to their 'bias' or 'special interest'. To be the object of vision, rather than the 'modest', self-invisible source of vision, is to be evacuated of agency.⁶¹

Shadwell's *The Virtuoso*, in its satirical critique of speculation, indirectly endorses the model of the modest witness and, as such, participates in the establishment of a dominant structure against which contemporary speculative theatre seeks to challenge. It is safe to claim that, despite the presence of speculative elements and discussion on speculation, British theatre from Shakespeare to Marlowe and Shadwell failed to engage with the concept fruitfully and tended to overlook its political potentials and ethical implications.

⁵⁹ Nick Payne, *Elegy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 24.

⁶⁰ 'Female modesty was of the body; the new masculine virtue had to be one of the mind. This modesty was to be the key to the gentleman-scientist's trustworthiness; he reported on the world, not on himself.' Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouseTM: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), 30.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

2. *The Rise of Speculation in British Theatre*

It was not until the early twentieth century, with George Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* (1921), that the speculative started to be employed as a subversive strategy in British theatre. The series has critics divided, not only because of its unprecedented length (a full performance of all five plays included in the cycle can last up to eight hours), its ambitious scope (the first play *In the Beginning: B.C. 4004 (In the Garden of Eden)* starts with Adam and Eve while the last *As Far As Thought Can Reach*, staying true to the title, depicts events in the year AD 31920) or its philosophical burden, but mainly because of Shaw's controversial position on evolutionary science. In his Preface to *Methuselah*, Shaw outlines his commitment to Creative Evolution and the Life Force—the two concepts he developed based on theories set forth by Buffon, Lamarck, Samuel Butler and Henri Bergson—against Darwinist and Neo-Darwinist theory of mechanical 'Natural Selection'. Unfortunately, his contemporaries found him easy to dismiss, and his biological argument was never taken seriously.⁶² Such a critical opinion is quite understandable, for despite proclaiming himself a 'great biologist',⁶³ Shaw was ill-informed on the subject of evolution and the fact that he presented his argument as a valid scientific idea while simultaneously attributing a mystical quality to it only gains him more criticism from the scientific community.⁶⁴

Shaw's theory of evolution in *Methuselah*, incoherent and inconsistent as it may be, is not without significance. Firstly, it functions as a source of inspiration for themes and plots of speculative fiction. Shippey points out that while 'no science fiction author accepts Shaw's solution of Bergsonian or quasi-Lamarckian belief in an *élan vital*', they do 'accept and take seriously his question whether any ethical sense can survive the universe of pointlessness, cruelty, and "blind chance" apparently revealed by Darwin'.⁶⁵ The thesis on longevity and evolution raised in *Methuselah* continues to be tackled and explored by writers in the

⁶² Commenting on the long-livers in Part 5 of *Back to Methuselah*, J. B. S. Haldane makes an austere remark, 'To a biologist they are unconvincing', while Peter J. Bowler claims that 'Shaw seems to have felt that he was part of a new wave of support for Lamarckism, but in fact his claim that it represented the spiritual salvation of the evolution movement was no longer fashionable even outside science.' See J. B. S. Haldane, *The Causes of Revolution* (London: Longmans Green, 1932), 165; Peter J. Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades Around 1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 105.

⁶³ Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells*, ed. J. Percy Smith, *Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 147.

⁶⁴ See Tom Shippey, 'Skeptical Speculation and *Back to Methuselah*', *Shaw* 17 (1997): 199-213.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

following decades, even though their solutions and approaches can differ considerably from Shaw's. Despite its departure from materialism, *Methuselah* is a major landmark in the development of an important theme: 'speculation about powers of mind and its place in the workings of the universe'.⁶⁶ It is also one of the first dramatic works to introduce the figure of the automata. Even though Shaw was probably unaware of Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* (1920), his automata and Capek's robot share the same fundamental feature: they are intelligent beings with no souls. Once again, this theme of artificial intelligence and the possibility of creating nonhuman consciousness will be taken up with enthusiasm by the next generation of speculative fiction writers.

Secondly, Shaw's speculative approach to immortality is crucial to the emergence of speculative theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to J. O. Bailey, Shaw's unconventional take on the issue acts as an attack on two Victorian orthodoxies, 'the Darwinian conception of evolution as chance mutation and survival of the fittest' and 'the creeds of the churches that a personal God observes, rewards, and punishes human behaviour'.⁶⁷ Shaw's *Life Force* is, as such, a subversive force that seeks to contest the established hegemony in both science and religion. Like Shakespeare, Shaw juxtaposes science and fantasy; however, the changing status of science in the twentieth century sets the two playwrights apart regarding the political implication of their artistic decision. Unlike Shadwell, Shaw takes speculation seriously since he is aware of the possibility its theatrical expression holds—the kind of possibility that cannot be realised through satire alone.

Lastly, the manner in which Shaw involves language anticipates the future tendency of speculative theatre to place a strong emphasis on verbal expression instead of action or visual representation. In *Methuselah*, language plays a pivotal role in the successful transfer of Shaw's grandeur vision onto the stage. The task of representing long life in a manner that simultaneously engages the audience and maintains the theatrical, speculative dimension of the play is made possible through syllogistic progression. To effectively render the passage of time perceptible to the audience, to accentuate the chronological separation between different groups of characters, Shaw resorts to a successive demonstration of epistemological superiority through conversation. In Play One, Adam and Eve investigate a dead deer in their first introduction to the concept of death, which establishes their inferior position compared

⁶⁶ Susan Stone-Blackburn, 'Science and Spirituality in *Back to Methuselah* and *Last and First Men*', *Shaw* 17 (1997): 197.

⁶⁷ J. O. Bailey, 'Shaw's *Life Force* and Science Fiction', *The Shaw Review* 16, no. 2 (1973): 49.

to the audience's experience. Next, the character of the Serpent appears and explains to Adam and Eve things that the audience already knows. Into Play Three, 'the characters who are most like the audience are the ones who must have things explained to them.'⁶⁸ As the newly emerged supermen demonstrate their superiority over the President, the audience learns that these supermen are far beyond them as much as they are beyond Adam and Eve in Play One. The process is repeated with a young superman, a middle-aged superman, the Ancient, and back to Lilith, who began life before Adam and Eve.⁶⁹ Shaw's verbal strategy of persuasion brings to the stage beings thirty thousand years into the future and millenniums into the past without stripping them of their mysterious quality, nor does it succumb to the technical constraints inherent in the theatre medium. Such is a valuable achievement, as the play now 'forces the audience, if they wish to understand the performance, into an exploration and reassessment of the boundaries of what is conventionally thought possible'.⁷⁰

Methuselah is, without doubt, a great attempt at speculative theatre. Yet, its impact remains limited because of Shaw's insistence on not only challenging but also superseding the Darwinian conception of evolution.⁷¹ A decade after *Methuselah*, however, he seems to have come to terms with the speculative aspect of his vision. Shaw tones down his early conviction of the Life Force from religious/scientific truth to an uncertain possibility: 'I do not present my creed of Creative Evolution as anything more than another provisional hypothesis. All the provisional hypotheses may be illusions; but if they lead to beneficial conduct they must be inculcated and acted on by the Government until better ones arrive.'⁷² It is fair to say that the 1930s marks a turning point in Shaw's engagement with speculation. The departure from the rational and the expected becomes more and more prominent in his later plays and culminates in *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934)—a part of the trio 'Plays Extravagant' published in 1936. Like *Methuselah*, *Simpleton* received mixed critiques: Edmund Wilson judges it a 'silly play', Bernard Dukore defends its structure, while Frederick

⁶⁸ John Barnes, 'Tropics of a Desirable Oxymoron: The Radical Superman in *Back to Methuselah*', *Shaw* 17 (1997), 159.

⁶⁹ Barnes concludes: 'The ascent from naïve humanity (in Part 1) to ordinary humanity (in Part 2) through the occasional superman (in Part 3), the dominant superman society (4), and the superseded superman (5) is abruptly extended, in the last part of Lilith's closing monologue, into a vision of several more levels stretching beyond the Ancients until finally all that can be said is that there is something beyond.' *Ibid.*, 160.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷¹ Ironically, Shaw insists that his argument for extended life in *Methuselah* is not 'fantastic speculation: it is deductive biology'. See Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiological Pentateuch* [1921] (Penguin, 1987), 15. For someone who holds an anti-scientific stance, his claim does sound as if he is seeking validation from the scientific community.

⁷² Bernard Shaw, 'Preface of *On the Rocks*', *Prefaces by Bernard Shaw* (London: Constable, 1934), 366.

McDowell praises its ideas.⁷³ What makes the play of special interest to my investigation of speculative theatre is the way it anticipates absurdist theatre, a point raised by Rodelle Weintraub and Daniel Leary. While Weintraub analyses the dream-like structure of the narrative,⁷⁴ Leary focuses on *Simpleton*'s engagement with Nothingness and nakedness. The play demonstrates three characteristic aspects of absurdity: a breakdown of structural logic, space-time continuum, and traditional moral and ethical codes.⁷⁵ The flattening out of planes, climaxes and values in *Simpleton* leads to the unexpected that defies knowledge and rationality. It appears that Shaw has got rid of his earlier obsession with overturning dominant scientific theories with some newly constructed concepts, as can be seen in *Methuselah*. His thesis in *Simpleton* is far more radical and paradoxical in comparison: a heightened consciousness does not come from the accumulation of empirical knowledge but from embracing the void of being. Embracing the void—the ultimate act of capitulation—does not condone nihilism but, on the contrary, asserts the possibility of the future on the basis of Nothingness. As remarked by Leary, '[the characters] are simpletons not because they lack reason but because they rely on reason and so despair and become cynics and pessimists. They have not lost themselves. The play informs us that we do not begin to live until logic gives way.'⁷⁶

Shaw's engagement with absurdity and uncertainty in *Simpleton* brings him quite close to Samuel Beckett, even though their approach to language remains distinct. Beckett is a figure of particular interest to the twenty-first-century speculative theatre. First, his conception of time and space in some of his most celebrated theatrical works, such as *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957) and *Happy Days* (1961), remains influential to contemporary apocalyptic, dystopian and utopian imagination. Among the plays included in the corpus, Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* perhaps shows the clearest traces of the Beckettian absurdity. One can see a parallel between the waiting for an Ocado man in a chaotic world invaded by vegetations and the waiting for Godot, the only difference being the delivery man eventually shows up and is later murdered and consumed. Second, the noticeable tension

⁷³ See Edmund Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers: Ten Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1938), 195; Bernard F. Dukore, 'Shaw's Doomsday', *Educational Theatre Journal* 19, no. 1 (1967): 61–71; Frederick P. W. McDowell, 'Spiritual and Political Reality: Shaw's *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*', *Modern Drama* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1960): 196–210.

⁷⁴ Rodelle Weintraub, 'Bernard Shaw's Fantasy Island: *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*', *Shaw* 17 (1997): 97–105.

⁷⁵ Daniel J. Leary, 'About Nothing in Shaw's *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*', *Educational Theatre Journal* 24, no.2 (1972), 140.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

between the visible and the audible in all of Beckett's plays is also a feature frequently observed in speculative theatre. On the one hand, characters are forced to face the predicament of inescapable spatial and temporal confinement. On the other hand, we have narratives that actively resist closure and fixed interpretation. Third, Beckett's 'deconstructionist' approach to language and identity, his use of the absurd to highlight social awareness, as well as his commitment to uncertainty are inherited by many contemporary playwrights whose works are characterised as speculative. The most valuable element of Beckett's legacy to speculative theatre, however, lies in the proposal for another kind of political theatre, one that does not directly address various existing problems but nonetheless manages to fulfil its political and ethical function through formal experimentation. In this thesis, even though I do not provide a close reading of any of Beckett's plays, his presence can still be perceived at many points.

A list of British speculative plays up until the end of the twentieth century would be incomplete without Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (1998). As noted previously, not all science plays are speculative, nor do speculative plays necessarily deal with scientific issues. Yet, *Copenhagen* appears to be one of the few in which science and speculation complement instead of cancelling each other. While being warmly received in the UK, in the US, *Copenhagen* was attacked by many academics for misinterpreting the historical figure Heisenberg.⁷⁷ It appears that in their quest for factual accuracy, Frayn's critics forgot that *Copenhagen* is, first and foremost, an artistic venture. At best, the play was an approximation of events in 1941, when the Nazi collaborator Heisenberg visited his mentor, Bohr, in Copenhagen. The motivation of the visit and the content of their discussion remain a historical mystery. Frayn's dramatisation of the event, being fully aware of its representational status, appropriately makes use of the Uncertainty Principle of quantum mechanics to highlight the contingency shared by theatre and science. As Heisenberg and Bohr replay the same event in different forms throughout the play, the audience is constantly reminded of the indeterminacy of truth and the impossibility of objective history. *Copenhagen*, as such, fulfils the function of speculation in its resistance against closure and the fixing of meaning. Uncertainty is a predicament but also an opportunity to explore an indefinite number of possibilities, as the character Heisenberg explains:

⁷⁷ For instance, Jonothan Logan complains that *Copenhagen* 'tames' history, 'altering the facts and rearranging the moral landscape the real Bohr and Heisenberg inhabited'. Jonothan Logan, 'A Strange New Quantum Ethics', ed. Michael Frayn, *American Scientist* 88, no. 4 (2000): 356.

I'm your enemy; I'm also your friend. I'm a danger to mankind; I'm also your guest. I'm a particle; I'm also a wave. We have one set of obligations to the world in general, and we have other sets, never to be reconciled, to our fellow-countrymen, to our neighbours, to our friends, to our family, to our children. We have to go through not two slits at the same time but twenty-two. All we can do is look afterwards, and see what happened.⁷⁸

Heisenberg's statement conveys an image of passive acceptance that may lead many to interpret it as unethical or cowardly. On the contrary, I concur with Alain Badiou in his claim that passivity in the face of the impossible requires courage, not the courage to live dangerously, but one that endures: 'Passivity is in effect nothing but the dissolution of the "I", the renunciation of any subjective identity. In the end, in order to cease being a coward one must fully consent to becoming.'⁷⁹ It is this same trait of passivity that can be seen in many contemporary speculative plays.

Before moving on, I would like to conclude this rough historical survey with three remarks. First, British speculative theatre, far from being a modern phenomenon, can be traced back to the beginning of the playhouse in London. While Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare and Thomas Shadwell, each in their own way, address the notion of speculation, their works can hardly be considered speculative drama at the time of writing since their speculative vision lacks a disruptive quality that renders it politically and ethically relevant.⁸⁰

Second, the so-called list presented here is non-exhaustive, and the plays mentioned in this overview are but the most crucial landmarks in the trajectory of British speculative theatre. For instance, after *Simpleton* and before *Copenhagen*, there exist many other notable speculative plays. These include Shaw's *Farfetched Fables* (1948), most of Samuel Beckett's theatrical works, Howard Brenton's *The Churchill Play* (1974) and *Greenland* (1988), Edward Bond's *War Plays* (1985), Caryl Churchill's *The Striker* (1994), or some of the 'science plays' like Tom Stoppard's *Hapgood* (1988) and *Arcadia* (1998). Shaw's *Farfetched Fables* contains a series of six Fables, which immediately recalls *Methuselah's* structure. Not only so, *Fables* can also be seen as Shaw's final return to the idea of the Life Force and the evolution of the human race in his 1921 play. We may read it as proof of Shaw's undying

⁷⁸ Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen* (London: Methuen Drama, 1998), 78.

⁷⁹ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge & Massachusetts: Polity, 2007), 125.

⁸⁰ If speculation is to be understood as the manifestation of a structure of feeling, at the time of writing, these plays could not be identified as speculative theatre. Nevertheless, staged in the twenty-first century, Shakespeare's and Marlowe's works are as speculative as any play included in the corpus of this research. It is my belief that whether a play can be characterized as speculative depends on the chosen criteria, be it the time in which it is written or that of performance.

preoccupation with certain aspects of life sciences, including neuroscience, nutrition and artificial reproduction, but also as a failure to break away from a certain prescribed mode of future imagination. On the other hand, in *Fables*, it appears that Shaw has become much more sceptical about the idea of relentless progress, which he endorsed in *Methuselah*. The despairing tone of *Fables* is understandable, considering the shadow of World War II was still looming over Europe. Yet, the year 1948 should have given Shaw more reason to rejoice, as it witnessed the birth of the National Health Service, one of the greatest achievements of the early English welfare state. Shaw's pessimism at this defining moment, thus, disrupts the linear world view of history and situates *Fables* in an interstitial space between utopia and dystopia.

Turning to the science-speculative plays, it is noticeable that Tom Stoppard's *Hapgood* (1988) and *Arcadia* (1998) share many common characteristics with *Copenhagen*. As Mark Berninger neatly summarises, these plays (1) all investigate the significance of scientific discoveries in the past, (2) they pay special attention to 'the process of how history is constructed in the present and can therefore be termed metahistorical plays', and (3) they adopt metadrama and juxtapose scenes set in the past and scenes set in the present.⁸¹ Nevertheless, Stoppard's plays fail to adhere to the non-epistemological approach that speculative theatre upholds. In *Hapgood*, Stoppard engages closely with quantum mechanics; however, he opts for a simple, definitive solution to resolve the play's conflict and betrays the principles of indeterminacy and uncertainty. Similarly, his take on chaos theory and historical reconstruction in *Arcadia* portrays an Enlightenment attitude, especially when he suggests that rationality may assist the historians (Bernard and Hannah) in their task. Unlike *Copenhagen*, which manages to translate the aporia of speculation into a theatrical form, *Hapgood* and *Arcadia* delve into speculation, but their speculative power is inhibited by an eventual closure of possibilities.⁸²

This leads to my third and last observation. Early speculative plays such as Shaw's *Methuselah* and *Simpleton*, despite being subversive in terms of ideas and plot, continue to adhere to the fixed structure of meaning in language. Frayn's *Copenhagen* ventures further in its reflection on language and, in so doing, demonstrates a more radical approach to speculation. Nevertheless, it does not mean that we can or should establish a scale to measure

⁸¹ Mark Berninger, 'A Crucible of Two Cultures: Timberlake Wertenbaker's *After Darwin* and Science in Recent British Drama', *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 10, (2002): 110.

⁸² See Daniel Jernigan, 'Tom Stoppard and "Postmodern Science": Normalizing Radical Epistemologies in *Hapgood* and *Arcadia*', *Comparative Drama* 37, no.1 (Spring 2003): 3-35.

speculative commitment, a fixed list of criteria to determine which play qualifies as speculative drama more. The different approaches to speculation simply show the diversity in speculative imagination and representation, which contributes to maintaining the openness and flexibility of speculative theatre. It is also important to note that with *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw has pioneered a type of speculative theatre whose utopian impulse is characterised by a desire to undermine the binary way of thinking, be it science versus spiritualism or textual versus visual representations. As noted by Susan Stone-Blackburn, the relationship between the spiritual and the scientific in Shaw's *Methuselah* tends to trouble science fiction scholars who find it necessary to embrace the materialist emphasis of science while excluding the mystical elements deemed unscientific.⁸³ Within the space of speculative fiction, however, these two seemingly incompatible aspects can coexist comfortably since the focus of investigation no longer lies in scientific accuracy but the freedom of imagination. In the same way that Shaw uses concepts such as the Life Force and Creative Evolution to encourage more imagination in confronting the problems of mortality and evolution, many contemporary speculative plays approach the issue of ecological crisis through a fantastic lens. Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral*, and Stef Smith's *Human Animals* present the audience with three different worlds all turned upside down as vegetations and animals propagate out of control and even natural phenomena are mobilised for war. Despite the lack of any logical explanation, these plays still effectively draw the audience's attention to the reality of environmental destruction in the real world. At the same time, the implausibility in their vision of the future resists capitalism's obsession with curbing risks and foreclosing possibilities that are radically different from the present. This is but one example of how British speculative plays defy the binary logic that continues to govern most aspects of contemporary life. In the next section, I will introduce the theoretical framework used in this thesis to analyse the conditions of uncertainty and openness in speculative theatre and explain how these aporetic conditions may constitute another mode of utopian thinking.

⁸³ Stone-Blackburn, 'Science and Spirituality in *Back to Methuselah* and *Last and First Men*', 185.

III. APORIA AS A UTOPIAN METHOD

At first glance, it is undeniable the prevalence of dystopian motifs in contemporary British speculative theatre. From the surveillance state (Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, Edward Bond's *The Chair Plays*, Dawn King's *Foxfinder*) and its opposite extreme, the state of anarchy (Phillip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* and Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door*), to eco-dystopias (Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral*, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* and Stef Smith's *Human Animals*) and a wide range of accelerating socio-economic crises—the housing crisis (Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*), problems of an ageing population (Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five*), the inhumane sex industry (Alistair McDowall's *Pomona*), the nuclear threat (Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*) or the condition of alienation and information overload (Chris Thorp's *Victory Condition*). Even among the plays that seem to present technological utopias, such as Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (virtual reality), Nick Payne's *Elegy* (neuroscience), Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* (robotics and artificial intelligence) and Alistair McDowall's *X* (space science), the audience is constantly reminded of the discrepancy between progress in science/technology and humans' emotional, ethical development, which tends to result in tragic outcomes. The pervasiveness of these dystopian motifs in speculative theatre can be said to be a truthful reflection of the sceptical view of the world and its future, as well as the anxieties that characterise life in the twenty-first century. However, it would be erroneous to equate this manifestation with a complete abandonment of utopian aspiration. The mode of utopian thinking exercised in the plays included in this research resists the simplistic positive-negative paradigm that has long characterised utopian studies. Instead of inscribing in binary logic, the utopian method of contemporary speculative theatre is thoroughly informed by the notion of aporia. As a result, the utopian vision that emerges from these plays neither delineates a concrete project nor pronounces a clear break between the present and the utopian future but rather sustaining a space of openness in which paradoxes thought of as irresolvable contradictions can be articulated. Within this space, it is possible to imagine the impossible, as various social, economic, political, moral determinants that impede imagination are brought into question.

The term 'aporia', first used consistently by the Eleatic Zeno and later appears in writing in Aristotle's *Physics IV*,⁸⁴ comes from the Greek *aporos* that translates as a

⁸⁴ Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), 32.

‘deprivation of path’. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the noun ‘aporia’ refers to a speaker’s doubtful attitude or a perplexing difficulty,⁸⁵ while the adjective ‘aporetic’ is defined as ‘inclined to doubt, or to raise objections’.⁸⁶ As I will subsequently demonstrate, ‘aporia’ is a term that resists a clear, definitive definition. The long history of ‘aporia’ invariably implies that the use and meaning of the word have gone through many alterations. Occupying a crucial position in Western philosophy and acting as a prominent method of enquiry among ancient philosophers and influential schools, from the Presocratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Alexander of Aphrodisias, to Academic sceptics, Pyrrhonian sceptics, Plotinus and Damascius,⁸⁷ ‘aporia’ is an essential topic in philosophical discourse. The more interest the term gathers, the more contesting views it gives rise to and the more complex the whole matter becomes. It is beyond the scope of this short section to mention every figure who has contributed to the conceptual evolution of ‘aporia’. I have decided to focus on the first generation of the Sophists and Jacques Derrida, as their treatment of aporia is most relevant to my application throughout this thesis. My goal in this section is to identify the two different ways contemporary speculative theatre engages with the notion of ‘aporia’ and elaborate on how each mode of engagement contributes to the formulation of speculative theatre’s utopian vision.

1. *Rethinking Sophistic Aporia*

The Sophistic movement is an intellectual movement of the fifth century BC that emerged in a community based on direct democracy and oral procedure. Sophists of the first generation, such as Pythagoras, Gorgias, Hippias and Prodicus, are essentially performers, in the sense that they would travel from place to place to give lectures and performances, mostly to elite young people. Gorgias, a Sophist well-known for his anti-foundationalist views, makes extensive use of parody, artificial figuration, theatricality and the venue of the festival to engage his audience in the practice of critical thinking.⁸⁸ Compared to Gorgias, other Sophists may be less obvious in their association with the theatre. Still, it should be noted that all of them are acutely aware of the power of spoken language as well as the political

⁸⁵ ‘Aporia, n.’, in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 12 January 2020, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/9384>.

⁸⁶ ‘Aporetic, Adj.’, in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 12 January 2020, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/9382#eid615612>.

⁸⁷ See George Karamanolis and Vasilis Politis, eds., *The Aporetic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁸⁸ Scott Porter Consigny, *Gorgias, Sophist and Artist* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

potential of performativity and, consequently, their performances are carefully devised to best realise these power and potential. There are two reasons that make the Sophists and their practice of particular interest to my research on contemporary speculative theatre. First, the kind of shared agenda that marks sophistic thought is similar to that of speculative theatre of the twenty-first century. According to Rachel Barney, ‘the sophists are concerned to disentangle the contribution of the subjective and the socially constructed from the natural or objective, and to work out the implications of that analysis’⁸⁹; at the same time, despite this fundamental common ground, sophistic thought is essentially anti-dogmatic, as it tends to philosophise in a critical, self-undermining way. In other words, like contemporary speculative theatre, the sophistic practice engages the audience in an interrogation of the binary logic that conceals injustice and enables violence while maintaining its status as a ‘structure of feeling’ rather than being institutionalised or fully organised into a dominant ideology.

The second reason, which is closely linked to the first, has to do with the kind of experience emerging from the encounter between the audience and the performance. In both the sophistic performance and contemporary speculative theatre, the goal is not to communicate objective truth but to encourage people to practice a kind of critical thinking already attuned to emotions.

Gorgias’ parodic performances are an integral part of this pedagogy, for by displaying the rhetoricity of every text, he shows his audience that all arguments, including his own, are contingent, situated fabrications that are ‘true’ only insofar as they are endorsed by specific audiences. Gorgias’ objective is not to transmit objective truth or to inculcate universal moral principles, but to encourage people to become engaged in the *agons* of their culture. For it is by engaging in these *agons* that people are able to liberate and empower themselves, while fostering solidarity in the Panhellenic community.⁹⁰

The above commentary on Gorgias’ pedagogy can be said to be characteristic of the Sophists of the first generation. It values the same hermeneutic indeterminacy that underlines contemporary speculative theatre’s utopian aspiration. Such an aporetic experience may seem disorienting at first, as the audience is left to ponder upon the unsolved problems with which they are presented. However, its political potential lies in the possibility of a community sustained not by shared values and similarities but variety and respect for individual rhythms. In the words of Rachel Barney, the sophistic movement has ‘what we might call *dialectical*

⁸⁹ Rachel Barney, ‘The Sophistic Movement’, in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Mary Louise Gill and Pierre Pellegrin (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 79.

⁹⁰ Consigny, *Gorgias, Sophist and Artist*, 30-31.

unity: the unity of a debate or tradition, with both the commonality and the diversity, indeed conflict, it implies.’⁹¹

It is interesting to note how the Sophists not only practice and encourage hermeneutic indeterminacy or epistemology relativism but themselves have become the embodiment of aporia. Since very few of their writings survive, most of what is known about their ‘teachings’ exist in the form of citations in the writing of others. This explains why already in the fifth century BC, ‘though associated with the words for wisdom (*sophia*) and wise man (*sophos*), and originally meaning simply an expert or teacher, *sophistēs* had begun to take on connotations of intellectual deviousness,’⁹² considering how influential Plato’s writings were and how unsympathetically he portrayed the Sophists. At the same time, it is because of this scarcity of first-hand sources and the subsequent uncertainty surrounding their thoughts that the Sophist can accommodate various interpretations and are constantly viewed as ‘our contemporaries’ — ‘whether that makes them Enlightenment rationalists, eminent Victorians, cynical *fin de siècle* perspectivists, analytic moral philosophers, or, most recently of all, postmodernists.’⁹³

It is perhaps in Plato’s writings that we can see most clearly the violence imposed on sophistic practice and the consolidation of a binary logic through the two figures of the Sophist and Socrates. Like the Sophists, Socrates had no writings of his own, and all that is known about his method is made available through the accounts of his students and contemporaries: Plato, Xenophone, or the playwright Aristophanes, for instance. The variable and sometimes contradictory sources of his life and philosophy give rise to the Socratic problem that effectively makes Socrates himself an aporetic figure *par excellence* and, more specifically, of hermeneutic aporia. It is widely accepted that one of the most defining characteristics of Socrates, as seen in Plato’s early dialogues, is his systematic use of aporetic discourse to undermine his interlocutor’s claim of knowledge and certainty by constructing a space where opposing, irreconcilable opinions can be scrutinised.

Despite the similarity in their method, the Sophists and Socrate, through Plato’s writings, are made into symbols of two opposing types of aporia—the destructive ‘sophistic aporia’ and the generative ‘philosophical aporia.’ As Gareth Matthews remarks, aporetic dialogues disappear in the middle period of Plato’s creative activity, and the fictional

⁹¹ Barney, ‘The Sophistic Movement’, 94.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

Socrates is allowed to develop theories and support positive conclusions rather than leaving the perplexity unresolved.⁹⁴ This makes it look as if, having established that Socrates is a philosopher who speaks the truth, Plato moves on to hijack Socrates's voice to support his own ideology. In the Platonic dialogues of the late period, in particular the *Parmenides* and the *Theaetetus*, perplexity (aporia) is once again given a central significance. Yet, it is far from being the same kind of perplexity that permeates the early dialogues. Socrates's interlocutors are no longer people whom he randomly meets on the street nor hostile Sophists whose reputation is at risk because of Socrates but intellectual, friendly individuals who are already willing to learn (and be persuaded) from the beginning. The content of the exchange also differs from that of the early dialogues. First, these exchanges revolve around a particular theoretical problem—Plato's Theory of Form—rather than ethical questions. Second, they are highly technical, filled with details destined for a more limited audience, such as those belonging to the Academy.

This shift in the usage context of aporia marks the emergence of the image of Socrates as an intellectual midwife and brings attention not only to the kind of aporia that Socrates and Plato pursue but also to the kind of aporia that they deem detrimental and, therefore, should be eradicated—the sophistic aporia. Sarah Kofman recognises the evolution of Plato's use and conception of aporia throughout his writing career as part of a larger scheme to establish the Platonic hierarchies. It has been generally agreed that Socrates's systematic use of aporia in the early dialogues frequently draws him criticism since it closely resembles the method employed by the Sophist—the antithesis of the philosopher. We can interpret Plato's move to focus on a different kind of aporia in the later dialogues as an attempt to further distance himself from the ambiguous space that the historical Socrates occupies and introduce a decisive division between the Sophist and the philosopher through the fictional Socrates. In 'The Simile of the Cave', the *Republic Book VII*, the captives experience the sophistic aporia in darkness, but it is the philosophical aporia associated with light that promises to rescue them. Sarah Kofman elaborates on this point:

[T]he only thing that can save them is an aporia; only an aporia can make visible the chains of pleasure and of the sensible world, which bind their souls to their bodies and prevent them from thinking; only an aporia can make them aware of the aporetic state into which they were initially plunged without realizing it. [...] The fearful aporia comes about because the soul is

⁹⁴ Gareth B. Matthews, 'Perplexity in Plato, Aristotle, and Tarski', *Philosophical Studies* 85, no. 2 (1997): 218.

troubled and bewildered by the darkness. If, on the other hand, it is dazzled by the light, one should, he says, rejoice at one's perplexity, at one's *aporia*'.⁹⁵

This hierarchical relationship between the sophistic-dark-paralysing *aporia* and the philosophical-light-stimulating *aporia*, as Kofman aptly points out, 'is consistent with all the Platonic hierarchies, which privilege the visible at the expense of the sensible, above at the expense of below, and which make light dominant over darkness, male over female'.⁹⁶ *Aporia*, thus, becomes an important site where the Platonic and later Aristotelian positive epistemologies consolidate, at the cost of the Sophists and their rhetorical method being maligned.⁹⁷ George Pullman succinctly summarises the systematic violence imposed on the Sophists in the following passage.

[...] Platonic and Aristotelian rhetorical theory disciplined the sophists' extravagant practices, substantiated their unsubstantiated claims, and transformed their dithyrambic, mythic, magical, poetic discourse into a logical, rational theory of argumentation. In other words, Plato and Aristotle transformed *mythos* into *logos*; thus they were the 'fathers' of rhetoric insofar as rhetoric was a respectable *technê* for the production of reasonable discourse.⁹⁸

While concurring with this traditional thinking, Pullman contends that there exists an underlying cause for the systematic vilification of the Sophists, which is linked to politics and derived from the fear that sophistic rhetoric 'would foster unstable governments':

If one promotes antithetical reasoning or denies the possibility of absolute *judgments*, then one instils a profound sense of the futility and arrogance of single-minded interpretations of the world. Hierarchical assumptions about thought and social organizations are called into question, and multiple voices are granted equal consideration. Such a way of thinking and living could easily have led to the breakdown of the Athenian hegemony, hence the Athenian suspicion of those who taught what Plato called *misology*.⁹⁹

Sophistic practice, being a way of talking and writing 'designed to change the world'¹⁰⁰ rather than a way of describing it, is undoubtedly a form of anti-foundational epistemology that threatens the stability and hegemony of power in ancient Athens and, as a result, marks itself a target for the ruling class.

⁹⁵ Sarah Kofman, 'Beyond *Aporia*?', in *Post-Structuralist Classics*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, trans. David Macey (London & New York: Routledge, 2017), 21-22.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁷ George L. Pullman, 'Reconsidering Sophistic Rhetoric in Light of Skeptical Epistemology', *Rhetoric Review* 13, no. 1 (1994): 51.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66. On a similar note, Sarah Kofman writes, '[...] in order to safeguard reason from madness, and in order to master a mimesis that cannot, ultimately, be mastered, Plato makes a salutary distinction between good and bad mimesis, between noble and base sophistry, between dog and wolf; this is why he attempts to distinguish between philosophical *aporia* and sophistic *aporia*, which are as alike as rival brothers.' See Kofman, 'Beyond *Aporia*?', 17.

¹⁰⁰ Pullman, 'Reconsidering Sophistic Rhetoric in Light of Skeptical Epistemology', 67.

Pullman is not alone in his reappraisal of the Sophists.¹⁰¹ Recently, there has been renewed interest in sophistic among contemporary rhetoricians and thinkers, many of whom are associated with feminist writing. Sarah Kofman, who was briefly mentioned above, holds the opinion that while Plato's distinction between the good (philosophical) and the bad (sophistic) aporia falls victim to dualistic thinking, it simultaneously invokes an uneasy awareness of the inevitability and necessity of the paralysing aporia of the Sophist.¹⁰² Adopting a more radical attitude, Barbara Cassin, in her thought-provoking book entitled *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism*, argues for a new perspective to look at the history of philosophy that focuses on the sophistic history of 'neglected and repressed traditions, of alternative paths'.¹⁰³ Her book considers sophistic texts as 'the paradigm of what was not only left to one side but transformed and made unintelligible by their enemies'¹⁰⁴ and, in so doing, the Sophists are made to occupy the status of the 'others' in the quest for real knowledge. Paradoxically, this also means that these 'others' can never be wholly eradicated, as the doctrine of the Sophists is 'an operator that serves to circumscribe and define the scope of philosophy'.¹⁰⁵

Like Pullman, Cassin contends that the systematic discreditation of the Sophists in ancient Athens is politically motivated. Sophists are devalued on all grounds because they are representative of a consistent relativism that impedes the establishment of power, in particular, the power of language in terms of fixed meaning.

The entire rhetoric of the sophists is thus a vast performance which, time after time, by means of praise and counsel, produces the consensus required for the social bond. This consensus is minimal, even minimalist, because far from requiring a uniform unity, the sophistical consensus does not even require that everyone think the same thing (*homonoia*) but only that everyone speak (*homologia*) and lend their ear (*homophônia*). In this way, it is hinted that the final motor (*ressort*) of political discourse is homonymy [...].¹⁰⁶

Cassin's statement quoted above makes sophistic rhetoric (and consequently, sophistic aporia) a matter highly pertinent to my investigation of speculative theatre. The kind of

¹⁰¹ It must be noted that the 'rehabilitation' of the sophists started in the nineteenth century, with thinkers such as G. F. Hegel, George Grote, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

¹⁰² In her reading of Plato's writings, Kofman notes that '[...] the philosopher is forced to swallow the metis of the sophists in order to use it against them and so as not to be dispossessed of his master[...]. The only way to invert the balance of power [...] is to outdo [the sophist] by adopting his wiles'. Kofman, 'Beyond Aporia?', 16.

¹⁰³ Barbara Cassin, *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism* (Fordham University Press, 2014), 10.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

aporia that emerges from sophistic practice is grounded in performativity: its subversive power resides not in what is said but in the manner the exchange between the sophist and their interlocutor resists closure and fixed interpretation. In this sense, speculative theatre can be said to be a sophistic practice. First, in terms of language, speculative plays such as Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone* consistently destabilise fixed meaning. Take an example from *Escaped Alone*, in which two different meanings of the word 'float' collide in one sentence: 'Yawls, ketches, kayaks, canoes, schooners, planks, dinghies, lifebelts and upturned umbrellas, swimming instructors and lilos, rubber ducks and pumice stone floated on the stock market.'¹⁰⁷ In finance, the verb 'float' is used for a currency that 'fluctuate[s] as regards its international exchange rate',¹⁰⁸ which has nothing to do with the common usage of the term—'to rest on the surface of any liquid'.¹⁰⁹ Here, the language game or lexical ambiguity makes it impossible to determine which meaning of 'float' is to be prioritised. The fact that the sentence starts with a list of things that rest on the surface of any liquid only to end with a reference of the stock market defies the audience's expectation and certainty.

Second, in terms of form, binary oppositions are called into question in various ways. Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, Alistair McDowall's *Pomona*, Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* exploit the heterotopic nature of the stage to juxtapose two dramatic worlds in a single space. *The Nether* interrogates the 'realness' of virtual reality, where sexually deviant people (paedophiles) are allowed to live as their true selves without causing harm to any actual children. *Pomona* problematises the boundary between real life and game by interweaving a Lovecraftian role-playing game and a young woman's search for her sister on a mysterious but also existing island in Manchester. *Victory Condition* and *Escaped Alone* weave together apocalyptic scenarios and the quotidian life of common people. Another set of binary oppositions can be found in Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five* and Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly*. These two plays put to the test the supposed distinction between human and nonhuman, inorganic beings, not only through the practice of using human actors for robot roles but also by invoking the unstable power relations between humans and artificial intelligence. The third binary set addresses the tension between showing and telling in the theatre medium. Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* and *Radiant Vermin* resist theatre's visual imperative by replacing graphic

¹⁰⁷ Caryl Churchill, *Escaped Alone* (London: Nick Hern, 2016), 12.

¹⁰⁸ 'Float, v.', in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 13 January 2021, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/71731#eid4121712>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

representation of violence with story-telling even when dealing with the subject matters of an apocalyptic crisis or serial murders. Last but not least, Alistair McDowall's *X* and Nick Payne's *Elegy*, in their treatment of the experience of memory loss, interrogate the past-present delimitation in temporal perception.

In all these examples, speculative theatre engages the audience in a sophistic practice, a theatre experience that 'promotes antithetical reasoning', 'denies the possibility of absolute judgments' and attacks the 'arrogance of single-minded interpretations of the world'.¹¹⁰ The audience is encouraged to revise their hierarchical assumptions on reality and fiction, the human and the nonhuman, seeing and hearing. Against the apolitical charge due to its fantastic and futuristic narratives, speculative theatre presents itself as another form of postmodern political theatre, one that resists direct association with any political messages. Marvin Carlson writes:

Instead of providing resistant political 'messages' or representations, as did the political performances of the 1960s, postmodern performance provides resistance precisely not by offering 'messages', positive or negative, that fit comfortably into popular representations of political thought, but by challenging the processes of representation itself, even though it must carry out this project by means of representation.¹¹¹

Like the Sophists who are 'more interested in fallacies and puzzles than in proofs and solutions, more comfortable with paradox and satire than with dogmatic assertion',¹¹² contemporary speculative theatre demonstrates its subversive quality by relying on sophistic aporia (hermeneutic indeterminacy) to maintain the openness of dialogue between theatre and its audience—an openness that sustains discourse and points towards the possibility of a more ethical mode of relationality.

2. *Derridean Aporia—Impossible Theatre, Impossible Community*

In the twenty-first century, parallel to the effort to rehabilitate sophistic aporia, we continue to witness a critical attitude towards sophistic practices. Those who reject modern 'sophistry' argue that the practice endorses ideas detrimental to the progressive epistemological project, such as relativism—the shift of the focus of enquiry from objective and obtainable Truth to truths, or the emphasis on contextualised interpretation of representation rather than on meaning.

¹¹⁰ Pullman, 'Reconsidering Sophistic Rhetoric in Light of Skeptical Epistemology', 66.

¹¹¹ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), 142.

¹¹² Barney, 'The Sophistic Movement', 95.

The modern sophists are those that, in the footsteps of the great Wittgenstein, maintain that thought is held to the following alternative: either effects of discourse, language games, or the silent indication, the pure ‘showing’ of something subtracted from the clutches of language. Those for whom the fundamental opposition is not between truth and error or wandering, but between speech and silence, between what can be said and what is impossible to say. Or between statements endowed with meaning and others devoid of it.¹¹³

The modern sophists, according to Alain Badiou, are still perceived as ‘the singular adversary of philosophy’. However, rather than promoting anti-sophistic extremism—the desire to eradicate the sophist, Badiou acknowledges the sophist’s role as the ‘perverted double of the philosopher’ who must ‘only be assigned to *his place*’.¹¹⁴ It appears that Badiou here carries on the Platonic project of maintaining the existence of the sophist as a scapegoat or ‘other’ against which the philosopher construct their identity. Among the contemporary sophists mentioned by Badiou, Jacques Derrida makes a frequent appearance, despite the fact that in his later texts and interviews, Derrida emphatically controverts the widespread belief that ‘deconstruction amounted to nothing more than an update on ancient sophistical themes or a bag of crafty rhetorical tricks with absolutely no regard for reputable, truth-apt standards of debate’¹¹⁵—the sort of belief put about by John Searle and, to some extent, Badiou. In the field of performance studies, the broader perception remains that ‘deconstruction is incompatible with any metaphysical language or categories, and incapable of producing meaningful practical vocabularies’.¹¹⁶ This has resulted in hesitation or outright rejection of a deconstructionist approach among performance theorists. Philip Auslander, despite acknowledging the potential application of Derrida’s critique of language and fixed meaning to the interrogation of grounding concepts in performance such as the playwright’s vision, the director’s concept or the actor’s self, also claims that ‘for Derrida, the play of difference is all there is’.¹¹⁷ Other performance theorists, including Johannes Birringer, Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanie K. Forte, are much less enthusiastic about engaging with the deconstructionist method,

¹¹³ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans., ed. Norman Madarasz (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 116-17.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹⁵ Christopher Norris, ‘Truth in Derrida’, in *A Companion to Derrida*, ed. Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 23.

¹¹⁶ Duncan Jamieson, ‘Between Derrida and Grotowski’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 17, no. 1 (2007): 64.

¹¹⁷ Philip Auslander, ‘“Just Be Your Self”—Logocentrism and Difference in Performance Theory’, in *Acting (Re)Considered: Theories and Practices*, ed. Phillip B. Zarrilli (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 66. In his 1997 revision of the same essay, Auslander, hoping to establish a more meaningful purpose of deconstructionist discourse, replaces this phrase with ‘deconstruction is the analysis of the play of *différance* within existing discourses and the implications of that analysis for the meanings imputed to those discourses’. See Philip Auslander, ‘“Just Be Your Self”—Logocentrism and Difference in Performance Theory’, in *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 38.

citing its supposedly unlimited textual play and its structural closure as factors that impede any practical use, politically speaking.¹¹⁸ However, as pointed out by Duncan Jamieson, rather than seizing deconstruction as a tool for approaching questions of presence, the most fertile ground for developing Derrida's relationship to performance is perhaps in the attention to *experience*.¹¹⁹ Concurring with Jamieson, I also believe that the Derridean aporia promises to be a fruitful approach in examining the ethico-political implication of contemporary speculative theatre's 'experience of the impossible', which emerges from its deconstructionist approach to language, meanings, truths and reality.

Derridean aporia is not the oscillation between two contradictory sayings (as in the case of the sophistic aporia), but the contradiction applies to one and the same entity: the condition of possibility is also the condition of impossibility. Unlike Aristotle, whose aporia of time is still deconstructible, the Derridean aporia is both 'undeconstructible' and the source of all deconstructions.¹²⁰ Among the examples of the impossible/aporia that Derrida returns to frequently are gift-giving, hospitality, forgiveness and mourning. Inherent in the commitment to these aporias and the impossible in general is a utopian impulse that characterises speculative theatre's endeavour to represent the unrepresentable, not to capture it but simply to suggest the possibility of other ways of thinking and other modes of relation unrestrained by existing hierarchies and boundaries.

According to Derrida, there are three types of aporia or nonpassage. First, the nonpassage resembling an impermeability is the kind that can be found in closed borders. Second, the aporia or impasse stems from the fact that there is no limit, when there is no longer a border to cross—the limit has become too porous, permeable and indeterminate. In this second type, there is no opposition between the two sides, just like there is no opposition in terms of safety between being inside one's home and being outside in the circumstances of war. Lastly, 'the impossible' is a nonpassage because 'its elementary milieu does not allow for something that could be called passage, step, walk, gait, displacement, or replacement, a kinesis in general. There is no more path [...]'.¹²¹ The third type is the most extreme and the

¹¹⁸ Johannes Birringer argues that 'the text [becomes] nothing but a "performance" of itself', while Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanie Forte argue that 'in the closed system of deconstruction the only possible reference is to the dominant ideology it deconstructs. In effect, it reproduces things as they are . . .' See Jamieson, 'Between Derrida and Grotowski', 64.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹²⁰ Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political*, 33.

¹²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (California: Stanford University Press, 1993). 21.

most difficult to think about since '[t]he impasse itself would be impossible'.¹²² The condition for 'the impossible' dictates that there is 'no more movement or trajectory, no more *trans-* (transport, transposition, transgression, translation, and even transcendence), no space for the aporia because of a lack of topographical conditions or, more radically, because of a lack of the topological condition itself'.¹²³ It is on this last type of aporia—the impossible—that I would focus my analysis of contemporary speculative theatre's utopian impulse. I would argue that when it comes to 'utopia', in order to overcome the binary logic of a good place or noplacé, a heaven-on-earth or another disguise of totalitarianism, we should consider it another example of the impossible.

Here, I will digress a little from Derrida to discuss some recent developments in utopian studies to demonstrate how the turn towards aporia in speculative theatre can be related to the 'processual turn' in utopian studies. From the second half of the twentieth century, in the field of literature, utopia and its twin dystopia have undergone a process of reimagination and reconceptualisation that increasingly blurs the demarcation between the two sub-genres. The emergence of 'critical utopia' in the 1970s and 'critical dystopia' in the 1980s and 90s accentuates the importance of distinction, not between utopia and dystopia, but between Utopia, which stands for ideological affirmation and historical closure, and the utopian impulse understood as the negation of any form of totalitarian administered society whether it is deemed 'desirable' or not. Critical utopian texts 'reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as dream', '[dwelling] on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated' and '[focusing] on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives'.¹²⁴ Following the same direction of self-reflexivity, critical dystopia offers 'not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration'.¹²⁵

Like the way critical utopias and critical dystopias are categorised in literary criticism, in the field of theatre studies, we can also consider certain plays as presenting critical utopia

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* [1986] (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 10.

¹²⁵ Thomas Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Avalon Publishing, 2000), xv.

or critical dystopia narratives. Rory Mularkey's *The Wolf from the Door* (2014), Nick Payne's *Elegy* (2016) and Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* (2018) belong to the former group while Edward Bond's *The Chair Plays* (2000-2005), Dawn King's *Foxfinder* (2011), Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* (2013), Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* (2014), Stef Smith's *Human Animals* (2016), and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) are sometimes identified with the latter. *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and *Elegy* give just enough information for the audience to recognise how technologically advanced these worlds must be for ordinary people to possess a life-like robot or for patients who suffer from degenerative diseases to be cured by a single operation. *The Wolf from the Door* appears to be documenting a revolution in the making; however, the absurdist (but no less violent) way this revolution unfolds betrays the seriousness of the documentary genre. Edward Bond's *Have I None*, *The Under Room*, and *Chair* are all set in the year 2077, when Britain falls under a totalitarian authority that abolishes the past and terrorises its citizens. Similarly, *Foxfinder* introduces a bleak vision of a future Britain significantly regressed in terms of technology and governed by a zealously religious group that propagates the myth of the magical, cunning fox—the invisible but omnipresent enemy of humans and humanity. *Pastoral* and *Human Animals* explore the tension between civilisation and nature by transporting the audience to the midst of a crisis as London is infested with rampaging vegetation in the former, wild animals and the growing fear of contagion in the latter. *The Children* brings us to a coastal town in the aftermath of a nuclear accident to experience this powerful longing for pre-crisis normality, which has become a prevalent, relatable feeling in the twenty-first century. *Pomona* brings the audience to a mysterious island where prostitution, pornography production and human organ harvesting are thriving businesses.

It is essential to stress that the above categorisation remains flexible, for the plays said to be critical utopias (*Instructions for Correct Assembly*, *Elegy*, and *The Wolf from the Door*) can always be classified as critical dystopias. As a result, instead of focusing on the dialectic between utopia and dystopia, it will be much more beneficial to investigate the utopian impulse shared by the two sub-genres. Critical utopia and dystopia, despite their opposite settings, are both utopian expressions in the sense that they 'constantly shatter the present achievements and compromises of society and point to that which is not yet experienced in

the human project of fulfilment and creation'.¹²⁶ In other words, it is the shared speculative form of critical utopia and dystopia that makes them politically and ethically relevant.

This paradigm shift provides a favourable condition for research linked to the theatre medium, which has until now occupied a marginal place in utopian studies. Unlike the novel and the moving image (such as films or TV series), the medium of the theatre, in most cases, does not accommodate a description of the utopian or dystopian world detailed enough to enable an immersive experience.¹²⁷ However, as utopian studies shift the focus from Utopia and Dystopia (understood as the blueprint or, at the very least, concrete prediction of the future) to the utopian impulse (an exercise in imagination stemming from the desire for change without any determined goal), theatre's constraints in staging speculative fiction are no longer a disadvantage but have become parts of what makes the medium particularly compelling in expressing its utopian aspiration. For instance, in the 2016 Royal Court production of Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, the audience is given fragments of a post-apocalyptic world where violence and horror exceed visual representation.

MRS J The hunger began when eighty per cent of food was diverted to t 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. The entire food stock of Newcastle was won by lottery ticket and the winner taken to a 24 hour dining room where fifty chefs chopped in relays and the public voted on what he should eat next. 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. Finally the starving stormed the tv centres and were slaughtered and smoked in large numbers. Only when cooking shows were overtaken by sex with football teams did cream trickle back to the shops and rice was airlifted again.¹²⁸

Apocalyptic scenarios such as the one quoted above are recounted in an unemotional tone by a character standing between two burning red frames against a dark stage. Rather than satisfying the audience's voyeuristic pleasure by providing them with spectacular images and actions, the play creates an unsettling theatre experience caused by the discrepancy between the audible—extravagant and bombarding language on the one hand—and the visible that is impoverished on the other. It is precisely in this resistance to the visual imperative that *Escaped Alone* demonstrates most clearly its utopian aspiration by pointing towards the possibility of imagining a future that cannot be captured or regulated. The importance of language here does not lie in its ability to truthfully reflect reality but its deconstructive operation.

¹²⁶ Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 27.

¹²⁷ The exception being immersive theatre.

¹²⁸ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 22.

Commenting on utopian speculation in literature, Ruth Levitas observes that there are three aspects in the IROS method—Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: analytical-archaeological mode, constructive-architectural mode, and ontological mode that focuses on subjective transformation.¹²⁹ In the case of speculative theatre, while the concern with archaeology and architecture is not completely discarded since there is always the need to ‘bring to debate the potential structure of an alternative society’,¹³⁰ it is evident that portraying ‘the concrete institutional character of an alternative society’¹³¹ is not where the theatre medium places its emphasis. Instead of providing the audience with a detailed, systematically documented account that implies a sort of sequential development and therefore obeying the law of linear temporality, the futuristic, alternative and surrealist worlds depicted in contemporary speculative theatre function like snapshots that one accidentally picks up without any knowledge of how a particular scene/situation came into existence. The sketchiness and elusiveness of these speculative worlds, while managing to convey a general atmosphere of otherness, maintain their status as a utopian gesture rather than a reliable representation of Utopia/Dystopia. In breaking with the principle of causality, speculative theatre carves out a space where the audience can imagine different ways of being, different modes of relationality that challenge existing forms of relationships based on binary identity.¹³² Tom Moylan argues, ‘To write utopia is to indicate what cannot yet be said within present conceptual language or achieved in current political action. To write utopia is to perform the most utopian of actions possible within literary discourse. The form is itself more significant than any of its content.’¹³³ Speculative theatre has ventured even further since it not only writes but also performs utopia.

It is here that we encounter an impossible theatre invested in cultivating a utopian subjectivity and initiating an impossible community. Impossible, according to Derrida, does not mean ‘not possible’ but rather the very condition for possibility.

We think the impossible. If I made the connection between thought and desire in this respect, it is because we not only think the impossible; we are also interested in it. We are motivated by something that is impossible. It is the impossibility of hospitality that is the condition for everything that cannot attain it (but as such it should not be confused with a regulatory idea).

¹²⁹ Ruth Levitas, ‘Being in Utopia’, *The Hedgehog Review* (2008): 25.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Ruth Levitas argues that utopian speculation enables the emergence of ‘prophetic identity’, that is ‘self-understanding in terms of who we might become (both individually and collectively) rather than who we now are, and in particular where we come from.’ See Levitas, ‘Being in Utopia’, 29.

¹³³ Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 39.

This means that such an impossible is not simply something negative. We have to rethink the 'im-' of the impossible. The impossible is not that which is 'not possible'. In other words, it is not simply the negative side, the negative aspect of the possible. So the impossible is, in a certain sense, at one with the possibility that makes it possible.¹³⁴

Derrida uses the quasi-concept of the impossible to refer to several phenomena, including hospitality, mourning, forgiving and the gift, all of which are issues explored in many contemporary speculative plays. The manner in which these themes are presented in Edward Bond's *Chair Plays*, Dawn King's *Foxfinder* or Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five* exceeds the particularity of each theme and calls for an overall reassessment of power relations informed by binary logic. Bond's *The Under Room*, for instance, serves as a powerful reminder of the oppressive nature of the concept of hospitality based on the host-guest dichotomy. When the immigrant refuses to run away with Joan despite the fact that she has risked her own safety by sheltering him, he violates the exchange economy and power relation that dictate conventionally defined hospitality, which deeply unsettles Joan and pushes her to commit murder. By exposing the limitation of the popular conception of hospitality, *The Under Room* indirectly calls for an engagement with the infinite or unconditional hospitality—an 'impossible' that is also the condition for the possibility of a more ethical mode of relationality.

The search for a theatre of the 'impossible', for an 'impossible' theatre in contemporary speculative theatre, can be considered a legacy of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. However, if Artaud retreats to the theatricality of radiophonic work as a way to 'displace cruelty with a physical attack that puts to the test the relationship of the individual to language',¹³⁵ speculative theatre insists on the significance of the visual language of the stage and the actor's body, no matter how impoverished it appears to be. Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* 2015 production by Soho Theatre adopts a minimalist approach to staging. Similar to the Royal Court production of Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, violent scenes are recounted by the characters rather than being shown. However, unlike *Escaped Alone*, *Radiant Vermin* makes extensive use of the actor's body and physical theatre techniques, as the characters not only retell but also re-enact the murders they committed in exchange for a dream house. Juxtaposed against a simple white environment, the verbal description and physical miming of extreme cruelty are all the more unsettling. The tension between the

¹³⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'The Tragic, the Impossible and Democracy: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', interviewed by Danie Goosen, *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law—Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique* 23, no. 3 (September 2010): 247.

¹³⁵ Helga Finter and Matthew Griffin, 'Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre: The Legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty', *TDR* (1988-) 41, no. 4 (1997): 18.

light-heartedness of the visual language and the serious nature of the narrative creates a space for the audience to reflect on their implication in systemic violence. In other words, it is a paradoxical space that fosters a utopian subjectivity, from which emerges the possibility of an open ‘quasi’-community. Unlike the traditional community, whose definition automatically implies the existence of the others who are excluded and outside, Derrida’s ideal, utopian community is a loose ensemble of singularities, a different form of being-together:

One could imagine an *undecidable* system, a vague, quasi community, that would communicate only in the sense of being *interactive* or *relational*, of containing non-isolable elements or moments, that would together make for a loose ensemble, at best a kind of *quasi* system inasmuch as it would be underdetermined, a whole that would not be so sufficiently *ordered* as to produce predictable, foreseeable results, but would always be vulnerable to chance and surprise from what is outside the community.¹³⁶

Such is an impossible community, one that is ‘never found, one never knows if it exists’, and ‘to think one has found it would be not only mystified, but would right away cause one to lose it, destroy it’.¹³⁷ Ultimately, contemporary speculative theatre’s commitment to sophistic aporia—its explorations of various contradictions and the state of perplexity these contradictions induce, combined with its exploration of the Derridean aporia, can be seen as an attempt to generate the conditions of an impossible community of theatre audience. Both forms of engagement with aporia reveal speculative theatre’s deeply political and utopian aspiration and highlight its function as a rehearsal space for the different forms of political, ethical and social relations to come.

In the next chapter, I will analyse contemporary British speculative theatre’s utopian expressions in its reconfiguration of myth. These include the apocalypse myth (Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone*, Philip Ridley’s *Mercury Fur* and Chris Thorpe’s *Victory Condition*), modern political myths (Rory Mullarkey’s *The Wolf from the Door*, Dawn King’s *Foxfinder*, Edward Bond’s *Have I None* and *Chair*) and, more specifically, socio-economic myths (Thomas Eccleshare’s *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and Philip Ridley’s *Radiant Vermin*). Drawing on Roland Barthes’s conception of myth as a form of communication that naturalises history, I will also explore how some speculative plays respond to this naturalisation by denaturalising the mythical object and the hero image—two elements that are frequently seized by mythical speech for various ideological, political or

¹³⁶ John D. Caputo, ‘A Community without Truth: Derrida and the Impossible...’, *Research in Phenomenology* 26, no. 1 (January 1996): 26.

¹³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Points . . .: Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf (California: Stanford University Press, 1995), 351.

economic interests. In its treatment of particular myths, speculative theatre often resorts to the sophistic aporia—the uncertainty and perplexity that emerge from binary oppositions—to maintain a space of openness for other possibilities. On the other hand, when dealing with myth as a form of representation, it gives rise to the Derridean aporia, as the act of demythicising is inseparable from that of remythicising. In other words, speculative theatre makes clear that the condition for the possibility of being free from the coercion of mythical speech is also the condition for its impossibility. However, if the language of mythical speech is aimed at producing and imposing fixed meanings, the languages of speculative theatre’s mythopoeia accommodate multiple and non-hierarchical interpretations simultaneously. This insistence on difference, indeterminacy and nonidentity is what characterises speculative theatre’s utopian impulse in its engagement with myth.

CHAPTER 2. SPECULATIVE THEATRE'S MYTHOPOEIA

I. APORIA OF THE END—RECONFIGURING THE APOCALYPSE MYTH

Like 'speculation,' the word 'myth' is often regarded dismissively as an equivalent for a widely held but false belief or idea. An element of speculative fiction, myth retains a curious relationship with reality and history, in the sense that it is both real and unreal, historical and ahistorical. Because of their malleability, myths can always be reappropriated and revised according to the interests of the myth-maker and consumer. It is not surprising to witness the extent to which even the most ancient myths continue to exert their influence in today's politics, economics, culture—in short, in all aspects of life. Contemporary British theatre has continued to profess great interests in reviving and rewriting myths, and this holds for speculative theatre as well. Among a number of foundational myths that frequently feature in speculative plays, the apocalypse myth occupies a special position. The twenty-first century, with its never-ending environmental, social, political, economic, ethical crises, also witnesses the proliferation of eschatological thinking—thoughts directed toward death, judgment and the final destiny of humankind. The apocalypse myth, initially an essential part of Christian eschatology, has become a global subject matter in contemporary cultural representation. The apocalyptic narrative is aporetic since it 'seeks to be nonnarrative, to get beyond the strictures of time and space'¹³⁸ despite being a story set in time and space. The struggle to represent something that is unrepresentable, to imagine that which is rendered unimaginable by existing conditions, can be characterised as the utopian impulse shared by all apocalyptic narratives, regardless of their medium. Nevertheless, a closer look at apocalypse literature and film will reveal that in reality, the professed commitment to the unimaginable is usually forfeited, the promise of openness abandoned in favour of an affirmative, up-lifting closure. In his examination of popular apocalypse films in the last thirty years, David Christopher concludes that despite the difference in temporal setting, 'apocalypse and post-apocalypse narratives are highly ideologically similar in either their valorisation of a patriarchal hero that can save capitalism, or their canonization of human

¹³⁸ Lee Quinby, 'Introduction', in *Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xiv.

tenacity'.¹³⁹ Put differently, the utopian impulse is systematically translated into a Utopian project to accommodate the fantasies of renewal and redemption. These fantasies signal a return to a nostalgic, perfect and imaginary past; at the same time, the redemptive paradigm is nothing more than a reinforcement of the *status quo*. Many apocalypse scenarios portray the collapse of civilisation and, by extension, the collapse of capitalism, but, paradoxically, it is within this process of destruction (which is often averted, in the case of apocalypse narrative) and reconstruction (in the case of post-apocalypse narrative) that capitalism reasserts its power. Timothy Morton aptly points out the 'repressive tolerance'¹⁴⁰ granted to apocalypse fantasies by capitalism: 'It's seductive to imagine that a force bigger than global capitalism will finally sweep it away. But what if this thought were coming to us from within capitalism itself? What if capitalism relied on fantasies of apocalypse in order to keep reproducing and reinventing itself?'¹⁴¹

In the following pages, I will attempt to demonstrate how contemporary speculative theatre, being keenly aware of the environment within which it operates and the dilemmas it has to face when tackling the theme of the apocalypse, adopts various strategies to disrupt the mode of utopian thinking linked to popular apocalypse narratives. I contend that speculative theatre maintains its utopian impulse by displacing and reconfiguring the apocalypse myth so that it no longer details a future-oriented, predicable event. In the plays subsequently examined, including Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2001) and *Escaped Alone* (2016), Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* (2005) and Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* (2017), the apocalypse is either divested of its sense-making function or losing its status as an event and, consequently, its significance. The purpose of this displacement is to draw the audience's attention to existing problems, which have profound impacts on society but have often been naturalised, integrated into normality and, therefore, becoming invisible. On the other hand, the existence of the post-apocalyptic world in some of these plays conveys a sense of hope while still

¹³⁹ David Christopher, 'The Capitalist and Cultural Work of Apocalypse and Dystopia Films', *Cineaction* 95 (2015): 59.

¹⁴⁰ The concept of 'repressive tolerance', developed by Herbert Marcuse, denotes a specific kind of tolerance practised by capitalism to undermine all opposition and dissent while simultaneously incorporating all subversive elements to reinforce its control and dominance. Marcuse writes, 'those minorities which strive for a change of the whole itself will, under optimal conditions which rarely prevail, be left free to deliberate and discuss, to speak and to assemble—and will be left harmless and helpless in the face of the overwhelming majority, which militates against qualitative social change. This majority is firmly grounded in the increasing satisfaction of needs, and technological and mental coordination, which testify to the general helplessness of radical groups in a well-functioning social system'. Herbert Marcuse, 'Repressive Tolerance', in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, by Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 94.

¹⁴¹ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 125.

managing to resist the temptation to envision a simplistic utopia where morality is improved and restored. In its reconfiguration of the apocalypse myth, speculative theatre resituates the apocalypse in the space of uncertainty and possibility in an attempt to reclaim time—both the present and the future—from the grip of capitalist and affirmationist ideologies.

1. *The Violent End—Apocalypse à venir*

(*Far Away—Mercury Fur—Escaped Alone*)

As a subject matter, the apocalypse has featured in British theatre since the formation of the Medieval vernacular drama constituted by three main types: mystery, miracle and morality plays. More accurately, early theatrical representation of the apocalypse known as the Doomsday play can be considered a subset of the mystery play performed on pageant wagons. The cyclic form of the English mystery play, together with its lack of a fixed stage location, required various dramaturgical innovations to effectively engage the audience. This became especially relevant in the case of the Doomsday or Judgement play, which was supposed to depict future events, but whose religious and social function was to encourage the audience to reflect on the present to behave in ways that would ensure their chance of salvation.

In his examination of a number of Doomsday mystery plays, David Leigh argues that these plays possess unique features that mark them off as distinct from all the others in the mystery cycles.¹⁴² These include nonhistorical setting and nonrepresentative time, nonrepresentative action, nonhistorical representation of the character, audience participation through identification and explicit narration of the history of salvation. At first glance, Doomsday plays recall certain aspects of contemporary speculative theatre's commitment to negation. Nevertheless, a closer look will reveal that the type of negation practised in these plays differs radically from that found in the twenty-first-century speculative theatre. The conscious decision to avoid specific spatial and temporal settings resulted from the perception of apocalyptic events on the tangent of eternity and universality, while nonrepresentative actions were employed to highlight the symbolic aspect of the narrative. In other words, even though Doomsday plays are infused with negation, the act of negating is performed with a positive, definitive goal: to convey an unambiguous message to the

¹⁴² David J. Leigh, 'The Doomsday Mystery Play: An Eschatological Morality', *Modern Philology* 67, no.3 (1970): 211-23.

audience so that they will alter their current behaviour for fear of judgement. In this respect, these early representations of the apocalypse, as an instrument that reinforces existing normative conducts, illustrate how negation is only useful as a formal strategy, a subordinate element meant to give rise to the expected and predetermined affirmation.

Compared to the apocalypse featured in Middle Age Doomsday plays, the apocalypse in contemporary British speculative theatre marks a great departure from Christian eschatology, in the sense that the ‘end time’ is no longer interpreted as the consummation of God’s creation of the world. Instead, the ‘end of the world’ is replaced by the ‘end of an age’ or ‘end of life as we know it.’ Along the lines of modern eschatological discussion, speculative theatre tends to perceive the apocalypse as a catalyst for radical social transformation rather than the ultimate event that brings about the final goal of creation. This shift does not come as a surprise, considering how technology and capitalism have succeeded religion as prevalent forces that govern human activities. The destruction of the old and obsolete that gives way to the new has always been an inevitable process, but under capitalism and technological advancement of the twenty-first century, this process has been consciously expedited in response to society’s insatiable desire for novelty (or perhaps, to bolster society’s desire for novelty). By focusing on the theme of renewal, this mode of apocalyptic imagination retains the traditional Biblical transformative quality; nevertheless, this transformation is but the result of a carefully planned and systematically executed operation. Furthermore, the apocalypse that announces the ‘end of an age’ is no longer a unique event but one that suggests repetition. The end, thus, is both inevitable and impossible.

Against this future-oriented and governable apocalypse often seen in disaster movies, Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* (2001) and *Escaped Alone* (2016), as well as Philip Ridley’s *Mercury Fur* (2005), maintain their subversive quality by focusing on what Jacques Derrida terms *l’avenir*. At the beginning of the documentary film *Derrida*, he makes a distinction between two types of future:

In general, I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and *l’avenir*. The future is that which—tomorrow, later, next century—will be. There’s a future that is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, *l’avenir* (to come), which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their

arrival. So if there is a real future beyond the other known future, it's *l'avenir* in that it's the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.¹⁴³

If working with a predictable future necessarily requires extrapolation based on rationality and therefore subscribing to the perpetuation of current socio-politico-ethical conditions, the task of representing *l'avenir*, because of the subject matter's utter unpredictability, engenders senselessness and, to a larger extent, madness. Speculative theatre relies on three strategies to invoke the madness that breaks absolutely with constituted normality: an emphasis on narrative in representation of violence, linguistic absurdity and visual display of the absurd. In tackling the impossible future, speculative theatre is well aware of its inescapable failure; nevertheless, successfully capturing and representing the future is far from being the goal of this type of theatre. Rather, the embrace of irrationality encapsulates theatre's confrontational stance against society's dominant tendency to curb risks and manage the future.

The fact that the apocalyptic imagination in Churchill's *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone* or Ridley's *Mercury Fur* does not seem to make any sense because of its outright absurdity attests to these plays' commitment to speculate 'a real future that is beyond a known future' while also pointing towards a new conception of absurdism. The apocalyptic impulse of contemporary speculative theatre does not strive to establish any convincing possible future scenario from which the audience is to gain some sort of knowledge. As we shall see in the following analysis of the three plays mentioned, their apocalyptic visions are remarkable, not because they announce sound warnings but because of their ideological dubiousness. Such ambiguity, however, should not be interpreted as a tactic to evade political and ethical responsibility. On the contrary, the absence of any clear message in many speculative plays, like their decision to focus on *l'avenir* instead of a predictable future, is to be understood as theatre's protest against a culture that obsessively commercialises consumable apocalypse narratives. In its attempt to reconfigure the apocalypse myth, contemporary British theatre dwells on uncertainty precisely because uncertainty or unpredictability appears to be the only solution to resisting the multiple determinisms of history. The utopian aspiration emanates from these plays does not reside in the common optimistic vision of humanity enduring even the most catastrophic events but in the possibility of imagining a future that is not just a mere extension of existing problems and conditions. In other words, it is not the plot that

¹⁴³ Kirby Dick, Amy Ziering Kofman, and Jacques Derrida, *Derrida: Screenplay and Essays on the Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 53.

distinguishes these plays from the apocalypse narrative in other mediums but their formal innovations.

Perhaps no theatrical event in recent British theatre history could better encapsulate the apocalyptic imagination in which the end comes with a bang than the explosion at the end of Scene Two in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995). The instant the hotel room is literally blasted apart, the space of realism is also destroyed, giving way to a surrealist, hellish landscape of atrocities. Kane's writings and their productions constitute a theatre of the extreme, which defies all attempts at sense-making. Explaining the kind of theatre she pursues—experiential as opposed to speculative—Kane refers to Jeremy Weller's *Mad* (1992), a piece of drama that exerts a strong influence on her work.

This was a project that brought together professional and non-professional actors who all had some personal experience of mental illness. It was an unusual piece of theatre because it was totally experiential as opposed to speculative. As an audience member, I was taken to a place of extreme mental discomfort and distress and then popped out the other end. What I did not do was sit in the theatre considering as an intellectual conceit what it might be like to be mentally ill. It was a bit like being given a vaccine. I was mildly ill for a few days afterwards but the jab of sickness protected me from a far more serious illness later in life. *Mad* took me to hell, and the night I saw it I made a decision about the kind of theatre I wanted to make—experiential.¹⁴⁴

Here, Kane's use of the qualifier 'speculatory' is directly linked to 'intellectual conceit' or rational reasoning incapable of producing the visceral effect, the 'jab of sickness' that acts as a vaccine. It is interesting to juxtapose Kane's conception of the speculative or speculatory against that of Howard Barker, another figure who left a strong impact on Kane's artistic career. In *Arguments for a Theatre*, Barker writes:

The real end of drama in this period must not be the reproduction of reality, critical or otherwise (the traditional model of the Royal Court play, socialistic, voyeuristic) but *speculation*—not what is (now unbearably decadent) but what might be, what is imaginable. The subject then becomes not man-in-society, but knowledge itself, and the protagonist not the man of action (rebel or capitalist as source of pure energy) but the struggler with self.¹⁴⁵

It is clear how Barker's concept of speculation is different from Kane's. To speculate, according to Barker, is to depart from the reproduction of reality, to liberate the imagination. Both Barker and Kane, despite their contrasting ways of articulating the kind of theatre they strive to achieve, as can be seen in their conflicting characterisations of speculation, unite in

¹⁴⁴ Sarah Kane, *Letter to Aleks Sierz* (4 January 1999), quoted in Graham Saunders, "'Just a Word on a Page and There Is the Drama.'" Sarah Kane's Theatrical Legacy', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13, no. 1 (2003): 97–110.

¹⁴⁵ Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 38. Emphasis mine.

their aversion against realist representation and in their lavish use of violent imageries. This emphasis on violence, accompanied by the absence of any explicit political or ethical message in their plays, has contributed to the negative opinions toward Barker's and Kane's works in their initial reception.

Like Barker's 'Theatre of Catastrophe' and Kane's usually labelled 'in-yer-face' theatre, many contemporary speculative plays that tackle the apocalypse theme are often perceived as politically, ethically ambiguous because of their engagement with extreme violence. When Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* was first presented in 2005, it received the sort of critique that immediately recalls what was first written about Kane's *Blasted*. Charles Spencer, in his review of *Mercury Fur* for the *Telegraph*, heavily criticises the play's matter-of-fact depiction of sadistic excesses as 'cheap thrills' and Ridley as a writer 'turned on by his own sick fantasies'.¹⁴⁶ While it is true that violence plays a prominent role in a play in which people consume hallucinogenic butterflies and act out their wildest fantasies, including torturing and murdering a child for entertainment, it would be erroneous to assume that *Mercury Fur* and Kane's *Blasted* or *Cleansed* are completely alike. Kane's early work in particular and British theatre in the 90s, in general, do not shy away from staging torture, rape or cannibalism—gruesome acts that aim to unsettle the audience by targeting their senses. Defending this theatrical direction, Kane insists, 'If you are saying you can't represent something, you are saying you can't talk about it, you are denying its existence.'¹⁴⁷ Kane's argument for theatre's visual imperative, nevertheless, went through a revision in her 'later' plays, namely *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*. Both plays mark a departure not only from the narrative but also from the visible, as can be seen in the prioritisation of language over character or action. Already in the late 90s, Kane's shift to language and the audible foreshadows the development to be seen in British speculative theatre in the twenty-first century, which sees an escalation in violent imagery that renders visual representation and visceral affect inadequate to evoke a meaningful response from the audience. In a culture increasingly characterised as a culture of image, where the inexpressible is fully translated to the visual, British theatre exerts its capacity for resistance by adopting a seemingly atavistic move of turning back to the dramatic and the audible.

¹⁴⁶ Charles Spencer, 'A Vicious Kick in the Guts', *The Telegraph*, 5 March 2005, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3638182/A-vicious-kick-in-the-guts.html>.

¹⁴⁷ Sarah Kane, quoted in Graham Saunders, *'Love Me Or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 24.

Accordingly, violence in *Mercury Fur*, despite its intensity, is never seen on stage. The play, set in a derelict flat in the East End of London in a not-too-distant future, gives the audience glimpses of an infernal world mysteriously invaded by hallucinogenic butterflies. The butterflies come in different colours, and each is capable of producing a particular effect: the gold with white flecks for immortal sensation, the black for suicide, the two-tone blue to feel happy and floaty, the pure crimson for physical violence, or the red with silver stripes for an experience of assassination. The event that marks the first appearance of the butterflies is recalled by two characters; however, their accounts contain one crucial conflicting detail: the origin of the catastrophe. One claims that a freakish sand storm brought the butterflies and, as such, echoes the general belief that associates the event with the apocalypse myth in the New Testament. The first butterfly, despite being light blue with silver specks, has come to be referred to as white,¹⁴⁸ probably because in John's revelation, the first horseman of the Apocalypse—Pestilence—rides a white horse. The other character, however, suspects that it was a bio-attack manoeuvred by some unknown political agent. In this second account, there was no sand storm, no mysterious insects materialising out of nowhere; instead, the butterfly cocoons were dropped on the street by planes. It remains uncertain as to which account among the two reflects the truth. Regardless, it is clear that the apocalypse, whether divine intervention or a man-made crisis, can only be perceived as apocalyptic in retrospection. It is revealed that there was a period of relative normality right after the unanticipated arrival of the first butterflies: being those that produce pleasant sensations and feelings, they are used as a sort of harmless street drug. Only later on, with the appearance of more violence-induced butterflies that all hell start to break loose.

The two teenage brothers, Elliot and Darren, are preparing for a party, which involves a wealthy banker known as the Party Guest and a ten-year-old boy known as the Party Piece, a meat hook and a video recorder. The success of this party will help them gain favour with the Party Guest, which is crucial to the survival of the brothers and their loved ones—their mother, known as the Duchess, as well as their friends Lola and Spinx. Soon enough, the situation spins out of hand. Elliot and Darren find themselves in one ethical dilemma after another. In one of the most unsettling scenes of *Mercury Fur*, the newcomer Naz is forced to replace the Party Piece because the latter was not conscious enough for the Party Guest's liking. The stage direction ensures that the audience is made aware of the torture inflicted on the young boy, not through the visible but the audible.

¹⁴⁸ Philip Ridley, *Mercury Fur* (London: Methuen Drama, 2005), 58.

Screams start to be heard. Muffled at first, growing louder. The sound of struggling. Sound of PARTY GUEST saying, 'Tell me the truth', and 'I'm gonna hurt you!' etc. Sound of SPINX given directions: 'Hold him still!' and 'Over here!' and 'Move the light here!' etc. The noises from the bedroom become increasingly horrific.¹⁴⁹

What makes this off-stage scene particularly provoking is, therefore, the grisly soundscape. In depriving the objectifying gaze that has come to characterise our culture of visual consumption, *Mercury Fur* invites the audience to contemplate their role and responsibility in a society where violent images have become omnipresent, not only normalised but also commercialised.

Recalling how his mother and sister were murdered by a gang in a supermarket as the catastrophe unfolds, Naz describes the experience in brutal, gory details.

NAZ [...] Mum is screaming, 'Don't hurt me kids'. Lots of blades go swish. Sort of helicopter feeling. Stuff gets in my eyes. Blood. Wipe it away. Look up and see one of the gang holding Mum's head. He's cut it off. [...] Can hear Stace crying but I can't see her. The crying is real close. It seems to be coming from this big smashed fruit. It's all red inside and very juicy. It's got an eye. It's Stace! The gang has stomped on her head. One of her arms is gone. The gang drags her away and pull off her knickers. She's pissing herself. The piss shoots right up. The gang laughs. One of them gets his cock out and says he'll plug the leak. He sticks his cock in her. One of the others fucks what's left of her mouth. They all drink Coke. They fuck Stace and they drink Coke. I think Stace must be dead now.¹⁵⁰

The present tense used in Naz's recollection of the traumatic event is particularly telling since it helps the audience visualise the scene as if it is taking place in front of their eyes. At the same time, the fact that there is no visual aid but the character's narration acts as a distanciation tool that prevents any attempt to perceive the narrative as realistic. As much as one is shaken by the vividness of the atrocity, one cannot help but have the impression that they are listening to a fictional tale told by a fictional character—an impression accentuated by the aloofness with which Naz discusses the murders of his family. It is astonishing that in one of the most traumatic moments of his life, Naz's mind does not fail to capture the image of the gang drinking Coke while torturing his sister. This small but calculated detail can be read as Ridley's implicit comment on the consumer culture, whose symbol has been seamlessly incorporated within the most violent behaviour. What is at work here is not just the blurring of reality and performance but a paradoxical process aimed at realising the fictional and undermining it simultaneously. That is to say, while the text of *Mercury Fur* is no less gruesome than that of *Blasted* or *Cleansed*, the manner in which the former is staged marks a clear departure from visible and performed violence.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

It is not difficult to notice the resemblance between Naz's indifferent demeanour while delivering his brutal lines and Mrs Jarrett's detached tone in her apocalyptic monologues in Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*.

Four hundred thousand tons of rock paid for by senior executives split off the hillside to smash through the roofs, each fragment onto the designated child's head. Villages were buried and new communities of survivors underground developed skills of feeding off the dead where possible [...]. Rats were eaten by those who still had digestive systems, and mushrooms were traded for urine. Babies were born and quickly became blind. [...] Torrential rain leaked through cracks and flooded the tunnels enabling screams at last before drownings. Survivors were now solitary and went insane at different rates.¹⁵¹

Escaped Alone premiered in January 2016 at the Royal Court and was directed by James Macdonald. The plot is straightforward enough: four women in their seventies are having a tea party in the backyard, discussing daily life topics such as family members, TV shows, and personal maladies. These conversations are, however, interspersed with Mrs Jarrett's frightening but also hilarious apocalyptic monologues featuring flood, starvation, cannibalism, pestilence and more. Unlike Naz's recollection that is told in the present tense, Mrs J's description of the future is delivered in the past tense. Nevertheless, the effect of language on the audience is quite similar in the sense that both plays deny the audience the pleasure of a sentimental, relatable account of the catastrophe. If violence in *Mercury Fur*, despite its extremity, is not completely unheard of or unimaginable, the situation in *Escaped Alone* has been pushed even further to assume a dimension of universal madness. It is the absurd element that renders the apocalyptic vision in the latter so unrealistic that representation becomes redundant rather than impossible. As Caryl Churchill's approach to the apocalypse situates the event in *l'avenir*—a future exceeding comprehension and expectation—the play's refusal to show can also be read as an implicit commentary on the tendency of the seventh art to spectacularise destruction and ecological disasters. The apocalypse scenario has been subject to widespread political, cultural exploitation and misappropriation in recent years. Crises and threats are said to be everywhere and ready to wreak havoc at any time. Such propaganda provides the authorities with an excuse to maintain a state of exception indefinitely that, in turn, allows them to commit unconstitutional acts without being held accountable. On the other hand, as crisis is incorporated into everyday life, perpetuated by apocalyptic films, TV series or video games, suffering and violence are also normalised. The detailed, realistic representations of apocalyptic events usually seen on screen are but hyperrealities that wrap themselves in the illusion called realism.

¹⁵¹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 8.

Contemporary speculative theatre resists this tendency to construct yet another hyperreality, not only by steering away from the visual imperative but also in its adoption of an apocalyptic language. As can be seen in *Escaped Alone*, language seems to undergo a process of being broken down and put back together at random. As a result, the future presented in snapshots is fragmentary, despite the appearance of sequential progression. It is not the first time that Caryl Churchill's deconstructionist approach to language manifests itself in an apocalyptic scenario. Earlier, in 2001, we already witnessed a similar experiment in *Far Away*, a play set in a world where everyone, everything, is at war against each other.

TODD But we're not exactly on the other side from the French. It's not as if they're the Moroccans and the ants.
HARPER It's not as if they're the Canadians, the Venezuelans and the mosquitoes.
TODD It's not as if they're the engineers, the chefs, the children under five, the musicians.
HARPER The car salesmen.
TODD Portuguese car salesmen.
HARPER Russian swimmers.
TODD Thai butchers.
HARPER Latvian dentists.
TODD No, the Latvian dentists have been doing good work in Cuba. They've a house outside Havana.
HARPER But Latvia has been sending pigs to Sweden. The dentists are linked to international dentistry and that's where their loyalty lies, with dentists in Dar-es-Salaam.¹⁵²

The randomness of the list, the impossibility to rationalise and reach any logical basis for association, or, to borrow from Michel Foucault, 'to define any common locus beneath them all',¹⁵³ defy the audience's expectation. When Todd says he has done boring jobs, the audience would not imagine that one of these involves working in abattoirs stunning pigs and musicians to the extent that, by the end of the day, all he could see when he shut his eyes were people hanging upside down by their feet.¹⁵⁴ The more exciting jobs that Todd has experienced are shooting cattle and children in Ethiopia, gassing mixed troops of Spanish, computer programmers and dogs, and tearing starlings apart with his bare hands.¹⁵⁵ It is this unpredictability in the narrative that makes the apocalyptic imagination in *Far Away* truly subversive, in the sense that it reclaims the possibility of a future free from all existing conditions.

¹⁵² Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (New York: Nick Hern, 2000), 36-7.

¹⁵³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [1966] (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), xix.

¹⁵⁴ Churchill, *Far Away*, 41.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

Churchill's seemingly nonsensical categorisation here bears a striking similarity to a passage in Jorge Luis Borges, quoted by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*. Borges, in turn, quotes a certain (fictional) Chinese encyclopaedia in which animals are divided into:

(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.¹⁵⁶

This short passage arose a 'laughter that shattered', which has resulted in

all the familiar landmarks of [Foucault's] thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.¹⁵⁷

Similar to Borges' passage, the enumeration in Act Three of *Far Away* would cause one to burst out laughing, but it is laughter associated with uneasiness and profound distress when witnessing the destruction of language, of what makes sense. From another point of view, by inducing laughter from a language in regress, Churchill implies that it can be used as a defamiliarizing language capable of overcoming the limitations of the sense-making language. The events transpiring in *Far Away* conjure up the images of holocausts and genocides in recent history: Auschwitz, the Balkan War, Cambodia, to name but a few. As Angel-Perez puts it, confronted with the necessity to represent horror, 'language has lost the ability to communicate and to convey information [...] one must therefore find a defamiliarizing language which places traumatism at a distance, in order to make it understandable'.¹⁵⁸ The 'laughter of the apocalypse' in *Escaped Alone* and *Far Away*, to borrow the term from Julia Kristeva,¹⁵⁹ by situating the audience in the interspace between abjection and fascination, creates an unsettling experience that paradoxically manages to convey the complexity and madness of reality and history truthfully.

It is interesting to observe how this aspect of linguistic absurdity is further enhanced in performance. In many cases, the emphasis on the visual display of the absurd in

¹⁵⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, quoted in Foucault, *The Order of Thing*, xvi.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Elisabeth Angel-Perez, *Voyages au bout du possible. Les théâtres du traumatisme de Samuel Beckett à Sarah Kane* (Paris : Klincksieck, 2006), 22.

¹⁵⁹ Kristeva defines the 'laughter of the apocalypse' as a laughter in which 'absurdity, stupidity, violence, sorrow, moral and physical degeneracy locate [us] [...] in that interspace between abjection and fascination'. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Rудiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 204.

contemporary speculative theatre completely goes against the economic approach to the visual representation of violence. In *Mercury Fur*, for instance, the grand entrance of the two characters Spinx and the Duchess, dressed in extravagant clothes and accessories, marks a moment of ludicrous contradiction.

SPINX enters. He is twenty-one years old and wearing leather trousers and fur coat. Gold rings are on every finger, gold neck chain, gold wrist chains. He is arm in arm with—
*The DUCHESS, thirty-eight years old. She is wearing a dress (covered with ice-blue sequins and rhinestones) and a white fur coat. Pearl earrings, diamond rings, necklace, bracelets and a sparkling tiara. She is wearing make-up (competently, but not expertly, applied) and dark glasses. Everything about her seems fragile and damaged. She is blind.*¹⁶⁰

The visual excess evoked by Spinx and the Duchess can hardly be said to be an exhibition of wealth and power since the expensive items they wear are no longer considered valuable in this post-apocalyptic world. Their appearance emerges in stark contrast, not only with that of other characters but also with their surroundings.

*A derelict flat in a derelict estate in the East End of London. Layers of peeling wallpaper (many cleaner patches where framed photos once hung), several pieces of old furniture (armchairs, a table, shelves, etc.), well-worn carpet and smashed ornaments. Detritus and dust cover everything.*¹⁶¹

This dilapidated environment, however, is described to the blind Duchess as a magnificent palace decorated with a chandelier and antique varnished wood furniture. In the subsequent conversation with other characters, it becomes clear that the ridiculous costumes and manner of speech are used to create a fantasy that would shield the traumatised Duchess from facing reality, from remembering the horror she went through.

Similarly, in *Far Away*, the unseen chaos of a world turned upside down is juxtaposed against the hats that get more and more extravagant with each scene and culminates in the procession of the prisoners on their way to the incinerator. In both *Mercury Fur* and *Far Away*, the excessive display of absurdity simultaneously conceals and invokes the unrepresentable violence that caused such absurdity. Rather than the actual representation of destruction, it is in these defamiliarized images of suffering that the audience can clearly perceive the destructive magnitude of the apocalypse portrayed in these plays.

To quickly summarise, I would argue that the apocalyptic imagination in *Mercury Fur*, *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone* performs an act of negation that is destructive and paradoxically generative, in the sense that it reclaims the possibility of a future unconstrained

¹⁶⁰ Ridley, *Mercury Fur*, 71.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

by the capitalist logic of renewal. Instead of portraying any realistic, rational or plausible end of the world scenario, these plays point to the possible end of capitalism itself in an age when it has become easier to imagine the end of the world rather than the end of capitalism and its totality. Writes Dan Rebellato:

What the apocalyptic tone recently adopted in British theatre does is offer a counter-strategy to capitalist realism. It offers images of the end of the world that are images of the end of capitalism. It does so in terms that reject conventional forms of graphic violent representation and instead invites a play of the imagination, language and the aesthetic as a way of inviting us to make the end of capitalism, of its current, apparent totality, thinkable again.¹⁶²

The apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic futures speculated in Churchill's and Ridley's plays are not ideal nor believable; yet, they make it possible once again to imagine *l'avenir*—a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated. In its experiment with verbal and visual languages that challenge popular modes of apocalypse representation, contemporary speculative theatre relies on a kind of 'monstrous writing'¹⁶³ to maintain the aporia of the end and safeguard its utopian impulse from being translated into any closed, predetermined Utopia or Dystopia.

2. *Ending with a Whimper—Everyday Apocalypse*

(*Victory Condition—Escaped Alone*)

The vision of the end of the world examined in the previous section concerns mainly with how recent speculative theatre, by exposing language (both textual and visual) to the force of deconstruction, challenges the notion of the apocalypse as a future-oriented event and, instead, re-enacts *l'avenir*—the unknown, unpredictable future. There exists another mode of apocalyptic imagination in contemporary British speculative theatre, one featured most prominently in Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* (2017) and, to a certain extent, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*. These plays postulate that the apocalypse is not an event lurking on the horizon but a non-event that takes place amid the humdrum of everyday life, like a whimper that goes unnoticed. They portray an image of the apocalypse characterised by

¹⁶² Dan Rebellato, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Theatre: British Drama, Violence and Writing', *Sillages critiques* 22 (2017).

¹⁶³ Explaining the concept of *l'avenir*, Derrida writes: 'The future can be anticipated only in the form of absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can thus announce itself, present itself, only under the species of monstrosity. For this world to come and for what in it will have shaken the values of the sign, speech, and writing, for what is guiding here our future anterior, there is no *exergue* as yet.' Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 5.

boredom and monotony rather than being something spectacular. It must be stressed that such a portrayal is not an attempt to further normalise the apocalypse myth and divest it of the revelatory function; on the contrary, by displacing the apocalypse, *Victory Condition* and *Escaped Alone* reinvest a utopian hope of transformation in the apocalyptic ‘moment’ of the everyday.

As introduced by the Royal Court, *Victory Condition* attempts to ‘get to grips with the fact that everything happens at once’ and to ‘see if there’s anything we can do about it’.¹⁶⁴ The play can be read as a collage of various topics, both serious and entertaining, from simulation theory, the assassination of a freedom fighter, to the apocalypse. Together, they constitute a pointed commentary on pervasive problems in contemporary society and offer a rather grim outlook about the future. The critic Michael Billington, in his review for *The Guardian*, professes his disappointment with the play’s lack of solution: ‘I don’t doubt Thorpe’s passionate concern, but his bleakly determinist play offers no hint as to how, through political action, we might change a universe bent on self-destruction.’¹⁶⁵

Not only that the play’s content lacks the optimism that would stir people to take action, but its form is also problematic. *Victory Condition* opens to a couple, simply called Man and Woman, returns to their apartment after a trip and spending the rest of the day in the company of each other, doing things most couples would do on an uneventful evening, such as unpacking, eating pizza and drinking wine. However, it soon becomes clear that the air of normalcy emanating from this normal-looking couple and their standardised home furnished by mass-produced furniture is a deception, for the play immediately plunges into a strange world of multiple narratives. The dramatic world the play presents is one of intersecting realities through which the audience must navigate and construct meaning for themselves. Such is a challenging task, for *Victory Condition* is delivered as two monologues intercutting each other¹⁶⁶ and, as remarked by Michael Billington, ‘So dense and packed is Thorpe’s writing that one feels bombarded by words rather than stimulated into a new awareness of the

¹⁶⁴ ‘Victory Condition’, *The Royal Court*, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/victory-condition/>.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Billington, ‘*Victory Condition* Review—Pizza and the Apocalypse in Baffling Two-Hander’, *The Guardian*, 9 October 2017, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/oct/09/victory-condition-review-royal-court>.

¹⁶⁶ In the performance note, some guidelines are provided to perform the two long monologues. Even though they are written to be intercut in performance, the intercutting may stop when the Man and Woman reach the longest sections of text, at which point the performers finish the rest of their monologue texts one after another. Each monologue contains a number of sections readily marked but these can also be internally cut into shorter sections, if necessary, with the exception of the longest sections mentioned above, which should be delivered in their entirety.

world as a desolate wasteland.’¹⁶⁷ While the critic views this strategy as having failed to engage the audience, I would argue that bombarding the audience with words and preventing them from comfortably ‘consuming’ the play as just another apocalypse-themed product are precisely the goals here. It is also a form that truthfully reflects the condition of information overload that characterises life in the twenty-first century. The intercutting monologues undermine the intention of instant connection and communication, not only between the characters, as they are immersed in their separate worlds while appearing to be together, but also between the audience and the performance. At the same time, it is this very challenge that gives rise to the possibility of a more engaging and attentive mode of relating to a world of complexity.

Victory Condition is full of paradoxes. On the one hand, the play demonstrates straightforward concerns about various social issues. On the other hand, it skilfully evades collective political activism, dwelling on despair rather than hope. The pessimistic tone of the play resonates most perceptibly in the apocalyptic speech delivered by the Woman, which I will take the liberty to quote at length.

A series of images, bullet-fast. Multi-dimensional.

The dogs eat everything here. Each one of them is imagining how this will all fall apart. Each one of those imaginings borrowed from outside themselves.

Disaster movies lie to us because they tell us two things—the first is, this is real. And the second is that disaster, true disaster, ends everything. That it is impossible if it is not all-consuming. Eating daily life and replacing it with a directionless panic.

Running the streets with your hair on fire, avoiding the spinning yellow taxi that whirls like straw in a tornado at the monster’s footfall, or is carried towards you on a wave of dark water.

You will not run the streets with your hair on fire.

You will not be narrowly missed by the descending talon of a monster.

You will not be crushed by a falling news helicopter.

You will not claw desperately at the windows of an underground train as the tunnel fills with river water.

You will not lose your grip on your husband’s hand as one section of the bridge gives way.

You will not fall to your knees in front of the oncoming fireball.

You will not turn to the scratching at the door as the government logo on the TV screen blanks for the final time.

You will not hear the last person with National Authority say God Help Us All on the radio.

You will not pound tearfully at the dashboard in a hundred-mile traffic jam.

You will not see the trees across the valley flatten themselves at supersonic speed before you fly suddenly and violently apart.

You will check your messages, and you will wonder at the escalating price of shower gel.

You will try to finish a book.

You will substitute ingredients and talk quietly over dinner.

You will laugh when someone says—we should have had a revolution. It would have been more fun.

You will not all die at once.

¹⁶⁷ Billington, ‘*Victory Condition* Review’.

You will look at amateur pornography and post your opinion on lists of songs about mass transit systems.
You will go to work.
You will queue slightly longer than usual.
You will feed your dog.¹⁶⁸

This speech can be roughly divided into two parts. The first consists of phrases starting with ‘You will not’ that present a linguistic negation. It is immediately followed by the second part marked by phrases starting with ‘You will’, which elaborates the woman’s vision of the ‘actual’ apocalypse. The anaphora used in both parts draws the audience’s attention to the discrepancy between their expectation and reality. It is not hard to notice how the monotonous prophecies of the second half generate a vivid contrast against the preceding spectacular, dramatic images of the apocalypse often seen in disaster films.

Here, Chris Thorpe attempts to remind us of our continued fascination with sensational apocalypses, which is but one of the many symptoms of a ‘culture transfixed by the spectacle of its own fragility’,¹⁶⁹ in the words of the philosopher John Gray. It must be noted that the object of interest here is not fragility itself but the ‘spectacle’ of fragility. The obsession with representation misidentifies the true sources of threat, misplacing fear and anxiety to fabulous monsters, zombies or unforeseen impact events. Thorpe condemns this tendency as ‘eating daily life and replacing it with a directionless panic’.¹⁷⁰ Instead, the apocalyptic vision he offers is one of monotonous routines, in which complacency has rendered people incapable of action. In place of a revolutionary rupture, the apocalypse of the everyday, because of its tedium ordinariness, evokes a form of discursive exhaustion. Yet, this exhaustion, aided by the repetitive ‘You will’, is paradoxically constructive, since it draws attention back to the issues that should have been focused on but overlooked because they are deemed too common and mundane: the escalating price of products, the challenge to concentration in an age of distraction, food crisis, or the prevalence of political indifference that prompts one to laugh at the idea of having a revolution. While it is true that *Victory Condition* offers no hint as to how we can change the world through political actions, it does remind us of the danger of unquestionable submission and conformity, of sleepwalking in the present and dreaming for radical changes brought about by imaginary future catastrophes. Such a reminder, however, may be regarded as of little practical use. After all, what good does it have in voicing one’s political discontent without being able to suggest any potential

¹⁶⁸ Chris Thorpe, *Victory Condition* (London: Oberon, 2017).

¹⁶⁹ John Gray, ‘The Violent Visions of Slavoj Žižek’, *The New York Review*, 12 July 2012, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/07/12/violent-visions-slavoj-zizek/>.

¹⁷⁰ Thorpe, *Victory Condition*.

remedy? Nevertheless, we should keep it in mind that '[it] is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads.'¹⁷¹ Through the use of fragmentation, intercutting monologues and repetition, *Victory Condition* performs precisely the function of a negating force that resists the social pressure of progress, clarity or comprehensibility—a pressure that 'permanently puts a pistol to men's head'.

The long passage cited above from *Victory Condition* performs its political function in another sense by calling for a reconsideration of the conditions under which prophetic speech can be characterised as subversive. Against conventional belief, prophecy in general and apocalyptic prophecy, in particular, are never supposed to be solely future-oriented. Future events may be predicted, but they are also presented as consequences of existing problematic conducts. Biblical scholars in the last century have constantly rejected the modern understanding of the prophet as foretellers of the future and, instead, stressing their relation to the conditions of their time.¹⁷² A prophet should be regarded as a social and moral reformer, a 'historical character charged with a heavy temporal weight'¹⁷³ and, respectively, prophetic speech a revelation meant to 'awaken us to ourselves'.¹⁷⁴

Writing on prophetic speech, Maurice Blanchot contends that it is, in essence, aporetic, since it

announces an impossible future, or makes the future it announces, because it announces it, something impossible, a future one would not know how to live and that must upset all the sure givens of existence. When speech becomes prophetic, it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is taken away, and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence.¹⁷⁵

According to Blanchot, the subversive power of prophetic speech lies in its ability to shatter the illusion of any epistemological or ontological certainty, to take away the present. At the same time, prophetic speech holds the promise of restoring time.

When everything is impossible, when the future, given over to the fire, burns, when there is no more rest except in the land of midnight, then prophetic speech, which tells of the

¹⁷¹ Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, by Theodor Adorno et al. (London & New York: Verso, 2002), 180.

¹⁷² See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), and Alan Cooper, 'Imagining Prophecy', in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. James L. Kugel (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 26–44. Cooper's extensive bibliography is especially helpful.

¹⁷³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 80.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

impossible future, also tells of the “nonetheless” that breaks the impossible and restores time.¹⁷⁶

These operations of prophetic speech certainly hold true in the case of Churchill’s *Escaped Alone*, as analysed in the previous section. The scenarios pronounced by Mrs Jarrett, impossible as they are, disrupt the surface of a ‘firm, stable, lasting presence’ and restore time by signalling the possibility of a future of radical difference. However, the same cannot be said about *Victory Condition*. Blanchot’s conception appears to be built upon the premise that the future envisioned in prophetic speech, ‘given over to the fire, burns’, ‘a future one would not know how to live’, should be distinct from the present. This does not apply to the future in the Woman’s speech, which is neither impossible nor dramatic but simply outlines existing conditions accepted as a matter-of-fact. In other words, the prophetic speech in *Victory Condition* seems to lack the disruptive quality that would generate any meaningful impact.

It is my belief, however, that the prophetic speech in Thorpe’s play, despite making no reference to an impossible future, still possesses all the subversive potential theorised by Blanchot. To support my argument, I will revisit the discourse surrounding boredom, especially the boredom of everyday life. It is not a mere coincidence that the Woman character who announces her vision of an everyday apocalypse works in the graphics department of an advertising firm. The advertising industry, whose sole purpose of existence is to generate desire and boost consumption of both tangible and intangible products, holds the promise of never-ending novelty, satisfaction and excitement—the antidotes of boredom if ever the feeling surfaces. As a topic that has gathered much interest in the fields of philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, and above all, art and literature, boredom still divides experts and the general public alike. On the one hand, the feeling is read as a metaphysical, ahistorical condition that is inherent in human existence.¹⁷⁷ Boredom in the twenty-first century, despite its particular forms of expression, is but a variation and continuation of previous concepts such as *acedia*, melancholy, *ennui* or spleen. On the other hand, many argue along the lines of Marxist thought that boredom, as a social phenomenon, is a product of specific historical, cultural conditions.¹⁷⁸ Modern/postmodern boredom, as such, cannot be

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

¹⁷⁷ See, for instance, Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L’Aventure, l’ennui, le sérieux* (Paris : Éditions Montaigne, 1963) ; Michèle Huguet, *L’Ennui ou la douleur du temps* (Masson, 1987) ; Georges Minois, *Histoire du mal de vivre : de la mélancolie à la dépression* (Paris : Éditions de la Martinière, 2003).

¹⁷⁸ See Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1996); Genrich Krasko, *This Unbearable Boredom of Being: A Crisis of*

viewed in the same light as the Romantic *ennui* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of the unprecedented and unique rhythm of contemporary life. The boredom experienced by the modern/postmodern subject is a pervasive affliction rather than something cultivated by the elite few as a condition for creativity. This argument is succinctly summarised by Elisabeth Goodstein:

As the conditions of mass leisure emerged, an initially elitist discourse of subjective disaffection gradually took hold in popular culture, so that by the early twentieth century the experience of ennui had become truly universal. While a century earlier, melancholy had been cultivated as a sign of spiritual distinction, this modern boredom signified, if anything, the lack of an inner life. [...] The contemporary terror of boredom, which testifies to its apparent inevitability, is saturated with the post-romantic resignation to a world in which neither work nor leisure can bring happiness to subjects who no longer hope for divine restitution in the next.¹⁷⁹

The ubiquity of boredom in the twenty-first century has prompted three seemingly different types of response: (1) resignation and learning to be comfortable with being bored, (2) constantly seeking out novelty and therefore falling into the vicious circle of consumerism, or (3) sublimating boredom through art. Regardless of their diverse rationale, these responses all converge in their belief that boredom is a negative state to be diminished or coped with, not only because it is deemed unproductive but also because the announcement of boredom signifies self-indulgence and vanity of a subject passing judgement on the world.

Against this hostile attitude toward boredom, Martin Heidegger argues that the ordinary perception of boredom as ‘disturbing, unpleasant, and unbearable’ is a misunderstanding that fails to recognise the essence of *attunement*.¹⁸⁰ He identifies three different forms of boredom: becoming bored *by* something, being bored *with* something, and profound boredom. While the first and second forms are linked to specific objects, such as the train one is waiting for or a party one has attended, the last form, known as deep or profound boredom, is dissociated from any concrete situation. The ‘it’ that is supposed to be the boring object is unidentifiable precisely because it encompasses the whole of the world as well as the subject themselves. Characterised as the fundamental *attunement* or mood of contemporary *Dasein* (being or existence) in a world of acceleration, calculation and massiveness,¹⁸¹ profound boredom is not a condition that one can get away from. It is no

Meaning in America (New England: iUniverse, 2004), or Elisabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

¹⁷⁹ Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities*, 99.

¹⁸⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 158-59.

¹⁸¹ Acceleration, calculation and massiveness are the three ‘symptoms’ that Heidegger identifies as constituting our technological being-in-the-world. See Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*:

doubt an extremely deterministic and pessimistic view, as it leaves the postmodern subject completely powerless under the systematic oppression that exposes them to the inevitable, inescapable emptiness at the crux of boredom. Nevertheless, Heidegger proposes that the experience of profound boredom is not without significance. In the face of this boredom, time becomes conspicuous and, the subject, confronted with the presence and power of time, with their status of being-in-time, may achieve a visionary moment of transcendence.¹⁸²

Along the same lines of dialectical thinking, Henri Lefebvre, through his critique of everyday life, provides extremely useful insights into the nature and potential of boredom in the modern context. Lefebvre, however, rejects the ontological significance Heidegger invests in profound boredom, condemning it as perpetuating ‘the elitist distinction between the mundane boredom of everyday existence and the deep boredom that leads to metaphysical questions’.¹⁸³ Lefebvre’s disapproval of Heidegger is well-founded since there is indeed a distinct hierarchy in Heidegger’s conception of boredom, in which the two first forms of boredom that are more frequently recognised in daily life are deemed less essential, more superficial compared to the last form of profound boredom. According to Heidegger, it is only through profound boredom that a subject can penetrate into the essence of boredom and time, through which emerges the singular extremity of what makes *Dasein* possible.¹⁸⁴ Instead of privileging certain forms and expressions of boredom over others, Lefebvre believes that there are latent emancipatory possibilities even in the most degraded of lived experiences. Consequently, the apocalypse of the everyday as envisioned in *Victory Condition*, in spite of its apparent dullness, does not preclude a hope for change—not the kind of perpetual programmable change but the unexpected change emerging from the interruption of linear time. While looking at amateur pornography and posting one’s opinion on lists of songs about mass transit systems, while going to work, queuing or feeding one’s dog, one may encounter a ‘moment’— ‘a flash of insight into the range of historical possibilities that

From Enowning, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁸² After a comprehensive analysis, Heidegger sums it up in a few dense lines: ‘Boredom is the entrancement of the temporal horizon, an entrancement which lets the moment of vision belonging to temporality vanish. In thus letting it vanish, boredom impels entranced *Dasein* into the moment of vision as the properly authentic possibility of its existence, an existence only possible in the midst of beings as a whole, and within the horizon of entrancement, their telling refusal of themselves as a whole’. See Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 153.

¹⁸³ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. Gregory Elliott, vol. 3 From Modernity to Modernism, 3 vols (London: Verso, 2008), 283.

¹⁸⁴ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 140.

are embedded in the totality of being, but that cannot be disentangled from the activities of everyday life'.¹⁸⁵

In his own words, Lefebvre characterises the moment as 'the attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility'.¹⁸⁶ He further elaborates:

The moment is born of the everyday and within the everyday. From here it draws its nourishment and its substance; and this is the only way it can deny the everyday. It is in the everyday that a possibility becomes apparent (be it play, work or love, etc.) in all its brute spontaneity and ambiguity.¹⁸⁷

Unlike Heidegger's transcendental profound boredom, Lefebvre's aporetic 'moment' is firmly grounded in the substance of the everyday. In *Victory Condition*, the Woman experiences a flashing moment of insight and clarity amid a habitual day at the office:

The whole day so far has been so normal. So utterly similar to any other day. I don't remember leaving the flat. I don't remember the underground. The station at either end. A single human face. I don't remember any of it. And now I'm here. So I might as well get on with it.¹⁸⁸

It is within this monotonous routine that she encounters the moment, when 'Everything is glowing' and frozen, when she is overwhelmed by an inexplicable impulse to touch the face of one of her colleagues, when it becomes possible for one individual to have a glimpse of everything that is transpiring in the world through multiple perspectives. Such is indeed an apocalyptic moment—a transformative non-event of subjective revelation. The moment will certainly pass, overtaken by numerous activities that require one's attention, but it is far from being lost or completely forgotten, despite the fact that most of the possibilities perceived during the moment will remain unrealized. Lefebvre's 'theory of the moments' is, as such, utopian and tragic at the same time: 'in the moment, the instant of greatest importance is the instant of failure.'¹⁸⁹ It is failure (the coexistence of the possible and the impossible) that sustains the utopian aspiration obscured by the apparent tedium of everyday life.

Despite their numerous differences, Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* are quite close in their application of the two contrasting modes of the apocalyptic imagination. In both plays, the vision of the violent end of the world is juxtaposed against the whimper everyday apocalypse. In *Escaped Alone*, we see four women

¹⁸⁵ Michael E. Gardiner, 'Henri Lefebvre and the "Sociology of Boredom"', *Theory, Culture & Society* 29, no. 2 (2012): 54.

¹⁸⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. John Moore, vol. 2 Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday, 3 vols (London: Verso, 2002), 348.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁸⁸ Thorpe, *Victory Condition*.

¹⁸⁹ Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, 351.

in their seventies gathering in the backyard for afternoon tea, exchanging trivia, jumping from one trifling topic to another, from TV series, the supernatural ability they would like to acquire, to their family and their old jobs. The scene can hardly be characterised as exciting or remarkable, for the experience bears a striking likeness to what most people encounter in their daily life—experience without qualities, in which one immerses oneself just to pass the time. However, according to Lefebvre, trivial discussions and banal conversations can undergo a sudden shift of direction that drives them to ‘the threshold of truth’.¹⁹⁰ In such a moment, one is made aware of one’s unexpected impulses, of the inadequacy of intended meanings, but also of other possibilities. Towards the end of *Escaped Alone*, Mrs Jarrett blurts out the phrase ‘terrible rage’ twenty-five times in the middle of an inconsequential conversation. It remains unspecified as to the underlying causes of her intense anger, but one may surmise, from the fact that she is the character who announces the various violent apocalyptic scenarios, that her frustration stems from a sense of utter helplessness. While the world seemed to crumble around her, all she could do was killing time in small talks. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, the apocalyptic ‘moment’ that emerges from the tedium of everyday life is not without significance. The moment marks the surfacing of suppressed or unknown impulses and feelings and, despite the inevitable failure to realise most of these impulses, ‘in all its brute spontaneity and ambiguity’, such a moment does signal the possibility of genuine change. At the same time, the utopian impulse is preserved precisely because the moment remains a moment of possibility. It is clear that both Mrs Jarrett in *Escaped Alone* and the Woman in *Victory Condition* are desperately longing for something new, yet, as this ‘something’ remains elusive, the path to a fulfilled utopia is obstructed. These two plays fully capture the dilemma at the heart of contemporary art’s utopian aspiration identified by Adorno:

At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be Utopia, and the more Utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true; yet at the same time art may not be Utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation. If the Utopia of art were fulfilled, it would be art’s temporal end.¹⁹¹

Under the appearance of stagnation and pessimism conveyed through the image of a whimpering end, both *Escaped Alone* and *Victory Condition* profess a reserved but enduring belief in the transformative power invested in everyday life. These speculative plays speak once again of theatre’s endeavour to ‘discover the open world, the world of what is possible’

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹⁹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 32.

that is neither ‘the world which is chock-a-block full of realism and positivism’ nor ‘the gaping world of pure negativity and nihilism’.¹⁹²

¹⁹² Henri Lefebvre writes, ‘Between the world which is chock-a-block full of realism and positivism, and the gaping world of pure negativity and nihilism, our aim is to discover the open world, the world of what is possible’. See Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, 263.

II. RECONFIGURING MODERN MYTHS—POSTMODERN FABLES

According to Bruce Lincoln, ‘myth’ is a term associated with a certain discourse when one wants to make powerful and highly consequential assertions about its relative level of validity and authority *vis-à-vis* other sorts of discourse.¹⁹³ Thus, inherent in myth is a binary opposition that seeks to exclude and, paradoxically, to preserve the Other as the figure against which one forms one’s identity. In the previous section, I have examined how contemporary speculative theatre undermines the present-future, before-after binary categories of the apocalypse myth. To further elucidate this subversive operation, I will now turn to theatre’s representation of modern myths—myths deliberately fabricated for specific political, socio-economic purposes, by and for specific groups during a particular period. Unlike the myth of the apocalypse, which still largely retains some spiritual element regardless of the narrative formulated, modern myths place a strong emphasis on utility, practicality and concrete results. It also follows that the consequences and ramifications of modern myths are expected to be more immediately perceptible. Qualitatively assessing these consequences and ramifications, however, is a different matter. Modern political myths present a perfect site of sophistic aporia since they can both incite revolution (according to Georges Sorel) and preserve existing power structures or, in the worst-case scenario, give rise to totalitarianism (as theorised by Roland Barthes or Ernst Cassirer). The contradictory views regarding the impact of political myth are present in many contemporary speculative plays, including Edward Bond’s *Have I None* (2000) and *Chair* (2000), Dawn King’s *Foxfinder* (2011) and Rory Mullarkey’s *The Wolf from the Door* (2014). On the one hand, myth is used as an instrument of totalitarian regimes to deprive people of independent thought, in the case of Bond’s plays and *Foxfinder*. On the other hand, thanks to the power of myth, revolution is made possible, as can be seen in *The Wolf from the Door*. In the first part of this section, I will attempt to elucidate how the emancipating-paralysing dichotomy concerning the impact of political myths is, in fact, a false dilemma, for both sides employ the logic of sacrifice to justify violence. What is at stake is not the question of whether there is a ‘right’, ethical way to exploit myth for political purposes. Rather, the goal of speculative theatre is to fulfil the role of a demythicising force by disclosing the mechanism of the mythological machinery in politics.

¹⁹³ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), ix.

In the like manner, Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* (2015) and Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* (2018), rather than focusing on criticising the consumption of numerous socio-economic myths that are characteristic of advanced capitalist society, draw our attention to the general conditions that legitimate the realisation of unethical ideas and the process different forces come together to package these ideas under desirable labels such as 'progress' or 'self-actualisation'. This is not to say that perpetrators of violent acts are absolved of their crimes but a reminder of the close interplay between the system and the individual in the normalisation of violence. The two plays also demonstrate that even the most manipulative myth can lead to unexpected effects beyond the conscious calculation of either the myth-maker or myth-consumer. In addition, *Radiant Vermin* and *Instructions for Correct Assembly* bring into relief the limitations of traditional humanistic values, prompting the audience to suspend their moral judgement and dwelling on the aporetic experience as a way to engage ethically with the social issues raised in these two plays.

By staging various modern myths in the light of sophistic aporia, contemporary speculative theatre reconfigures these myths into 'postmodern fables', the term used by Jean François Lyotard to denote a kind of narrative that disrupts the temporal structure of conventional myth through its lack of finality.¹⁹⁴ Instead of giving the promise of an ultimate end that asks to be believed, postmodern fables make use of the grand narrative traditionally associated with myth to destabilise this very narrative. Being fables, they do indeed convey a moral; nevertheless, this moral is posthuman, in the sense that it is not confined within the rigid classical humanistic ideal. The principle behind the moral of posthuman fables of speculative theatre is the principle of indetermination, which rejects and urges the audience to reject mindless submission to the binary logic of myth.

1. *The Aporia of Political Myths*

(Have I None—Chair—Foxfinder—The Wolf from the Door)

¹⁹⁴ Lyotard points out that the eschatological principle guiding Christian historicity, the temporal structure characterises Western myths, presupposes a closure in future possibilities: 'The completion of history, be it always pushed back, will re-establish a full and whole relation with the law of the Other (capital O) as this relation was in the beginning: the law of God in the Christian paradise, the law of Nature in the natural right fantasized by Rousseau, the classless society, before family, property, and state, imagined by Engels. An immemorial past is always what turns out to be promised by way of an ultimate end.' See Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 97.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the proliferation of political myths is often perceived as detrimental rather than constructive. The rise of neo-fascism, racism, populism in the West, all of which converge in their extensive use of myths and mythical language, provides ample evidence to justify the mounting apprehension regarding the mythicalisation of politics. It is, therefore, only natural that the critical attitude and distrust towards political myths feature prominently in speculative theatre. Edward Bond's *Have I None* and *Chair*, as well as Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, all warn against the danger of myth being systematically exploited by totalitarian states as an ideological instrument. On the other hand, it seems that the revolutionary aspiration invested in the myth of the general strike has not completely disappeared, as can be seen in Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door*. However, as I will demonstrate subsequently, these speculative plays fulfil the political and ethical function of theatre by refusing to simply denounce or endorse the use of political myths to achieve radical social changes.

Among the four plays examined in this section, Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door* is perhaps the most straightforward in its intention to problematise the act of assigning values to political myths. In the play, Catherine, a middle-aged aristocrat and her friends/conspirators commit themselves to the task of tearing down the society they deem as 'continually promulgat[ing] hierarchies and slaveries in all their disgusting forms'.¹⁹⁵ Their project aims at improving the quality of life for the majority by liquidating the elites, destroying all hierarchies, resetting the world to a new beginning. With Leo Lionheart—an infantile homeless man whom Catherine randomly picked up at the station one day—as the sole ruler, it does seem as if the new order is more desirable: 'Crime is down. Happiness is up. The wealth is evenly distributed. And public services are running well.'¹⁹⁶ Unfortunately, and quite expectedly, this Utopian world fails to satisfy everyone, as 'the realm has suffered its first suicide' soon after Leo claimed the throne.

Traversing *The Wolf from the Door* is the myth of the general strike, which, according to Georges Sorel, is associated with a catastrophic revolution that changes everything from top to bottom. In Sorel's opinion, the general strike 'must *be taken as an undivided whole and the passage from capitalism to socialism conceived as a catastrophe whose development*

¹⁹⁵ Rory Mullarkey, *The Wolf from the Door* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 12.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

defies description'.¹⁹⁷ The political myth represented in *The Wolf from the Door* is not only violent, radical and apocalyptic but also imbued with an unmistakably utopian impulse.¹⁹⁸

We watch
Horried
As on a twenty-four-hour news channel the carnage unfolds
We see cars of politicians detonated
By night club bouncers
We see celebrities chucked in the Thames
By Polish builders
We see columnists disembowelled by angry rude-boys
And hipsters crucified on Primrose Hill
We see ladies who lunch lynching football players
And film directors strangled by unpaid interns:
The sick, subdued and silent mass of England
Rises up¹⁹⁹

The club bounders, Polish builders, angry rude-boys, ladies who lunch, unpaid interns, all of whom appear to have very little in common, are united in the single goal of eliminating the elites—people perceived as instrumental in perpetuating the injustice of the current system. The success of the revolution attests to Sorel's belief in the power of the general strike myth in bringing about radical changes. However, it will be erroneous to assume that *The Wolf from the Door* unreservedly endorses the use of this political myth or Sorel's controversial defence of violence. On the contrary, the play simultaneously challenges the myth's claim for justifiable, necessary violence and interrogates its utopian vision, its promise of betterment once all hierarchies are eradicated.

The disparity between the play text and the visual representation of violence is particularly relevant to its subversive intention. In James Macdonald's production at the Royal Court in 2014, when Leo is about to chop off the head of a Tesco assistant manager with a sword, the stage is submerged in darkness, and when the lights are back, a cloth has covered the head of the decapitated character. Such a minimalistic approach clearly demonstrates theatre's disinterestedness in literal, visual representation. The play's emphasis on language can be perceived clearly in scene fourteen entitled 'The Sights', which brings a

¹⁹⁷ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T. E. Hulme and J. Roth (New York: Dover, 2012), 140, original emphasis.

¹⁹⁸ Sorel insists on distinguishing myth from utopia, writing, 'Whilst contemporary myths lead men to prepare themselves for a combat which will destroy the existing state of things, the effect of utopias has always been to direct men's minds towards reforms which can be brought about by patching up the system.' (See Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 28-29). However, his conception of utopia is extremely limited, not only because it is perceived solely as a blueprint for future projects but also because it is associated with reforming or 'patching up' the existing system and therefore, incapable of producing radical changes.

¹⁹⁹ Mullarkey, *The Wolf from the Door*, 41.

revolution in full swing on stage. Despite its name, there is nothing to be seen, for the whole scene, written entirely as stage directions, is spoken by the actors.

*A women's fencing association pulls down Nelson's Column.
Buckingham Palace is raided by an over-seventies golf team.
A life-drawing class sets fire to all the trees in Green Park.
Westminster Abbey gets napalmed by a ceilidh group.
A water-polo team shoot their rocket launchers at Ten Downing Street. [...]*²⁰⁰

The manner in which this scene is staged reminds us of the tragic Greek chorus, which Albert Weiner theorises as a theatrical element used to realise the Alienation Effect: 'The chorus does not act as a conciliating influence between character and audience as some believe. To the contrary, it is an alienating influence, working to insist on the differences not the similarities between the two natures of man.'²⁰¹ The use of a pseudo-chorus here also falls in line with contemporary British theatre's tendency to avert from a visual representation of extremely violent events, as mentioned in the previous section on its approach to the apocalypse myth. In eschewing graphic violence, *The Wolf from the Door* also situates Catherine's call for action in a more critical light.

CATHERINE No! This society wants you to believe that. This society wants you to believe you are weak. It wants you to believe you are powerless. It wants you to believe you are incapable of violence. But you are not, you are not. You are beautiful and free and alive and capable of violence. And when I say violence I don't have in mind the petty meaning that this society gives to it. I don't mean muggings and beatings and hit-and-runs and crimes of passion and petty deaths, for they are merely the products of alienation and loneliness and powerlessness, I mean the beautiful violence which brings change. I mean the violence which brings creation. I mean the violence which may well turn our stomachs to enact but which looking back we will be proud of because it brought a better future for our children. You are capable of this. You just have to prove it.²⁰²

As one of the main organisers of the resurrection, Catherine has been very successful in stirring public sentiments with her eloquent defence of violence. Her words quoted above could have easily been taken as a summary of Sorel's 1908 book, *Reflections on Violence*, in which he celebrates the heroic action of the proletariat as a means to save the world from the corruption of capitalism and the bourgeois—in short, a solution for 'progress'. What is remarkable in drawing this parallel is the fact that, similar to how Sorel's view of violence

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁰¹ Albert Weiner, 'The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus', *Theatre Journal* 32, no. 2 (1980): 212. Weiner also carefully points out that in identifying the Alienation Effect in Greek tragedy, he does not imply that Greek dramatists were Brechtian in disguise, since the effect is an ancient tool that has been used since the beginning of theatre and Brecht just happens to be the first who gave it a name.

²⁰² Mullarkey, *The Wolf from the Door*, 32.

historically became a source of inspiration for both Marxists and Fascists, Catherine's words simultaneously invoke the revolutionary and totalitarian spirit.

For what transpires in *The Wolf from the Door* is not a class struggle of the proletariat but a revolt of a mass—'people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organisation based on common interest, into political parties or municipal governments or professional organisations or trade unions'.²⁰³ When such a mass acquires the appetite for political organisation, we witness the operation of what Hannah Arendt calls the 'totalitarian movement', which, under proper manipulation, can culminate in a totalitarian state. Soon after the establishment of a new political structure with Leo Lionheart as the sole and supreme ruler, the audience is introduced to a series of ridiculous laws imposed by the king: skateboards as the only method of transportation, mobile phones are replaced with a large network of cups joined together by pieces of string, steak and kidney pie as the new national dish, or Mermaid Wednesday when everyone is required to dress up as a mermaid and can only communicate through made-up mermaid language.²⁰⁴ It appears that the general strike in *The Wolf from the Door*, having successfully dismantled existing social hierarchies, simply replaces them with another system of control that is no less rigid, albeit the outward show of infantile innocence. Here lies a paradox of the revolutionary impulse: both too much planning and too little planning for the future after a catastrophic revolution may lead to the emergence of totalitarianism. *The Wolf from the Door* envisions a scenario in which the existing system is dismantled; however, it does so not to promote the general strike myth but to invite the audience to contemplate on the (im)possibility of a different kind of politics in which systematic oppression can be truly eradicated.

If *The Wolf from the Door* attempts to disrupt the paralysing-emancipating dichotomy of political myths from the premise of emancipation, Edward Bond's *Have I None* departs from opposite end. *Have I None* is part of a trilogy known as the *Chair Plays*, which is set in 2077. In this amnesiac society, the authority has abolished the past as well as its human relations. The tedious life of a couple, Sara and Jams, is disrupted by the sudden appearance of Grit, who claims to be Sara's brother. Jams, a member of the army, is the exemplary citizen of a regime that exploits the myth of absolute equality to eliminate all opposition, all non-conformist behaviour.

²⁰³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1973), 311.

²⁰⁴ Mullarkey, *The Wolf from the Door*, 46-47.

JAMS Authority was right to abolish the past. Get shot of it. Videos—tapes—discos—dressing up—raves—dot com dot—junk. People were sick with it. It was a hobby to buy a new car, drive away from the salesroom and crash it into a wall. What do people do when they've got everything? One day they beg you to take it away. They want peace instead. That's why they grab at resettlement—why it's easy to forget.

Everyone with the same walls—same issue furniture—same issue clothes—same issue food. It takes time—but we must. [...] The suffering will end. There's still the odd lunatic. The old women with pictures in their heads. They stray kids. I'm not immune to it—some days I feel like the footprint in the land where no man has trod. But still it gets less. The suffering goes.²⁰⁵

These lines reveal the supposed reason as to why Jams and many people grab at resettlement, willingly submitting to the totalitarian state. It is the discontent with capitalist consumerism that gives rise to nostalgia—a sense of longing for a simpler, more peaceful time. The promise of no more suffering as a result of absolute equality is a powerful myth, especially in times of extreme uncertainty and anxiety. Once again, we witness the familiar pattern of how the realisation of a utopian desire turns out to be a dystopia. Unlike the usual means of political oppression, political myths 'did not begin with demanding or prohibiting certain actions' but 'undertook to change the men, in order to be able to regulate and control their deeds'.²⁰⁶ Ernst Cassirer compares this operation to the way a serpent paralyses its victims before attacking them: 'Men fell victim to [political myths] without any serious resistance. They were vanquished and subdued before they had realized what actually happened.'²⁰⁷

In the case of Jams, it would be inaccurate to claim that he was unaware of what happened; however, his indoctrination has made it impossible for him to realise the false causality between resettlement and peace. When Grit, coming from the other end of the country where the measures for resettlement began to be implemented, recounts the suicide outbreak he witnessed on his way, Jams chimes in with his memory of Reading and concludes: 'If you'd been resettled it wouldn't've happened. Reading wasn't resettled either. No outbreaks after.'²⁰⁸ Here, we encounter a mythical speech that naturalises history.

[I]n the eyes of the myth-consumer, the intention, the *adhominatio* of the concept can remain manifest without however appearing to have an interest in the matter: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Edward Bond, *Have I None*, in *The Chair Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), 25-26.

²⁰⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1961), 286.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Bond, *Have I None*, 10.

²⁰⁹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1991), 128.

As an innocent myth-consumer, it does not occur to Jams that resettlement leads to ‘peace’ precisely because it has eliminated all oppositions or that there must be a reason for people to prefer death to resettlement. The mass suicides bring into relief the fact that there is no such thing as a homogeneous ‘people’ who unequivocally choose to be deprived of material possession as well as history in exchange for security. It becomes clear that the political myth of absolute equality and peace in *Have I None* serves as an ideological instrument to justify the legitimacy of a totalitarian state.

In *Chair*, another play in Bond’s trilogy, we encounter the same mechanism of oppression.

PrisCit is not what it is in the public mind. The department provides a choice. A tablet or an injection in a friendly clinic. Without cost to the individual or any intimate circle or organisation. Cremation is provided and a short ceremony offered. There is a list of approved readings and musical items. Choices may be ticked. The list is not mandatory. If there is a favourite poem or tune it may be substituted. The official in charge speaks only of the good. The former sadness and bitterness go. Each is given a block or marble resin and a thornless rose bush. The garden of remembrance is landscaped to be a haven of tranquillity. The wardens eat their lunchtime sandwiches there. The department also provides a floral tribute. Personalised floral offerings encourage excess and other vulgarities. They draw attention to the few surviving social inequalities. In death democracy—or where!²¹⁰

The fictional world of *Chair* is very similar to, if not the same as, the world of *Have I None*. PrisCit—the equivalence of an extermination camp/department reserved for dissidents—is the emblem of the absolute equality myth, but also of totalitarianism. The above explanation about the nature of the department is provided by a welfare officer, who is investigating Alice for her involvement in an incident: previously, Alice offered a chair to a soldier on escort duty, but her act of kindness excited the old female prisoner and led to the soldier shooting the prisoner.

During her brief exchange with the soldier before things take a turn for the worse, Alice appears to be completely conventional and conformist. She echoes the kind of politically mythical speech loaded with indoctrination: ‘The bus service isn’t the government’s fault. [...] It’s the bandits. They hold the buses up and break open the—’ or ‘I don’t know why people cause trouble. We’ve got all we want. Why must some take it from others? [...] Some people are never satisfied with—’.²¹¹ However, Alice’s vocal submission to ideology should not be taken at face value. Unlike Jams in *Have I None*, whose words and actions complement each other, Alice’s actions are far from being law-abiding or subservient.

²¹⁰ Bond, *Chair*, in *The Chair Plays* (London: Methuen, 2012), 105.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

Twenty-six years ago, instead of immediately handing in an abandoned baby to the authority, as she was supposed to do, she hesitated for a few days. When it became too late, for she would have been charged with concealment, Alice decided to keep Billy and raised him in secret. The risk she has been taking for twenty-six years is not simply for the purpose of avoiding punishment but can also be read as a statement of a defiant spirit that insists on cultivating human relations in a world where human relations are consciously and systematically eradicated. Even though trapped in the political myths of a totalitarian society, Alice is still capable of preserving some memories of life before the spell of collective amnesia. There are several clues in her conversation with Billy that point toward the possibility of the old prisoner being Alice's mother. It does not matter if such is the case. What is of importance here is the fact that in taking the chair down to the bus stop, Alice is driven not by pity for a stranger but by a desire to re-establish a relationship that belongs to the abolished past. Her small act of kindness, as such, is the embodiment of the resistant spirit and the endurance of humanity in an inhuman society.

The resurface of a suppressed desire for human relations is also depicted in *Have I None* in the character Sara. Initially, Grit's sudden appearance with a photo of two kids is perceived as a threat by both Jams and Sara.

GRIT I came to deliver it.

He puts the photo on the table.

I'd forgotten you. Couldn't have said your name if I had to. When I saw the photo—as I unrolled it—my mouth said it—out loud. It knew, I didnt. I said 'What?' It said it again: Sally.

JAMS *goes to the table and picks up the photo. He looks at it. Tears it up.*

JAMS She's Sara. Could be any two kids.

SARA What's he want?

JAMS (*shrugs*) Suicide outbreak up there.

SARA He doesnt know what he's doing! When there's an outbreak of suicide everyone imagines! Hallucinates! If he *was* my brother—that's a reason to get rid of him! (*Straightens a chair.*) Some of the packs were frozen. They have to go in the fridge. (*Turns to GRIT.*) Don't stand there! Go away!²¹²

It appears that Sara is even more upset than Jams by Grit's presence and his claim of being her brother. As a result, when Jams suggests they have to kill Grit, Sara readily agrees and volunteers to go to the chemist to fetch poison. However, four days later, when she returns with the poison, some profound change has taken place, and she can now remember that she had a brother, even though it remains unclear whether the one in her memory is Grit. In the Introduction of the *Chair Plays*, Edward Bond writes, 'Are Sara and Grit siblings? I don't

²¹² Bond, *Have I None*, 11-12.

know because it doesn't matter. Once the question is asked the play has to go beyond the relationship.'²¹³ In other words, like the old prisoner in *Chair*, Grit fulfils the role of a catalyst for the eruption of Sara's suppressed memories. The reliability of these memories and the possibility of using them as a basis to identify the real relationship between Sara and Grit are of little importance. The significance of such an eruption lies in the emancipating effect it produces in the temporal blockage imposed by the authority. It is an eruption functioning as a 'gesture of immanent transcendence'²¹⁴ that exposes the mechanism of political myths and reclaims the individual's ability to think and imagine differently.

In Bond's *Have I None* and *Chair*, the political myth of absolute equality aims to eradicate not only the past and its human relations but also the existence of the Other. Dawn King's *Foxfinder* presents a slightly different mechanism of political myths, which thrives on the perpetual threat by a mythical enemy. The danger does not come from internal dissent but a supernatural, unknowable force—the fox. Winner of the 2011 Papatango playwriting competition, *Foxfinder* is set on a farm owned by a young couple, Judith and Samuel, during a fox infestation inspection. The nineteen-year-old foxfinder William, despite his rigorous monastic training that teaches him to resist temptation, becomes sexually attracted to the farmer's wife, Judith. It is implied that the play is set in a future in which, due to climate change, food has become scarce, city dwellers have one egg a week and three ounces of cheese on their ration and factory workers are faced with a life expectancy of three years. In this regressive world, the authority actively promotes the us-against-them mentality, with the fox as the emblem of all nonhuman forces that are malicious and destructive.

WILLIAM This field, this farm... this entire country is a battleground between the forces of civilisation and the forces of nature. If we lose, England will starve. Our towns and cities will crumble, and trees will grow amongst the ruins using the bones of dead men as fertiliser. Do you see? They want nothing less than our complete annihilation, Samuel. Without man, the fox will rule.²¹⁵

The fox performs the role of a mythical figure/enemy, which is useful for the unification of the people in times of crisis. At the same time, it constitutes a political myth that strives to control the citizens and deflect the incompetence of the government.

SARAH Wake up, Jude! It's a fairy story, the whole thing! The foxes are gone, but anyone who speaks out, anyone who talks about their doubts... they're arrested!
JUDITH Why?

²¹³ Edward Bond, 'Introduction', *The Chair Plays*, xli.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Dawn King, *Foxfinder* (London: Nick Hern, 2011), 25.

SARAH Because they're terrified of the truth and what it can do, that's why! They don't know why the weather's gone bad, or the crops are failing, and they don't know how to stop it. They've been wrong all this time, and all those people who lost their farms... all those people who died... Something like this... It could bring the whole bloody Government down.²¹⁶

Sarah, Judith's neighbour, exposes the nature of the political myth founded upon the ominous foxes as 'a characteristic way to deal with the pressing questions that arise from a specific socio-political condition, namely by pushing them aside, by neutralizing and invalidating their insistence, instead of solving them'.²¹⁷ This explains the reason why anyone who professes doubt will be eliminated since such doubt undermines the certainty of knowledge upon which the whole political machine is based.

In *Foxfinder*, we encounter not the paralysing effect of a political myth that inhibits imagination but a hypnotic one. In the beginning, the farmer Samuel remains incredulous, mocking the foxfinder William when the latter claims that the rabbits leave signs to warn them about the fox.

WILLIAM Exactly. I hypothesise that when I investigate those woods, I will find further evidence of an infestation.

SAMUEL You'll find rabbit holes. Loads of bloody rabbit holes. And you don't need to... interpret the symbols of what that means.²¹⁸

However, the situation is suddenly reversed when William suggests that the fox is responsible for the death of Samuel's son, who ventured out one night and drowned. Samuel, a grieving father, becomes obsessed with this idea. His growing conviction in the myth of the fox alters his perception of reality: he can hear and see the fox when nobody else can. In the same way that the authority exploits this political myth to justify their incompetence, Samuel uses the myth for his own purpose in his struggle with guilt. It is probably not the best way to work through one's trauma; however, it does demonstrate the malleability and unexpected effect of political myths that 'empty reality'.

The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37

²¹⁷ Herbert De Vriese, 'Political Myth and Sacrifice', *History of European Ideas* 43, no. 7 (2017): 823.

²¹⁸ King, *Foxfinder*, 25.

²¹⁹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 142.

The audience gets a glimpse of what Roland Barthes describes as a process of haemorrhaging or evaporating reality: Samuel’s memory of what happened the night his son died is significantly transformed — ‘I heard something that night. I thought it was Dan, but it could have been them.’ The malice of the fox provides the most logical, natural explanation for his son’s death and, once Samuel is convinced, reality, both past and present, only works to reinforce this explanation. For a political myth ‘cannot be simply “true” or “false” because it aims, so to speak, to create its own truth’.²²⁰ It cannot be simply a prophecy but must be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When Samuel shoots William because the latter has coerced Judith into trading sexual favours for a clean report of the farm, what the farmer sees is not a human being but ‘a fox in the shape of a boy’.²²¹ Samuel has internalised the myth that portrays the fox as a destructive and dangerous force preying on human weakness and threatening their survival, to the extent that it allows him to identify his real enemy—the foxfinder and everything he stands for. In other words, the political myth disseminated by the oppressor is now used by the oppressed to reclaim justice.

SAMUEL	We ought to be compensated. It’s not right, what happened.
JUDITH	What if they don’t believe us?
SAMUEL	Course they will. It’s the truth, isn’t it? ²²²

Samuel is confident that he would not be punished, considering there is no way to either prove or dispute the claim of William being ‘a fox in the shape of a boy’. As long as Samuel’s story corresponds to the official version about the fox, he would be safe since condemning him would equal sabotaging the government-sponsored political myth. The case of *Foxfinder* once again upsets the progressive-regressive dichotomy and affirms the impossibility of attributing a single, definitive value to the implication of political myths. Like *The Wolf from the Door*, *Have I None* and *Chair*, *Foxfinder* creates a space where the unexpected plays out, where the audience can explore the aporetic aspect of political myths that gives rise to hope and weariness simultaneously.

²²⁰ Chiara Bottici, ‘Philosophies of Political Myth, a Comparative Look Backwards—Cassirer, Sorel and Spinoza’, *European Journal of Political Theory* 8, no. 3 (2009): 366.

²²¹ King, *Foxfinder*, 78.

²²² *Ibid.*, 79.

2. Contemporary Socio-economic Myths

(*Radiant Vermin—Instructions for Correct Assembly*)

Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* (2015) and Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* (2018) are but two of many contemporary speculative plays that revise and retell popular myths. *Radiant Vermin*, first produced in 2015 at the Tobacco Factory Theatre, Bristol, gives the Faust myth a modern twist by situating it in a housing crisis when a young couple enters into a Faustian bargain with a Mephistopheles-like figure to acquire their dream home. *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, in telling the story of two parents replacing their lost son with a DIY robot, who then turns on them, vividly recalls Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1823) and, therefore, can also be traced back to the Pygmalion myth. The original theme of transgression and punishment is present, but it is carefully reformulated to reflect a modern outlook of what constitutes transgression and punishment. Furthermore, there exists another layer to the two plays' engagement with myth: through their apparent revision of old myths, they also bring into relief a number of contemporary socio-economic myths. These include, most notably, the perfect happiness myth, the myth of the prosperity gospel and the Social Darwinism myth. These plays resort to the imaginary to exploit 'the space of indetermination the system keeps open for hypothetical thought'²²³ and call attention to the two distinct but also inseparable aspects of the Inhuman in advanced capitalist society. Rather than reinforcing the binary logic of myth, speculative theatre sees in the suspension of judgment a potential strategy of resistance against political and ethical foreclosure.

Instructions for Correct Assembly was first staged by the Royal Court in April 2018. The play is set in an alternative present, which explains the mixture of familiar and speculative details that constitute the uncanny world and lifestyle portrayed. Thomas Eccleshare, who won the 2011 Verity Bargate Award for his debut play *Pastoral*, began writing *Instructions* with an image in mind: 'a man unscrewing the back of a silent boy's head, fiddling around, pressing a button, and then the boy talks'.²²⁴ This image is consequently developed into a play in which a middle-aged couple, Hari and Max, construct a replacement of their son out of components readily available from an IKEA-like store. If Frankenstein has to toil in secret and anxiety to create his monster from dead body parts, the

²²³ Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 100.

²²⁴ Thomas Eccleshare, *Thomas Eccleshare: Plays One: I'm Not Here Right Now; Heather; Instructions for Correct Assembly* (London: Oberon, 2019).

couple in *Instructions*, despite performing a similar act, is free from any moral judgement from their community. The fact that the parts of the robot are sold openly like furniture clearly shows that in this alternative present, building a humanoid is legal, socially accepted and common to the extent that it does not raise any concern.²²⁵ Hari's and Max's transgression is, therefore, of a very different nature compared to Frankenstein's. Frankenstein's ambition is to dominate and manipulate nature, to acquire God-like power in the matter of life and death. Mary Shelley's myth, as such, is a tale of forbidden knowledge and its consequence, which derives from the myth of the Fall of Man in the Book of Genesis. Unlike Frankenstein, the couple in *Instructions* does not violate any boundary in constructing a life-like robot. It appears that technological progress in the dramatic world of Hari and Max has successfully mastered the knowledge of artificial life and commercialised it in the banalest manner. As a result, what is perceived as an act of transgression in the Frankenstein myth becomes normalised when situated in this new context. The couple, far from being the creator, is but the consumer in an advanced capitalist world that capitalises on hope. Their action is motivated by guilt, regret and a desire to make things right by creating an alternative reality in which they can be the perfect parents of a perfect son. It is this promise of perfection and happiness, which underlines most myths of capitalism and modern technology, that the play works to unveil. At the structural level, *Instructions* mixes past and present scenes, which sometimes confuses the audience, especially since the son (Nick) and the humanoid (Jân) are played by the same actor. In a sense, this lack of distinction truthfully reflects Max's and Hari's inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality as they plunge deeper into the myth of purchasable perfect happiness.

For Hari and Max, the moment of transgression is not marked by the construction of a mechanical son but the conscious decision to transform themselves into cyborgs. Towards the end of the play, after the humanoid goes rogue during a house party, Hari and Max finally acknowledge failure in their attempt to fix the broken relationship with their real son. However, their obsession with perfection does not disappear with this realisation. On the contrary, the couple comes to a conclusion that, rather than trying to change the world, they would better change themselves in order to achieve their desired happiness.

MAX The world can never be perfect that's not going to happen.
HARI *shakes his head.*

²²⁵ The high cost of the robot, however, suggests that it is still a rather luxurious item in the early stage of mass commercialisation.

MAX But we can.²²⁶

In a surprising twist, Hari and Max decide to transform themselves into cyborgs by inserting a chip into their head, which allows them to control their own bodily functions in the same way they controlled Jân, the humanoid.

MAX Does it feel nice?

HARI It's wonderful actually. Plus.

MAX Yes?

HARI I disabled my sense of smell. So no more Wednesday night bin night worries.

MAX That will be a relief.

HARI And I've turned down my hearing too. So everything's just a little more

MAX Mm?

HARI Peaceful.²²⁷

This radical solution to happiness and perfection is the real transgression that Hari and Max commit but, simultaneously, it can also be interpreted as a form of punishment if we agree with the opinion purporting that the fusion between technology and humanity signals the loss of the couple's humanness. Such a claim holds within the limitation of the traditional and ideal conception of the human and humanity, which is in itself a social construct. To better understand the significance of Hari's and Max's actions, we need to take into account the subversive quality and the potential of the Inhuman. In *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Jean-François Lyotard poses two important questions: 'what if human beings, in humanism's sense, were in the process of, constrained into, becoming inhuman (that's the first part)? And (the second part), what if what is 'proper' to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?' In other words, Lyotard emphasises the need to differentiate two kinds of inhuman, 'the inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others)' and 'the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage'.²²⁸ However, it must be noted that, despite their difference, these two kinds are not separable but coexist in one single action. This explains the reason why in *Instructions*, the Inhuman that manifests in the couple's deliberate renunciation of their humanity is ethically and politically indeterminable.

HARI I know some people have the attitude that maybe we should all feel guilty or torture ourselves or that a bit of darkness lets you know that there's light etc. etc. I know all that. But my feeling is: wouldn't it be better if it was just always light? The fact is you only live once. And do you want to spend that time being a worry wart and moping about or would you rather get up and go and be able to enjoy things a bit more? This way is just

²²⁶ Thomas Eccleshare, *Instructions for Correct Assembly* (London: Oberon, 2018).

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 2.

MAX Nicer.
HARI Exactly.²²⁹

Hari's rationale here demonstrates his awareness of the necessity and inevitability of negative emotions, but this does not stop him from yearning for something 'better', from wanting to 'enjoy things a bit more', because it is just 'nicer'. Such a way of thinking is also the basis of the Endless Growth Myth that characterises advanced capitalism. Contemporary capitalism is not simply a matter of producing and consuming more material products, as in the previous historical forms, including mercantilism and industrial capitalism, but also of creating immaterial products through the process of reification. In the case of Hari and Max, while it is true that the bits and pieces of the humanoid are very much tangible, the real product sold to the couple is the hope of perfection and happiness. Their relationship with their real son, Nick, was damaged beyond repairable, but it is capitalism, aided by technological progress, that gives the promise of redemption even in the most impossible of situations. In this sense, Hari and Max have become Inhuman long before they reach the extreme step of turning themselves into cyborgs. The final act of denouncing their humanity by allowing themselves to be controlled like a mere machine is but the emblem of the loss of an individual's humanity in an Inhuman system consolidated under the name of development.²³⁰

Paradoxically, this break from normative humanistic ideals also presents a moment of possibility. By becoming cyborgs, Hari and Max are now able to control not only their body but also their desire. The first thing Hari does after successfully inserting the chip into his head is to disable his sense of smell and turn down his hearing—to go for less instead of always asking for more, to reduce rather than increase his performance. It is true that the couple is complicit in perpetuating the perfect happiness myth of capitalism, and even after becoming cyborgs, they are still very much bound by it. Nevertheless, the ability to control themselves that comes with the chip disrupts the logic of consumerism, as it allows the individual to achieve satisfaction with what they already have instead of constantly chasing after an impossible perfection. Not only so, but the couple's application of cyborg technology also goes against capitalist technoscience's mission of enhancing the human. What we witness here is perhaps the manifestation of what Lyotard calls the element 'proper' to humankind that is to be inhabited by the inhuman—a sense of self-awareness and moderation

²²⁹ Eccleshare, *Instructions for Correct Assembly*.

²³⁰ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 2.

only possible in something other than human. In a science-fictional scenario, Lyotard takes us 4.5 billion years into the future, when our sun explodes and the human race will have survived without the Earth. Through this postmodern fable, he exposes the limitations of the humanistic ideal and the need to rethink existing definitions of the human. On the one hand, the survival of the human race fulfils the humanist dream and reaffirms the central significance of human beings in the universe; on the other hand, the extreme conditions will require a transformation radical to the extent that those survivors will no longer be recognised as human based on the current definition.²³¹ In the case of Hari and Max, the couple is no longer human in the limited sense of the word, but their Inhuman signals a subversive moment that challenges the Inhuman system and its oppressive ideology.²³² It is a new, paradoxical and utopian expression of humanism: by fulfilling the human desire for happiness, the couple must abandon the narrow conception of the human as a stable category; by succumbing to the imperative for perfection perpetuated by capitalist technoscience, they take back the power to produce their own conditions of existence.

Unfortunately, *Instructions* ends on a rather ambiguous note, the possibility and potential of the second part of the Inhuman soon give way to something less affirmative or positive. In the final scene, Hari and Max are exercising in their house, discussing how great they feel and making plans to bring up more equipment.

HARI I knew we could get two of the cross trainers in here.
MAX It was worth taking off the base to get them up the stairs though.
HARI Definitely.
MAX Otherwise we'd have struggled.
HARI But now I think with these two in
MAX Maybe a pull-up bar on the door
HARI Maybe a pull-up bar on the door. And your yoga mats brought up
MAX That would be nice.
HARI I would say it's just about perfect.
They run and run and run.
*The end.*²³³

²³¹ Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 83-91.

²³² Lyotard further criticises the hubris inherent in traditional humanistic way of thinking: 'The Human, or his/her brain, is a highly unlikely material (that is, energetic) formation. This formation is necessarily transitory since it is dependent on the conditions of terrestrial life, which are not eternal. The formation called Human or Brain will have been nothing more than an episode in the conflict between differentiation and entropy. The pursuit of greater complexity asks not for the perfecting of the Human, but its mutation or its defeat for the benefit of a better performing system. Humans are very mistaken in their presuming to be the motors of development and in confusing development with the progress of consciousness and civilization.' See Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 99.

²³³ Eccleshare, *Instructions for Correct Assembly*.

The last image on stage is Hari and Max running on their treadmills heading to nowhere—a befitting metaphor for the couple’s ingrained obsession with perfection. It remains unclear whether the deliberate act of transforming themselves into cyborgs would be enough for them to resist the insatiable desire for more, a desire celebrated and encouraged in their society. This scene once again demonstrates the impossibility of separating the two parts of Lyotard’s *Inhuman*, and the audience is left with an uneasy feeling of uncertainty as to the political and ethical impact of the potentially positive inhumanity trapped in an *Inhuman* system.

The image of Hari and Max running on treadmills in their endless quest for happiness and perfection that closes *Instructions for Correct Assembly* symbolically resembles the ending scene of Philip Ridley’s *Radiant Vermin*, in which a young couple spirals down a vicious cycle of murder and greed in search of their dream home. Ollie and Jill, in their late twenties, are expecting a child while being stuck in a tiny flat of a place called Red Ocean Estate — ‘crime capital of the universe and all that’, where everyone ‘was either a drug dealer or suicidal’.²³⁴ One day, the couple receives a letter from a mysterious Miss Dee working at the Department of Social Regeneration through the Creation of Dream Homes, which informs them that they have been selected for participation in a new scheme. The house assigned to Ollie and Jill, despite being spacious, is run-down and requires a lot of fixing, the costs of which the young couple cannot afford. The opportunity for renovation soon presents itself most unexpectedly: on the night the couple moved in, a homeless man broke into the house, thinking it was uninhabited, and, during a struggle, he was accidentally killed by Ollie. Panic gives way to perplexity and pleasant surprise when the couple realise that the corpse has disappeared and the kitchen where the vagrant died is magically transformed into a designer kitchen with a self-replenishing fridge.

At first, Ollie tries to make sense of what happened, wanting to know *how* and *why* it happened. However, Jill brushes it aside, asking her husband to ‘Just accept.’²³⁵ After overcoming this initial moral hurdle, the couple progressively moves on with their plan to achieve their dream home, from leaving the back door open so that other vagrants can freely come in, to Ollie actively making rounds every night to collect ‘renovators’. As they proceed, the couple faces various practical obstacles, such as ‘the problem of humane home renovation’ or ‘the problem of Suspicion Free Renovator Collection’. These exceptional problems call for unusual solutions and, just like Nazi officials who rationally, scrupulously calculated all the

²³⁴ Philip Ridely, *Radiant Vermin* (London: Methuen Drama, 2015), 7.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

necessities for the Final Solution, Ollie and Jill work tirelessly to come up with the most effective method to collect and murder their victims. Ollie impersonates a Catholic priest so that he will not raise suspicion when he picks up homeless men and women on the street. He also examines all possible methods of killing, weighing their pros and cons, before finally choosing electricity and creating an electric magic wand that can perform efficient, neat killings.

OLLIE [...] So... Most important thing—speed! Right? It has to be quick! Now, I can guess what you're thinking. Gun. And, yes, that was my first thought too. But there's problems. One, I've never shot a gun before. Okay, okay, I can get one and practise. Fair enough. But that still leaves problem two—noise. Guns go bang. Okay, I can get a silencer. But that still leaves—three! What if the first bullet don't do the trick? Even a bullet in the head's not always fatal. And, believe me, I do not want to be pumping bullet after bullet into some writhing mass at my feet. Well, would you? Be honest. No. Not fair on me, not fair on them. What's the alternative? Strangulation? Takes too long. And all that protruding tongue and bulging eyes stuff? No thank you. Gassing? Too complicated to set up. So that leaves... Electricity! Yesss! Fast. Silent. Clean.²³⁶

It must be noted that Ollie's preoccupation with efficiency has a thin veil of morality, the same way people strive for a fast, silent and clean method in slaughterhouses to minimise the suffering of the animals and the psychological strain put on the workers. Already, within this frame of consideration, the victims are not regarded as human beings but disposable tools required for a higher purpose, namely, the couple's dream home. This dream home, Ollie and Jill argue, plays an essential role in the future of their unborn child, and it is for the child that they are ready to transgress any moral boundary.

OLLIE Because *everything* we did.
JILL No matter how horrible.
OLLIE No matter how shocking.
JILL We did it all—
OLLIE and JILL For baby.²³⁷

The pseudo-ethical thoughts that help maintain the couple's illusion that they are good people and, therefore, justified in their act of violence derives from two contemporary myths: the myth of the prosperity gospel (or the 'health and wealth' gospel) and the myth of Social Darwinism. The prosperity gospel myth, a mixture of economic and religious doctrines that gives validation for a culture of greed, propels the idea that true believers are entitled to *both* spiritual blessings in the hereafter *and* material rewards in this life. Financial success, good health and high social status, as such, are not meaningless worldly achievements but signs of God's approval. Since there is no limit to God's blessing, there are

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

certainly no limits to how much money, material possession or success one should aim for. It does not matter if these worldly rewards are achieved through morally questionable behaviour because if God were displeased with such behaviour, he would not have allowed it to lead to positive outcomes in the first place.

This interpretation of the Bible gains even more weight when it is combined with the myth of Social Darwinism. A prominent set of theories in the United Kingdom, North America and Western Europe in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, Social Darwinism, by extending the theory of natural selection to social and political realms, has served as a powerful instrument to support the rhetoric of racism, imperialism, fascism, Nazism, eugenics, to name but a few. It does not come as a surprise that ‘the crudest ideas of Social Darwinism, and the crudest analogical interpretations of human relationships in quasi-scientific terms, have been remarkably revived and given extraordinary publicity’²³⁸ in the twenty-first century, considering how these ideas and interpretations empower and reaffirm the principles of the current dominant system of a free-market economy. It was Herbert Spencer, a social philosopher, who coined the phrase ‘the survival of the fittest’ in 1864, which became a useful catchphrase for Social Darwinism supporters. The Spencerian theory, based on the presumption that historical progress is a natural and positive process, provides the necessary foundation for the development of Social Darwinism in its fullest form.

The weaker or less able members of society should not be artificially preserved, because the process of social selection which was creating the most vigorous and self-reliant types was something that ought not to be interfered with: its ultimate achievement would be human happiness of a general kind.²³⁹

With Spencer, the definition of the ‘fittest’ goes through an important revision that entails disturbing ramifications: from being the most adaptive to changes in the environment, it comes to be associated with the best, the strongest, the most ruthless. Human beings are stratified into either one of the two extremes—winner or loser, predator or prey—without any possibility of a middle ground.

Radiant Vermin is aptly set up as a quasi-Christian confession, but it is unclear whether it is a confession of sin or that of faith in consumerism and other neoliberal myths. There is an unmistakable lightheartedness in the way Jill and Ollie recount their journey to become serial killers. As such, rather than a religious practice, their ‘confession’ is more akin

²³⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London & New York: Verso, 2005), 101.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

to a fun reality show in which people watch and comment on the footage of themselves. They seem to be conversing directly with the audience, but all their questions are answered by themselves. In other words, the appearance of a free, open exchange conceals the reality of a rigid mindset that can only produce words that confirm its preconceived thoughts and opinions.

What we see on stage are two young people coming from a humble background, who, by a stroke of luck, figure out how to realise their dream and single-mindedly commit themselves to this goal despite all (moral) obstacles. This would make an inspirational story if it was not for the fact that the solution lies in murdering homeless people most efficiently. After the first accidental killing, Jill has a moment of apprehension, refusing to step into the new kitchen while proclaiming, ‘I can’t stay here. I *won’t!*’²⁴⁰ However, when Ollie leaves to work on the wiring, Jill has a change of heart after a few moments of self-persuasion.

JILL [...] Well, would any of you? Eh? Knowing what’s happened? Course not. Nor would any sane person—no, not ‘sane’. Anyone with a conscience. Morals. A man died here last night. [...] Christian values. It’s what I practise. When I see a homeless person on the street I *always* give some money. [...] How’s the old saying go? ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ Not ‘Be as lazy as you like and send the bill to everyone else’. Send it to people like you and me. Right? Oh, yes. Most of them’d suck us dry if they had the chance. [...] Another thing—when you walk past one of them on the street and you don’t give any money they mumble something like ‘Have a nice day.’ You noticed that? Like they’re trying to make us feel guilty. Guilty for what? Having self-respect? Aspiring to a better life. Why should I—why should *any* of us?—feel guilty about that? Without us everything out there would fall to pieces. It’d be the Dark Ages all over again. It’s people like *us* who’re standing between civilisation and chaos—Fuck it, I’m going to the kitchen!²⁴¹

The above monologue reveals the mechanism behind the process of justifying and normalising violence inherent in the prosperity gospel myth and the myth of Social Darwinism. At first, Jill believes it is immoral to enjoy the new kitchen because it is made possible by human suffering. She takes pride in the fact that she can sympathise with the struggle of homeless people and in her generosity, which are proofs of her Christian virtue. This line of thought, however, leads to the conclusion that *some* homeless are where they are because of their laziness and their negligence of Biblical teachings. A few sentences on, the whole of the homeless population is generalised to be those who do not have self-respect or aspire to a better life. At this point, Jill’s initial sympathetic attitude has shifted to an antagonistic mode that explicitly reflects the us-against-them mentality. Two convictions emerge from Jill’s reasoning process: (1) people like her and Ollie, being good Christians as

²⁴⁰ Ridley, *Radiant Vermin*, 36.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

they are, deserve to be rewarded with material gains regardless of how such gains are achieved, and (2) destitution is a matter of individual character. If health and material possession are signs of God's approval *and* the result of one's superior physical, intellectual, moral qualities, the failure to be prosperous and healthy is both God's punishment *and* proof of defects in individual character—another word for 'unfitness'. Here, we are reminded of an important distinction between classical (pre-Christian) myth and modern-contemporary myth: while the former places a strong emphasis on knowledge and functions as an alternative narrative to make sense of incomprehensible phenomena, the latter's primary function is practico-social *justification*. It is not to say that pre-Christian myth is free from ideology, which is certainly not true since many Greek myths were evidently used as an instrument for power legitimation in one way or another. Nevertheless, I would argue that the intention of myth-making and myth-consuming in contemporary society is more markedly functional. In the 'new' myths, truth and knowledge are no longer relevant, which has resulted in the association of myth with widely held but false beliefs. Precisely because of this disregard of truth that myths can be more readily incorporated into the propaganda machinery. Both the myth of the prosperity gospel and the myth of Social Darwinism are intentional misinterpretations and misappropriations of their original ideas/myths, but this does not stop people from being drawn to them. As Roland Barthes remarks, 'men do not have with myth a relationship based on truth but use: they depoliticize according to their needs'.²⁴² The act of consuming a certain myth has little to do with whether one is aware of the flawed ideas upon which that myth is based. In fact, it is perhaps because of the very awareness of these flawed but advantageous ideas that a myth is embraced.

In *Radiant Vermin*, Ollie and Jill are the rationalizers and the natural rhetoricians who, instead of facing the immense complexity of the system that sustains and perpetuates the falsity of the prosperity and Social Darwinism myths, 'have now moved in to snap at and discourage us: not now to ratify an imperialist and capitalist order, but to universalize its breakdown and to persuade us that it has no alternatives, since all "nature" is like that'.²⁴³ Jill's monologue quoted above can be seen as an example of the mythical speech, which 'transforms history into nature'.²⁴⁴ Since competition is perceived as an inherent, inevitable aspect of society, especially under capitalism, it is only natural that she has to be ruthless not only to survive but also to get ahead. From the couple's perspective, continuing with the

²⁴² Barthes, *Mythologies*, 144

²⁴³ Williams, *Culture and Materialism*, 102.

²⁴⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 128.

scheme of murdering the homeless is the only option, especially if they are to fulfil their role as good parents who are capable of providing their future children with a decent home. The Inhuman system, in pitting one disadvantaged group against another, effectively robs both groups of their humanity.

In the same way that Max and Hari in *Instructions for Correct Assembly* are enslaved by the obsession with perfection, Jill and Ollie tirelessly ‘renovate’ their home over and over again because no matter how nice it is, there is always room for improvement.

Make it bigger
make it brighter
make it faster
make it louder
make it stand out in the crowdier
for the world to adore
and when you’ve done all that—
oh, hell, I’ll still want more.
Hell, I still want more.²⁴⁵

Up to one point, however, the rooms stop changing, and the couple suffers from a period of something close to an existential crisis, as their ceaseless quest for novelty is disrupted. It is at this moment that the enigmatic Miss Dee reappears and presents another opportunity: the couple is to move to another house, as run-down as their current house in the beginning, and to start everything all over again. Only that this time, the new house will require double sacrifices, meaning each ‘renovation’ will need two ‘renovators’. Jill and Ollie take the offer without hesitation.

JILL What if... we might want a *third* house.
OLLIE I think that’s more than likely.
JILL It’s a definite. And another house after that probably.
OLLIE A place in the country.
JILL Oh, we’ve *got* to have that.
OLLIE It goes without saying, sweetheart.
JILL But... this house here—it took *hundreds* of renovators. Five or six houses down the line—
OLLIE It’ll take thousands. I know.
JILL Ollie... You and me—we’ll *never* manage that.
OLLIE We will, sweetheart. Because by then... we’ll have two sons to help us.
JILL Of *course!*²⁴⁶

There appears to be a pattern in the couple’s escalating desire: the next houses are first mentioned as a possibility—‘we *might* want a third house’, ‘and another house after that

²⁴⁵ Ridley, *Radiant Vermin*, 44.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 113-14.

probably—but once the prospect is announced, there is an immediate shift in terms of certainty: ‘more than likely’, ‘it’s a *definite*’, ‘we’ve got to have that’, ‘it goes without saying’. By the end of their exchange, it is no longer a second house that they aim for but five or six houses down the line. This is far from being a definite figure, knowing the nature of their obsession. The couple’s primary concern here is not being able to manage killing fast enough to renovate their new house, but Ollie soon reassures Jill that they will have the extra manpower from their children by then. Initially, children were used as justification for their ruthless behaviour, but it seems like at this point, even the need to find justification has completely escaped Jill and Ollie: without a flinch, they envision the assistance of their two sons in the murderous scheme, as if talking about how normal kids helping their parents with trivial house chores. In the same way that *Instructions for Correct Assembly* closes with Max and Hari endlessly running on treadmills, *Radiant Vermin*’s denouement shows the price Ollie and Jill have to pay for their Faustian bargain: being stuck in an eternal spiral of violence and insatiable greed.

It would be too reductive to characterise *Radiant Vermin* as a simple moral tale or a warning against the manipulative, dehumanising force of consumer capitalism or to subject Ollie and Jill to ethical, political judgement. Staying true to the original Faust myth, the couple compromise their moral integrity in exchange for what they deem to be the true essence of life. Like Faust, Ollie and Jill uphold the ‘Empire-Builder’ spirit and passionately commit to the idea of ownership.²⁴⁷ What distinguishes them, however, is the fact that the modern couple’s transgression falls in line with a state-sponsored policy that encourages the extermination of the homeless. In the same way that Max and Hari of *Instructions for Correct Assembly* are not the creator of the monster but mere consumers of the perfect happiness myth, Jill’s and Ollie’s moral transgression lacks the rebellious, subversive dimension that characterises Faust’s behaviour.

The contemporary social and economic myths mentioned here, including the perfect happiness myth, the prosperity gospel myth and the myth of Social Darwinism, provide a lens through which the behaviour of the neoliberal characters in speculative plays can be analysed. At the same time, the discernible presence of older literary myths in *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and *Radiant Vermin*, such as the Faust myth and the Frankenstein myth, reaffirms the durability and immense adaptability of myth. The grand narrative seems to be lurking in

²⁴⁷ In Part 2, Act 4 of Goeth’s drama, ‘High Mountains’, Faust expresses his desire to tame the ocean and create a new space where he can realise his vision of a brave new world to be build and ruled by him.

the background; however, the mixture of old and new myths undermines the intention of giving a comprehensive, encompassing picture of history or drawing any definitive ethical, political lesson. In this operation of intertextuality, old myths change their meanings, and new myths are exposed as reified, quasi-myths whose fictional quality has been obliterated to serve the purpose of consolidating an Inhuman system. *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and *Radiant Vermin* are more accurately characterised as postmodern *fables*, not *myths*, precisely because the main characters can no longer be perceived as human in the idealistic, limited definition of traditional humanism. The form of these two plays reflects the way neoliberal capitalism ensnares individuals in a bubble of illusion known as progress and change, which turns out to be a purgatory-like space of the Eternal Return. *Instructions for Correct Assembly* starts with Max and Hari eagerly assemble their new son in the hope of perfect happiness. By the end of the play, their obsession with perfection takes on another form, that of health and fitness. Who knows what they would turn to next once this venture also fails to provide them with perfect and lasting satisfaction? In the like manner, *Radiant Vermin* begins with Jill and Ollie recalling their first days moving into a new house and ends with the couple getting ready to move into another house to go through the same violent journey to ‘success’ all over again. The function of neoliberal capitalist myths, like the modern political myths examined in *Have I None*, *Chair*, *Foxfinder* and *The Wolf from the Door*, is to prevent people from understanding their real situation. Without this understanding, it is impossible even to imagine opposition against the hegemonic ideologies, and individuals will come to believe that actively participating in the various practices of structural violence and injustice is just part of normality. The fact that *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and *Radiant Vermin* end on a rather pessimistic note does not mean that they wish to convey a message of determinism and resignation. On the contrary, staying true to the ethical imperative of posthuman fables, these endings serve as a reminder of the need to constantly break free from the bubble of illusion created by myths, to search for the other Inhuman aspect of humanity in an Inhuman system. There will be moments of radically different possibilities, such as the moment Hari and Max in *Instructions* turn themselves into cyborgs. However, since such moments of possibility and emancipation do not last, they have to be constantly searched for. It is in this call for an open, uncertain and aporetic quest for an ethical way of being that we get a glimpse of speculative theatre’s utopian aspiration.

III. DENATURALISING MYTHICAL SPEECH

Up to this point, my examination of myth in contemporary speculative theatre still largely focuses on analysing the narrative of specific myths: one of the foundational myths—the apocalypse myth; modern political myths of the general strike and absolute equality; and neoliberal capitalist myths such as the prosperity gospel and the Social Darwinism. In this section, however, my approach to myth will be guided by Roland Barthes’s conception of myth as a type of speech, a particular mode of communication, a form.

It can be seen that to purport to discriminate among mythical objects according to their substance would be entirely illusory: since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones.²⁴⁸

According to Barthes’s characterisation, nothing can escape mythicalisation: ‘Myth can reach everything, corrupt everything, and even the very act of refusing oneself to it’.²⁴⁹ It is, as such, not a matter of how speculative theatre denounces the consumption of modern myths and urges its audience to do so. Rather, the goal of speculative theatre in adopting the mythical form is to provide the audience with a paradoxical space in which modern myths are constantly made, consumed, demystified, and remade. The fact that this process resembles the inexhaustible mutation of myths in real life does not diminish speculative theatre’s impact. On the contrary, by bringing into relief the operation in which myths are naturalised, speculative plays foster a kind of self-awareness and self-reflexivity that prevents the audience from consuming myth innocently. If myth is a *second-order semiological system*,²⁵⁰ by enacting myths on stage, speculative theatre functions as a third-order semiological system that disrupts the certainty of myth’s metalanguage and liberates the materials of mythical speech (language itself, photography, paintings, posters, rituals, objects, characters, etc.), which are ‘reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth’.²⁵¹ These materials are then invested with new meanings through which new myths emerge. Here, we encounter the Derridean ‘impossible’: the condition that makes it possible to overturn mythical speech is also the condition of its impossibility. What distinguishes mythical speech in speculative theatre from that which reaches us in our daily life activities, however, is the instability of the third-order semiological structure and the emphasis on

²⁴⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 107.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 132

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

conscious recognition: the audience is made aware of the context—the social, political, cultural, economic determinants—that gives rise to the act of mythicalisation. Accordingly, speculative theatre’s utopian aspiration manifests in the way its mythopoeia enables an aporetic experience so that the audience can rehearse their critical approach to myths and mythical speech.

In the following pages, I will examine two of the many strategies used in contemporary speculative theatre to denaturalise mythical speech. The first has to do with the mythicalisation of common objects—the chair in Edward Bond’s *Have I None* and *Chair*, the hat in Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* or the remote control in Thomas Eccleshare’s *Instructions for Correct Assembly*. These are materials caught by myths and embody specific meanings or messages that these myths intend to convey. On stage, these objects—known as props—perform a paradoxical function, that of reinforcing and dismantling the myths they represent, as they simultaneously summon up different meanings that exceed the initial intention of their being mythicised. In other words, they are no longer mere symbols but entities that take on a life of their own. The second strategy, which I have briefly explored in the first section on the apocalypse myth, relies on the tradition of Menippean satire to construct an impossible hero to disrupt the mythical frozen speech that morphs a chosen individual into the hero figure.²⁵² In Rory Mullarkey’s *The Wolf from the Door* and Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone*, the audience is introduced to different heroes who acquire this status because they are the embodiment of certain values that are instrumental to either the preservation of the *status quo* or the emergence of a new social order in their respective dramatic world. However, the construction of these hero figures simultaneously undermines the process of naturalising the values imposed on them, thanks to a tone that highlights playfulness and lightheartedness standing in stark contrast to the omnipresence of extreme violence. The unintelligibility and illogic the audience encounters in the hero figure of many speculative plays, as a result of the pervasive use of ‘the carnival sense of the world’, opens up a space where preconceived meanings are shattered and language, liberated from known or existing power structures, achieves a poetic, subversive quality beyond that of sense-making.

²⁵² According to Barthes, mythical speech is a frozen speech: ‘at the moment of reaching me, it suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens, it makes itself look neutral and innocent. The appropriation of the concept is suddenly driven away once more by the literalness of the meaning’. *Ibid.*, 124.

1. *Un-Re-making the Mythological Object*

(*Far Away—Have I None—Chair—Instructions for Correct Assembly*)

The fact that many contemporary British speculative plays are performed on a mostly bare stage is not simply a matter of budget constraint but can be seen as an attempt to draw the audience's attention to the few objects that appear in the performance. These objects are chosen for specific purposes and play a vital role in the construction of the constellation of signs in a theatre event. More often than not, they are neither mere elements of the décor nor the traditional 'accessory props' (where 'accessory' entails 'secondary', 'inessential').²⁵³ As pointed out by Angel-Perez and Poulain, 'contemporary dramaturgies invest things with the power of signifying beyond their own objectal function', which means that these props, while still being 'manifestations of the existence of a material, objective world', are also invested with the power 'of expression of subjectivity, acquiring meaning according to who owns, covets, collects, fetishizes, manipulates, distorts or destroys them'.²⁵⁴ Such is the kind of dramaturgies we encounter in many speculative plays written and performed in ways that liberate props from the frozen mythological speech to which they are subject. In Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, Edward Bond's *Have I None* and *Chair*, and Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, there is conscious effort to unsettle the concept (or the signified) that stage objects (or the signifier) are supposed to represent. In the same way that the people oppressed by political myths can reinterpret these myths to challenge their oppressor,²⁵⁵ the remote control in *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, the chair in Bond's plays, and the hats in *Far Away* exceed the meanings assigned to them in their dramatic reality and become capable of generating their own, unexpected meanings. In the making, unmaking and remaking of these mythological objects, we encounter the utopian impulse of speculative theatre to liberate material objects (and by extension, the audience's perception of these objects) from the violence of mythical speech.

The remote control in Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* is probably not an element to which one pays much attention when reading the play text. Nevertheless, it is the object that is present in many crucial moments of the play, including that when the couple, Max and Hari, struggle to adjust their robot son's behaviour and verbal expressions, as well

²⁵³Élisabeth Angel-Perez and Alexandra Poulain, 'Introduction', *Études Britanniques Contemporaines. Revue de La Société D'études Anglaises Contemporaines*, no. 35 (15 December 2008).

²⁵⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ Refer to the first part of the second section, *The Aporia of Political Myths*.

as the scene where the humanoid gets out of control and starts destroying the house. As a ubiquitous household item whose history parallels the history of consumer electronic devices and technology, the remote is a symbol of modern convenience and comfort, but also that of restlessness and immobility. Mostly known for its association with entertainment, the remote control, like many other important inventions in history, was initially developed for military usage.²⁵⁶ However, it was with the explosion of television in the 1950s that the remote became a catalyst for radical change in the way consumers interact with their devices as well as the development of entertaining programs. The remote has overturned the power relation between the spectator and the television—we become ‘less as a passive observer, more a ruthless overseer. If we didn’t like what we saw, a new channel was the flick of a switch away’.²⁵⁷ As a result of this power shift, the pace of programs had to be adjusted, and slow scenes cut off to prevent the audience from leaving for another channel. An object commonly viewed as inconsequential as a remote control, in the appropriate context, can be read as a symbol of a ‘culture of zapping’. In *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, the remote used on the humanoid is imbued with the very same desire for power and control that one has when restlessly looking for a program that would satisfy one’s need.

MAX How about you Jân? What did you do?

JÂN (*Talking with his mouth open and full of food.*) I cleaned my room.

HARI Jân?

JÂN Sorry. (*Still open and still full of food.*) I cleaned my room thoroughly.

MAX and HARI look at each other. MAX nods. HARI takes out the remote and taps on it a few times. *Beep!*

MAX What did you do again Jân?

He swallows the food, but mumbles monosyllabically into his chest with his head down like a sulky teenager.

JÂN Clned m’room.

HARI It’s okay it’s okay.

HARI *fiddles with the remote again and nods at MAX.*

MAX Jân?

JÂN *now talks eagerly and clearly looking each of them in the eye in turn.*

JÂN I cleaned my room from top to bottom, it took ages but was worth it as now I have everything just the way I like it.

MAX Good boy. What else?²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ The world’s first wireless remote control was created by American-Serbian inventor Nikola Tesla in 1898, which uses radio waves to control a miniature boat. Tesla’s intended client was the U.S. Navy; however, the value of his device was not appreciated at the time. Later, during World War II, the Germans deployed radio controlled tanks but ‘they were introduced too late to make a decisive impact on the outcome of the war’. See Miomir Vukobratović, ‘Nikola Tesla and Robotics’, *Serbian Journal of Electrical Engineering* 3, no. 2 (2006): 163–75.

²⁵⁷ Stephen Dowling, ‘The Surprising Origins of the TV Remote’, *BBC*, 31 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20180830-the-history-of-the-television-remote-control>.

²⁵⁸ Eccleshare, *Instructions for Correct Assembly*.

Hari's and Max's obsession with perfection is clearly demonstrated in this scene as they struggle to program Jån into their ideal version of a son. It is not only what the humanoid says that concerns the couple, but his attitude and facial expression are all taken into account. This rigorous training of manners soon takes an ideological and political turn when Jån mentions the comedy show he was watching.

JÅN Then I watched some television. A comedy show about some hilarious poofs who

HARI *taps the remote. Beep.*

JÅN A comedy show about some hilarious queer

Beep.

JÅN About some hilarious gay

Beep.

JÅN Some hilarious people. It was really good. I liked it because they smack each other over the head the whole time and there's a guy in it who always ends up with his face in the mud. It makes me laugh so much.

Pause. MAX nods. HARI fiddles again.

JÅN I like the show so much because the people in it are so stupid they're always doing stupid things.

Pause. HARI fiddles again.

JÅN I don't really like the show though. I think the way it portrays the characters is patronising to be honest.²⁵⁹

The offensive term 'poofs' is replaced by 'queer', 'gay', and, eventually, the most generic word is chosen so that there is absolutely no room for offence — 'people'. Jån is also forced to change his opinion about the show to conform to his parents' political outlook. Hari and Max, through the remote control, exercise their power as the master of Jån's emotion, thought and language. In the same way that a TV remote allows one to only see what one likes or that which corresponds to one's preconceived ideas, the remote in *Instructions for Correct Assembly* also functions as an instrument that generates an echo chamber in which all different opinions are eliminated.

It is interesting to notice how Eccleshare chooses a physical remote instead of a more advanced tool as the means to control the humanoid. The mixture of low and high tech in the play makes it clear that *Instructions for Correct Assembly* is not concerned with conveying accurate scientific knowledge. Rather, it is interested in exploring the love-hate relationship between human beings and technology: on the one hand, technology is meant to facilitate human life; on the other hand, the exponential rate with which technological progress is made demands us to constantly struggle so as not to be left behind. It is in the physical remote that this power struggle becomes most perceptible. The first TV remote control created by Zenith Electronics in 1950, which was aptly named 'Lazy Bones', only contained basic functions

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

such as turning the TV on or off and changing channels and was still attached to the television itself. Gradually, the remote became wireless, and the number of functions increased. By the end of the twentieth century, a standard remote had far exceeded the earliest model both in terms of function and complexity—a handful of buttons evolved into several dozens. The number of options that come with the remote eventually turns into a burden and overwhelms its user. It is this excess of modern technology that creates an ironic and comic situation in *Instructions for Correct Assembly*: Max’s inability to control the remote control.

MAX I tried fiddling with the remote but the damned thing has so many functions

HARI Max

MAX You’re never in the right mode

HARI Max

MAX And then if you are in the mode you’ve not got them on the right setting

HARI Max!

MAX I couldn’t control him. I’m sorry.²⁶⁰

Max’s failure in mastering the remote gives rise to a moment of alterity in which the object seems to acquire a life of its own, beyond both technological planning or specifications and the human desire for control.²⁶¹ However, as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, it is not enough to stop at demystifying the mythical objects. As the playwright Edward Bond argues, theatre ‘has to be both iconoclastic and iconographic because that is the function imposed on it by the mind’s need to humanize itself’ and the task of theatre is not only to destroy existing icons or symbols but also to create a ‘new method of graphism’.²⁶² This means that it is a vital function of theatre to reinvest in objects with different meanings once the dominant meaning—the mythical speech—is dismantled. In *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, the dismantling of mythical speech is taken literally in the dismantling of the humanoid. At the same time, there emerges a process of reassembling in the most unexpected manner. After Hari has turned himself into a cyborg, he disables his sense of smell and turns down his hearing. The remote control, even though not mentioned, is inferred here since the chip Hari uses previously belonged to Jân. The device’s meaning, however, was altered due to the couple’s transgression. It still symbolises the desire for power and control, but instead of being directed outward, it now serves to regulate one’s bodily function and desire.

²⁶⁰ Eccleshare, *Instructions for Correct Assembly*.

²⁶¹ The physicality of the remote on stage makes all the difference. Had Eccleshare used more advanced control techniques such as voice activation or motion control, the play would not have achieved the same effect, since the obliteration of a material device that serves as a medium for human and non-human interaction renders the technology behind such interaction abstract.

²⁶² Edward Bond, *Bond Plays: 5: The Bundle; Human Cannon; Jackets; In the Company of Men* (New York & London: Methuen Drama, 2013), 31.

In the book *The Stage Life of Props*, Andrew Sofer accentuates the significance of the stage objects known as props in constructing the constellation of signs in a theatre performance.

Precisely because of its radical instability as a theatrical signifier, playwrights have seized on the prop as a tool for destabilizing the conventional symbolism previously embodied by the now ambiguous object. Although they cannot legislate the prop's impact, playwrights can seek to orchestrate the prop's movement through concrete stage space and linear stage time. They can also shape the audience's reception of the prop through dialogue and stage directions... This is especially the case during periods of semiotic crisis, when the meaning of the object the prop represents is (quite literally) up for grabs.²⁶³

According to Sofer, a prop is '*a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of the performance*'.²⁶⁴ What distinguishes a prop from other kinds of stage objects is actual *motion*—'the prop must physically move or alter in some way as a result of the actor's physical intervention'.²⁶⁵ What emerges from this physical intervention, as can be seen in Max's and Hari's handling of the remote control in *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, establishes a relationship, not only between the object and the actor but also between the audience and the theatre event in which they are participating. In other words, the motion of props gives rise to different interpretations, different meanings and prevents the crystallization of these meanings into dominant mythical speech.

It is important to stress that a prop's movement can exceed the spatial and temporal limits of one production or one play. What contributes to props' radical instability as a signifier is their ability to 'move from play to play and from period to period', to 'accrue intertextual resonance as they absorb and embody the theatrical past'.²⁶⁶ In the case of Edward Bond, a playwright whose career has spanned several decades, certain objects have moved from play to play, from period to period, and this constant self-reference weaves these objects into a network of myths whose meanings are to be made out rather than predetermined.

²⁶³ Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 61-62.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 11, original emphasis.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2. While agreeing with Sofer that motion is the prop's defining feature, and that a performance-based analysis is crucial for understanding the prop's function, I would argue that a text-based analysis does not necessarily deprive the stage objects of dynamics as Sofer claims it to be: 'Yet motion is precisely what slips from view when the prop is considered as a static symbol, whose meaning is frozen once and for all on the page, rather than as an object that creates and sustains a dynamic relationship with the audience as a given performance unfolds.' ('Preface', in *The Stage Life of Props*, vi). Whether on the page or on stage, objects can still perform their dynamics and resist frozen meaning, as I strive to demonstrate in this section.

With Bond's *Have I None* and *Chair*, the chair becomes a prop charged with mythical speech. This piece of furniture is one of Bond's most iconic and frequently used dramatic objects.²⁶⁷ In the final scene of *Saved* (1965), for instance, the character Len is seen mending a broken chair, which Bond himself describes as a gesture that is 'almost irresponsibly optimistic'.²⁶⁸ In *Have I None* and *Chair*, however, the object takes on much darker connotations. Bond's utopian impulse does not disappear but simply moves away from an 'almost irresponsibly optimistic' attitude to a more 'rational' engagement with the theatre audience.

In one of the highlight scenes of *Have I None*, Sara and Jams are engulfed in bitter bickering on the subject of the chair incident.

SARA Sometimes! I keep a diary!
 JAMS That bloody diary!
 SARA To prove what goes on! In this house you need a record! I know what happened on Friday the 22nd of June last year!
 JAMS Friday the 22nd of June?
 SARA Friday the 22nd of June! And I know the time—
 JAMS Friday the 22nd of—
 SARA You sat on -
 JAMS Liar!
 SARA You sat on—
 JAMS Never!
 SARA May I drop dead! You sat on *my* chair!
 [...]
 SARA I know you'd been sitting!
 JAMS Leant!
 SARA I can prove it!
 JAMS Leant!
 SARA I heard the leg scrape! It scraped when you got out of it! I know when a leg scrapes and when it doesn't!²⁶⁹

The contrast between Sara's meticulous, obsessive record-keeping behaviour and the eradicated past of the whole nation is striking. Without having to consult the diary, Sara is capable of recalling the exact date and time of all the trivial incidents that took place in her house, including the time when Jams sat on her chair and when Jams kicked her shoes on the 14th of September.²⁷⁰ And yet, she is conditioned not to remember whether she has a brother. At first glance, the quibble between Sara and Jams concerning the chair appears ridiculous;

²⁶⁷ For a detailed examination of the recurrent use of the 'bundle' in Bond's plays such as *Lear* and *The War Plays*, see Claude Gourg, 'The "Bundle" in Edward Bond's Plays, an Avatar of the Unspeakable "Thing"', *Études Britanniques Contemporaines. Revue de La Société D'études Anglaises Contemporaines*, no. 35 (15 December 2008).

²⁶⁸ Edward Bond, 'Author's Note', in *Saved* [1966] (London: Methuen, 2000), 5.

²⁶⁹ Bond, *Have I None*, 14-16.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

however, when the audience is reminded that, in a society where the past was abolished, all personal papers destroyed, even furniture discouraged, a utilitarian, blackwood chair becomes the most valuable object one can possess without risking being considered the enemy of the state. Sara's possessive attitude towards her personal chair, rather than being a symptom of commodity fetishism, can be interpreted as the embodiment of the whole oppressive, totalitarian system. The presence of the chair is a constant reminder of the material and spiritual impoverishment of Sara's world.²⁷¹

The meaning invoked by the chair in *Have I None*, however, changes from moment to moment according to its interaction with the actors. In an almost farcical routine in which Jams and Sara take turns to position the chair the way they like, the piece of furniture suddenly becomes a site of power and ideological struggle.

SARA *turns her chair round with its back to the table.*
SARA In future my chair faces this way! I'll eat from a tray on my lap!
JAMS *gets up and turns SARA's chair to face the table.*
SARA (*turns the chair round*) Leave it!
JAMS (*turns the chair round*) I'll have a bit of discipline!
GRIT (*examining the backpack*) He broke the snap!
SARA (*turns the chair around*) Freedom!
GRIT (*holds out the backpack*) Look!
JAMS (*turns the chair back*) Discipline!
GRIT *picks up the other chair.*
SARA/JAMS O my God.²⁷²

Many times during the play, Jams meticulously adjusts the table and the two chairs into their proper places, exact to the millimetre. Witnessing these scenes, the audience may be reminded of Hamm's compulsive need to be at the centre of the room in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957). Even though Jams has the freedom of movement that is denied to the chair-bound Hamm, both characters' obsession with a precise spatial position is a poignant expression of the stasis in their thinking, political in the case of the former and existential the latter. Jams' persistent demand for discipline in his own house through the scrupulous positioning of the furniture, on the one hand, reflects the rigorous ideological training he receives working for the army and, on the other, overturns the power relation between subject and object: it is not the furniture that is prevented from shifting from there prescribed places but Jams' capacity for critical thinking. Sara's rebellious attitude concerning the position of

²⁷¹ 'The chairs are themselves tangible, material indicators and symptoms of a world in which, robbed of their past and the relative coherence that provided for their identities and lives, spontaneous mass suicides are happening in the world outside'. See Peter Billingham, *Edward Bond: A Critical Study* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 113.

²⁷² Bond, *Have I None*, 19-20.

her chair, as such, foreshadows the radical act she is about to commit to free herself from ideological and physical oppression.

The above scene in *Have I None* is illustrative of Edward Bond's characteristic dramaturgical strategy known as Theatre Events (TEs). As Michael Patterson points out, 'While Bond's facility with language is astonishing, it is unlikely that audiences will remember much of the dialogue of any of his plays.'²⁷³ Instead, what will leave a mark on their minds is the shocking, moving or farcical images and icons that constitute TEs. In Bond's conception, TEs 'make clear the cause and consequence of events, collecting the diffuseness of real life into illustration and demonstration—not dogmatically or symbolically but still in units of conflict'.²⁷⁴ In employing TEs as a means of analytical understanding, Bond proposes a 'Rational Theatre' that is not 'the cold reasoning of conventional political discourse'²⁷⁵ but one that relies on deconstruction and *cathexis* (emotional investment) to unmake and remake mythical speech. This explains why he is especially fond of domestic mass-produced objects, for 'they have such a low fiscal value that when cathected with tragic value, when associated with matter of life and death, the chasm between social and human values open wide'.²⁷⁶

This chasm between social and human values is indeed brought to the forefront by a chair in another Bond's play that bears the title of this very object. The chair that Alice brings down to the bus stop is the embodiment of what the Welfare Officer suspects to be a 'mutation in public sentiment'.²⁷⁷ The old prisoner sees and interprets the object as a rare sign of pity in an inhuman world. Similar to what happens in *Have I None*, there are moments in which this chair functions as a prop for an almost farcical routine: the soldier descends into panic, struggling to free the chair from the prisoner, who is clinging on to the object with all her might. By the end of *Chair*, a chair is used by Alice to commit suicide, but it is also associated with the first display of mature thinking in the infantile Billy.

BILLY [...] *Picks up a chair. Goes to the other door. He puts the chair by the body. He adjusts the chair's position. He tilts the body on to the back of the chair so that it takes the weight.*

²⁷³ Michael Patterson, 'Edward Bond: Maker of Myths', in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama, 1880–2005*, ed. Mary Luckhurst (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 417.

²⁷⁴ Bond, *Bond Plays* 5, 31.

²⁷⁵ Patterson, 'Edward Bond: Maker of Myths', 417.

²⁷⁶ George Bas, 'Glossary', in *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child: Edward Bond's Plays for Young People*, ed. David Davis, trans. Alison Douthwaite (Trent & Sterling: Trentham, 2005), 204.

²⁷⁷ Bond, *Chair*, 104.

Uncomfortable watching you. (*He sits on the chair facing away from the body.*) It's hard. Couldn't sleep last night. Door open.
BILLY *leans forwards. His elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. He sighs. He sits straight upright. His head is turned away from the body. He has fallen asleep. A hammering on the door. He sleeps.*²⁷⁸

Billy's question 'Am I becoming a man?', unfortunately, will never be answered since he is killed soon after leaving the flat. Consequently, his interaction with the chair in the above scene presents a moment of possibility, but it is a short-lived moment because the social conditions of his world would not allow him to become a man. Tracing the trajectory of the chair from *Have I None* to *Chair*, it becomes clear that a simple piece of furniture functions not only as part of the materiality of a totalitarian society but also as a symbol of compassion, hope and subversive potential. The relationship between the object and its meaning is not frozen or static, despite the constant semiotisation that takes place from one moment to another. The chair in Bond's two plays not only subverts mythical speech by suggesting another contradictory meaning of an object, as with the case of the remote control in *Instructions for Correct Assembly*. It goes further in the quest of denaturalising mythical speech by creating its own constellation of meanings, its multiple myths, which make it impossible to establish any dominant, ideologically fixed meaning.

As a prop, the chair in Bond's plays moves from play to play, period to period and accumulates its meanings throughout both the playwright's career and theatre history. With Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, the prop operates not only intertextually but also acquires its reference from historical events. The extravagant hats that gradually come into existence in Act Two and culminate in the haunting procession of prisoners on their way to the incinerator are both reflections of the play's existing social insanity and warning of the coming madness that turns the whole world upside down. The association of the hat and insanity is popularised by Lewis Carroll through the character Hatter in *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* (1865). Carroll, however, did not come up with the metaphor by himself but simply personalised a popular simile in the 1860s, 'mad as a hatter', to develop his character. This colloquial phrase, which entered the common language in the 1830s, is used to describe the phenomenon of feltmakers suffering from both physical and mental ailments due to prolonged exposure to mercury.²⁷⁹ In *Far Away*, Joan and Todd work in a hat factory, but the madness with which

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁷⁹ Even though feltmakers' illnesses had been identified as early as the beginning of the 19th century, the link between mercury poisoning and these illnesses was not established and officially enquired in England until 1896. See Chris Heal, 'Alcohol, Madness and a Glimmer of Anthrax: Disease among the Felt Hatters in the Nineteenth Century', *Textile History* 44, no. 1 (May 2013): 105.

they are infected is of a different kind compared to the mercury poisoning of hatters in the nineteenth century. They have certainly lost touch with reality but, rather than being a consequence of chemical exposure, theirs is the result of ideological brainwash.

JOAN It seems so sad to burn them with the bodies.

TODD No I think that's the joy of it. The hats are ephemeral. It's like a metaphor for something or other.

JOAN Well, life.

TODD Well, life, there you are. Out of nearly three hundred hats I've made here I've only had three win and go in the museum. But that's never bothered me. You make beauty and it disappears, I love that.²⁸⁰

Joan and Todd are aware of the symbolic aspect of the hats they are making, but the meaning they assign to these objects are frozen in mythical speech: 'The hats are ephemeral', it's like a metaphor for life, 'You make beauty and it disappears.' These lines echo the same rhetoric that sublimates suffering and aggrandises heroic virtues used on Joan when she was young to mollify the trauma of her first encounter with violence.

HARPER [...] Your uncle is helping these people. He's helping them escape. He's giving them shelter. Some of them were still in the lorry, that's why they were crying. Your uncle's going to take them all into the shed and then they'll be all right.²⁸¹

Harper successfully persuades her niece that what she witnessed—her uncle hitting people with an iron bar—is a heroic act because the ones who were hit are traitors who deserve the punishment. By accepting this 'truth', Joan is 'part of a big movement now to make things better': 'You can look at the stars and think here we are in our little bit of space, and I'm on the side of the people who are putting things right, and your soul will expand right into the sky.'²⁸² It is no wonder the grown-up Joan and Todd do not question the parades/political persecutions, considering how they have been conditioned from such a young age to take pride in complicity. As long as they are 'on the side of the people who are putting things right', Joan and Todd can have a clear conscience, no matter how much violence is inflicted upon others who must belong to the other side—the wrongdoers.

The hats' increasing spectacular presence on stage is a painful reminder of the hatters' intensifying blindness to the horror of their world. There are hints about their capacity for political thinking, as can be seen in their idealistic and naive plan to expose the corruption of the hat industry in acquiring contracts. Unfortunately, such is the limit of Joan's and Todd's concern. They are incapable of recognising the real problem at stake, which is not the

²⁸⁰ Churchill, *Far Away*, 31.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 20-21.

suspected corruption but the very existence of the hat industry and the parades. The fact that Joan and Todd are raised to perceive these horrors as natural and unquestionable is a symptom of an insane world. In *Far Away*, the hatters are mad not because of their working conditions in the factory but because of their ready submission to the social conditions that make it possible to turn killing into a spectacle. Joan's and Todd's interaction with the hats would constitute a Bondian Theatre Event that shows 'how people are made to be what they are so that things can go on happening as they do, not what must happen because people are what they are.'²⁸³

Read in a larger context, the hats represent artistic creations that are completely disconnected from practical matters—'art for art's sake'—as well as the danger of art being instrumentalised to aestheticize violence. Churchill must have been fully aware of theatre's impossible situation: like the authority in Joan's world, theatre creates an event in which one can witness the aestheticization of violence as an accomplice. Many productions of *Far Away* make sure that the hats are visually appealing so that they can be enjoyed by the audience (see Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3). However, *Far Away*, as a theatre event, does not submit the hats to static mythical speech like what transpires in its dramatic world. This is because, unlike Joan and Todd, who are blind to the madness the hats represent and consume myth innocently, the audience is constantly reminded of the fact that the stage objects are part of a semiological system, not a factual one. As Roland Barthes explains:

[W]hat allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system.²⁸⁴

By staging how the hats naturalise history and empty reality, *Far Away*, like *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, *Have I None* and *Chair*, denaturalises the mythical speech imposed upon objects and transforms them into entities capable of generating their own meanings. The audience is prevented from consuming myth innocently and, being exposed to the elusiveness of the signifier, have to constantly navigate between the different meanings (functional, material, symbolic) of these objects to construct their own narrative. In the next section, I will

²⁸³ Edward Bond, 'Commentary on The War Plays', in *Bond Plays: 6: The War Plays; Choruses from After the Assassinations* (London: Methuen Drama, 2013), 339.

²⁸⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 130.

continue to demonstrate how this aporetic experience is also characteristic of the audience's encounter with the mythical figure in contemporary speculative theatre.

2. The Impossible Hero

(The Wolf from the Door—Escaped Alone)

As an archetype and a mythical signifier, the hero has continued to be a central figure in every aspect of cultural, social, political imagination. The fashion in which the hero and their quest are imagined evolves according to the specificities of each epoch, the fear and hope that occupy the public mind during different crises. In the twenty-first century, the diversification of the hero image in an attempt to disrupt the hegemonic rhetoric on gender, sexual orientation, class, race, age or disability at the core of the hero narratives can be seen as a welcoming change. The increasing visibility of minority heroes—representatives of groups of people who have been historically silenced, ignored or demonised—however, does not steer away from the original purpose of assigning the title 'hero' to an individual: that of transforming them into a symbol. The hero, as such, is constructed by mythical speech and is always meant to be instrumental to ideology. As long as the binary logic continues to define mythical speech, the hero emerges from this speech, no matter how carefully constructed they are to reflect the intersectionality of identities, inevitably empowers certain groups at the cost of others. Speaking differently, even the diversification of the hero image cannot completely overcome the narrative of exclusion.

Historical events in the twentieth century have served as a constant reminder of both the potential and danger inherent in individual hero worship, which has, in turn, contributed to the dilution of the symbolic power invested in the hero figure. There has been a tendency to confound heroism and altruism, which effectively alters the image of the hero, from someone who has a unique background and is destined to influence the course of human history, into the everyman who occasionally rises to the rank of the hero through their small but meaningful actions. This shift away from the grand narrative associated with the mythical hero constitutes another branch of hero imagination in contemporary society.

The fragmentation of the individual hero image and the popularity of micro-heroism, while successfully challenging the rigidity and exceptionalism of the traditional hero narrative, paradoxically strengthen the nostalgic desire for the universal heroic figure who is the personification of a mythological past characterised by simplicity, clarity and certainty,

rather than a hero as an emblem of the postmodern age defined by complexity and uncertainty. This explains the lasting success of the superhero franchises, which continue to capitalise on the one-dimensional hero-warrior. As a cultural agency, theatre is well aware of the potential danger of dismissing the popular desire to restore the mythical hero, for such an attitude would leave open a gap that can be exploited by any ideology. I would argue that contemporary speculative theatre presents a particularly fruitful approach in its engagement with the hero figure. Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door* and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, while adopting the grand narrative associated with the classical mythical hero narrative, still manage to create an impossible hero figure who exists at the threshold of all boundaries. The hero and heroine here are no longer reduced to the status of a symbol. In realising what Mikhail Bakhtin characterises as the 'carnival sense of the world', they signal towards the most radical form of heroic imagination invested in the outcast.

Central to the plot of Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door* is the revolution that liquidates the elites, eradicates all hierarchies and leads to the ascension to power of Leo—a homeless youth loitering at a train station. The audience is made to question the motive of Catherine, a fifty-two-year-old aristocrat who is 'extremely rich because of old money', in following and then bringing Leo home. In the beginning, Leo himself thought it was sex that Catherine wanted, then reckoned it must be because she had a dead son whom Leo resembled. When both assumptions turn out to be wrong, and the pair starts to arm themselves for a shopping trip, the audience is given a cue to leave behind all that is plausible and probable to enter a realm of the unthinkable. Leo becomes Lady Catherine's protégé and decapitates a supermarket assistant manager. They later embark on a journey across the country to realise a grand plan that would result in the rebirth of the nation.

In the character Leo, the audience can catch a glimpse of a minority hero who represents politically, economically and socially disadvantaged groups.

LEO My mother was from Africa or somewhere. I never met my dad. He was foreign too. She got pregnant before she got here and then died giving birth. I know this because I was eventually given her passport. I couldn't pronounce her name. I sold it to a man I met who makes fake passports because he said he could use the bits. I was moved from care home to care home as a boy and I insisted on being called a different name in each place so that I could choose one I liked. I've been Leo for a few years now. I heard the name cos someone once called their son it. They stopped bothering to send me to school because I kept wandering off. I don't have any qualifications because I don't need a job because I don't need to eat or sleep or drink or wash my clothes.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ Mullarkey, *The Wolf from the Door*, 18-19.

There is a clear emphasis on intersectionality in the hero Leo. Not only that he is black,²⁸⁶ an immigrant's son, an orphan, but also uneducated and homeless. At the same time, Leo is constructed with all the characteristics of a mythological hero: despite growing up in adverse circumstances, he possesses mysterious, superhuman qualities that distinguish him from the rest of humanity: he does not need to eat or sleep or drink or wash his clothes. It remains doubtful whether Leo's claim about his ability to survive without food or sleep can be taken as it is, for his behaviour betrays signs of a disturbed mind: he proposes Catherine to cup his ass-cheek a few minutes after meeting her, in the middle of a train station, breaking into tears right after callously chopping off somebody's head, only to laugh the next second. Regardless, I believe that these exaggerated details should not be interpreted from the psychological perspective to determine whether Leo is a liar or a mad man, but rather, they should be understood as instrumental in accentuating the radical otherness and otherworldliness of the hero figure in *The Wolf from the Door*. There is also a clear religious connotation in the mentioning that Leo has never known his father, which implies the possibility of him being a messianic figure with divine origin. This explains the puzzling line at the end of the first scene when Leo suddenly blurts out, 'Do you remember Jesus?'²⁸⁷ The question is completely out of context and almost obscene, considering that it is pronounced while he is pulling up his trousers after letting Catherine cup his bottom. It is, however, an important remark that directs the audience's attention towards the subsequent development of Leo as a heroic saviour.

Another element crucial to the construction of Leo's exceptionalism lies in the lack of a fixed proper name, whose permanence is essential to a person's identity formation. As it turns out, Leo insisted on being called a different name in each of the care homes he went to so that he could choose one he liked. Without a surname, Leo is also free from the symbolic order and law associated with the Lacanian name-of-the-Father. As revealed by other characters, Leo's outsider status is the reason he was chosen to be the new ruler in the new world order.

BISHOP You were chosen for this project because of who you are. You are of uncertain parentage, no fixed abode and no employment. You have no education, no qualifications, no personal ties and no possessions. You exist outside society. You have no connections or attachments to it, and so society would have it that you are mad. We would have it that you are free. You do exactly what you want, all of the time, to the extent that

²⁸⁶ In the 2014 production at the Royal Court, Calvin Demba, a black actor, is chosen to play Leo.

²⁸⁷ Mullarkey, *The Wolf from the Door*, 4.

sometimes you even do what you don't want, because you want to do what you don't want because you want to do it.

[...] The only person who can offer up any kind of true alternative is someone completely free from the inbuilt strictures of this stifling society. Someone like you.²⁸⁸

It is noticeable how negative Leo's description given by the Bishop is: instead of positive attributes, his existence is characterised by an accumulation of lacks such as uncertain parentage, no fixed abode, no employment, no education, no qualifications, no personal ties, no possessions, no connections or attachments to society.

However, since *The Wolf from the Door* takes on the form of the epic narrative of a hero's quest, Leo's radical outsider status must inevitably be resolved. According to the mythologist Joseph Campbell, the hero adventure comprises three great stages: (1) separation or departure, (2) trials and victories of initiation, and (3) return and reintegration with society.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.²⁸⁹

In the case of Leo, with his ascension to the throne after the revolution, he enters the third stage, which signals not the traditional reintegration with society but, because of his special status, the integration with society for the first time. He is now referred to as 'Lionheart', a surname Leo chose himself but is also an epithet historically linked to Richard I of England (1157-1199). It is unclear whether Leo was aware of this association when he picked the name; however, the mere fact that he is, for the first time in his life, identified by a fixed 'surname', indicates the loss not only of his status as someone outside of society but also of his radical freedom in the face of the symbolic order of language.

Nevertheless, *The Wolf from the Door* does suggest a way to emancipate the hero from the paralysing force of mythical speech. By creating an extraordinary situation meant to test the idea of a radically different political system governed by a hero-outcast, the play makes extensive use of the tradition of Menippean satire to resist any finalisation of meaning. The term 'Menippean satire' was first employed by Varro, a Roman author living in the first century BCE, to describe his own writings but also to acknowledge the influence of the Greek Cynic Menippus (third century BCE) on his style. As a protean and durable genre, Menippean satire has continuously evolved and adapted throughout ancient times, the Middle

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

²⁸⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* [1949] (California: New World Library, 2008), 23.

Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and well into the present.²⁹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, who, together with Northrop Frye, is often credited for the revitalisation of academic interest in the genre in the latter half of the twentieth century, contends that Menippean satire is ‘one of the main carriers and channels of the carnival sense of the world in literature.’²⁹¹ He also provides a detailed list of Menippean satire’s characteristics, which are: (1) the prominence of comic elements; (2) extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention; (3) extraordinary situations; (4) the combination of various fantastic, symbolic, mystical-religious elements with slum naturalism; (5) philosophical universalism; (6) a three-planned construction of heaven/Olympus-earth-the nether world; (7) experimental fantasticality made possible by observation from some unusual point of view; (8) moral-psychological experimentation; (9) scandal scenes, eccentric behaviour, inappropriate speeches and performances; (10) sharp contrasts and oxymoronic combinations; (11) elements of social utopia; (12) inserted genres and a mixture of prose and poetic speech; (13) a multi-toned and multi-styled nature; and finally, (14) a concern with current and topical issues.²⁹² All these heterogeneous elements are bound together by one principle, which is a carnival sense of the world.²⁹³ In Bakhtin’s view, the carnival sense of the world is deemed highly political because of its ability to generate an atmosphere of ‘joyful relativity’ that fundamentally changes the rhetorical element in any genre of the seriocomical: ‘there is a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism’.²⁹⁴ With the carnival sense of the world, freedom is not just contemplated upon as something abstract but materialises in the form of the carnivalized text and performance.

The Wolf from the Door, as a postmodern Menippean satire, is pervasive with a carnival sense of the world. The revolution brings together people from all walks of life, from nightclub bouncer, Polish builder, angry rude-boy, lady who lunches, unpaid intern, to over-seventies golfer, seven-year-old scout boy, clockmaker, and choirmaster. This free familiar contact among people gives rise to a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, which transcends hierarchical barriers. Eccentricity is no longer frowned upon but taken as it is: a pair of English Civil War reenactors in full Roundhead regalia can be seen casually

²⁹⁰Jonathan Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 70.

²⁹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 113.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 114-18.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

having supper at a service station in the middle of nowhere. Carnavalesque *mésalliances*—the combination of the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid—regularly emerge to the extent that it is no longer surprising to know that Catherine and her friends do not actually drink coffee at her coffee morning but discuss the violent overthrow of the government, besides practising flower arranging. The audience is also presented with all kinds of profanation imaginable, from the Bishop of Bath and Wales pondering over the best method to commit suicide to the carnivalesque parody of a king and the messianic figure.

Here, I will only focus on analysing the carnival sense of the world emanating from the hero figure of *The Wolf from the Door*. Unlike Richard the Lionheart, who goes down in history as a symbol of male virility, Leo Lionheart is infantile and prefers to be told what to do. The disparity between the signifier—‘Lionheart’—and the signified—Leo—disrupts the logic of identification. In the last scene, the carnival excess is not only perceptible in the words or actions of the characters but also visually overwhelming.

*A huge throne room. Garish colours, glitter and gold. Two bizarrely dressed COURTIERs stand flanking a gigantic throne. A very, very weird fanfare plays. LEO enters, rubbing his eyes. He is dressed in a bizarre kind of cape, carrying a sceptre and wearing a monstrous crown. There is a massive portrait on the wall of LEO wearing exactly the same outfit.*²⁹⁵

Everything is pushed to the extreme, as can be seen in the qualifiers employed in the stage direction—‘huge’, ‘garish’, ‘gigantic’, ‘bizarre’, ‘monstrous’, ‘massive’. It is in this last scene that the audience sees two versions of Leo—one frozen in an image, the same way he is frozen by the mythical speech in its attempt to construct a hero symbol; the other a ruler with ‘utterly impregnable power’ who wishes there is someone to tell him not to cry. On the one hand, Leo performs the role of a dictator who transforms the world into a never-ending carnival. As a king, he introduces a series of absurd and contradictory laws, such as deciding skateboards to be the only method of transport to reduce carbon emissions, reopening coal mines, replacing mobile phones with a large network of cups joined together by pieces of string, naming steak and kidney pie the new national dish, or designating ‘Mermaid Wednesday’ when everyone is required to dress up as a mermaid and only talks to each other in a made-up mermaid language.²⁹⁶ On the other hand, the measures Leo arbitrarily came up with, while bearing traits of infantile insanity, can also be interpreted as a form of resistance against the ‘inbuilt strictures of this stifling society’ and the rigid logic of identity specifically

²⁹⁵ Mullarkey, *The Wolf from the Door*, 45-46.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

linked to the hero-leader figure. Without any experience in governance, not to mention his apparent intellectual limitation, Leo is the least suitable candidate to lead a country. Yet, he is eager to listen to the daily progress report, and his child-like innocence makes it possible for him to empathise more with the suffering of others. When he is told that the realm has suffered its first suicide, Leo orders to build the deceased's family a new house, sending them a basket of puppies and exempting them from Mermaid Wednesday that week so that they can grieve.²⁹⁷ Leo Lionheart is a paradoxical hero: he is far from being the leader one would imagine leading a country; at the same time, he possesses personality traits that would make him a highly considerate ruler.

Drawing on the tradition of Menippean satire, *The Wolf from the Door* manages to construct an impossible hero who exists at the threshold. By the end of the play, Leo is no longer the outcast but has been integrated with society; nevertheless, such integration does not completely destroy the radical freedom associated with his outsider status. His insanity, or his 'carnival sense of the world', liberates him from the confinement of any single heroic imagination. It is as Bakhtin remarks:

Dreams, daydreams, insanity destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of a person and his fate: the possibilities of another person and another life are revealed in him, he loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; he ceases to coincide with himself.²⁹⁸

Postmodern Menippean satire is political not because it identifies and ridicules the negative aspects of either an individual or a specific group of people but due to its ability to maintain its sophistic aporia: it 'offers no single authoritative view and tends to conclude uncertainly, without any statement or dramatization of positive values.'²⁹⁹ The construction of the hero, as a result, becomes one of the sites where this sophistic aporia³⁰⁰ and uncertainty play out. Leo in *The Wolf from the Door* is the kind of Menippean hero who is heroic because he can evoke

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁹⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 116-17.

²⁹⁹ Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire*, 70.

³⁰⁰ It is an important point that in his examination of the serio-comical, Bakhtin juxtapose the Socratic dialogue against the Menippean satire, which are conventionally considered to derive from two incongruent traditions: the anti-sophistic tradition of the former and the sophistic tradition of the latter. However, the Socratic dialogue mentioned here specifically refers to Plato's early dialogues, which still emphasise on the dialogic nature of truth and of human thinking about truth. This Socratic dialogue, according to Bakhtin, cannot be found in the final period of Plato's work since it 'entered the service of the established, dogmatic worldviews of various philosophical schools and religious doctrines' and was 'transformed into a simple form of expounding already found, ready-made irrefutable truth' and 'degenerated completely into a question-and-answer form for training neophytes (catechism)'. In other words, the subversive power of both the Socratic dialogue and the Menippean satire resides in their sophistic aporia, which leaves open rather than foreclosing interpretation. See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 110.

an ambivalent interaction between basic oppositions of traditional logic and subvert the binary structure of mythical speech that conjured him up.

We encounter another hero figure who exists at the threshold and exerts a similar subversive impact in Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*. What is most noticeable about the structure of *Escaped Alone* is the jarring oscillation between two dramatic worlds: the small talks in the backyard of four women in their seventies are repeatedly interrupted as the stage goes black and Mrs Jarrett emerges from darkness to deliver her apocalyptic monologues.³⁰¹ To better understand the intention behind the juxtaposition of two drastically different narratives, we need to return to the title of the play, *Escaped Alone*, which derives from a biblical source: 'And I only am escaped alone to tell thee,' Originally found in the *Book of Job*, where it is repeated four times by Job's servants to report the misfortunes that befell him, the quote makes a prominent return in the epilogue of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). In the play text of *Escaped Alone*, the quote appears in the prologue and is attributed to both the *Book of Job* and *Moby Dick*.

'I only am escaped alone to tell thee.'
Book of Job. Moby Dick.

It becomes clear from the beginning that the quotation in *Escaped Alone* is both intertextual and metatextual. I would argue that there is an intention to provide a third-level reading, which includes critical commentaries not only on the Book of Job but also on the way Melville employs it in his novel (the second-level reading). To understand the role assigned to Mrs Jarrett in *Escaped Alone*, it is, therefore, essential to refer to both Job's servants and Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*.

If the Biblical Ishmael is an outcast condemned to wander the wilderness, Melville's Ishmael is tested by the sea and emerges as the only survivor of the wreck. It is generally agreed that there are at least two Ishmaels situated in two different temporal planes: a narrator and an active participant in the story (or a character) that the former recalls retrospectively. It is also noticeable how, in *Moby-Dick*, the marginal figure of the messenger in the Book of Job is transformed into 'a pivotal poetic model inseparable from that of Job'.³⁰² Unlike the messengers in Job who make their brief entrance to announce in a few words the various disasters that destroy Job's world, Ishmael plays the role of a primary witness whose

³⁰¹ Here I refer to the 2016 production at the Royal Court.

³⁰² Ilana Pardes, *Melville's Bibles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 33.

testimony and voice are the foundation upon which the whole novel is built. This Ishmael-centric approach accommodates a reading in which Ishmael is perceived as a national ideal. However, Robert T. Tally Jr. argues that the narrative voice of Ishmael, far from being monologic, is polyphonic and, rather than being the Adamic American hero, Ishmael is a ‘figure that accompanies concepts, a figure through whom thought moves’.³⁰³ Consequently, the monological Ishmael should not be taken seriously since he is but a ‘carnavalesque parody’ used by Melville to poke fun at the authorities and the concept of authority.³⁰⁴

It appears that Caryl Churchill has taken after Melville in her intention to unsettle the monologic authority of the hero-witness’s words through the use of parody. Nevertheless, the carnivalesque in *Escaped Alone* is pushed to the extreme, which not only dismantles the logocentric certainty of the witness’s narrative but also brings into relief the fact that language completely loses its sense-making function in the face of unthinkable, global-scaled sufferings. Just as there are two Ishmael, there are two Mrs Jarrett in *Escaped Alone*: Mrs J, who indulges in trivial exchanges with three other women in a typical English backyard and Mrs J, the narrator. The play opens and ends with Mrs Jarrett directly addressing the audience, which indicates that she is completely aware of her status as a narrator and performer.

I’m walking down the street and there’s a door in the fence open and inside are three women I’ve seen before.³⁰⁵
[...]
And then I said thanks for the tea and I went home.³⁰⁶

While the other three characters are enclosed in the dramatic world of the backyard for most of the time,³⁰⁷ Mrs J has the ability to cross both spatial and temporal boundaries to gain temporary access to incompatible spaces and times. In the 2016 production at the Royal Court, London and the 2017 production at BAM Harvey Theater, New York, thanks to Miriam Buether’s stage design, the threshold status of Mrs J is visually perceptible. In both the beginning and the end of the play, there is a fence that divides the stage into two. As a result, Mrs J occupies an uncertain space that belongs to neither the space of the dramatic backyard nor the non-dramatic space of the audience. In the like manner, during the intervals,

³⁰³ Robert T. Tally, ‘Anti-Ishmael: Novel Beginnings in *Moby-Dick*’, *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 18, no. 1 (2007): 8.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³⁰⁵ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 5.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁰⁷ There are moments in which each of the three characters seems to be transposed to the inner world of their mind and physical time is frozen as they deliver long monologues about their fear, anxiety, and trauma.

she is situated between two burning red frames against the total darkness of the stage while delivering her apocalyptic monologues (See Figure 4). The two frames divide the theatre's space into three planes of reality that extend into two opposing directions: the darkness behind Mrs J belongs to the apocalyptic world simultaneously invoked and obscured by her description, while the space in front of her belongs to that of the audience.

Mrs J's testimonies, unlike those of Job's servants and Ishmael's, do not concern with the sudden disasters that befell a particular individual or group of people but a chain of fantastic and grotesque man-made catastrophes that have ravaged the whole planet.

MRS J 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. The entire food stock of Newcastle was won by lottery ticket and the winner taken to a 24 hour dining room where fifty chefs chopped in relays and the public voted on what he should eat next. 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. Finally the starving stormed the tv centres and were slaughtered and smoked in large numbers. Only when cooking shows were overtaken by sex with football teams did cream trickle back to the shops and rice was airlifted again.³⁰⁸

The stage design during Mrs J's monologues is devised to maximise the impact of her words. These words, meant to invoke vivid images of an apocalyptic world, fulfil the role of *ekphrasis*, not in the limited modern definition of the term but in its original understanding. While recent scholarship tends to limit the definition of ekphrasis to literary representation of visual art, in late antiquity, the term was associated with the skill of scene-painting in the broadest sense, employed in all the major genres—epic, lyric poetry, pastoral, drama, history and romance.³⁰⁹ Ekphrasis plays an important role in the sophistic method of the second and third centuries, and its fullest expression can be found in the *Imagines* by Philostratus. In these works, ekphrasis 'functions not only as an elegant literary *topos* but also as a sophistic critique of the epistemological stability of viewing—a critique intended to unmask both the deceptions of mimetic illusionism and the assumed correspondence between representation and reality'.³¹⁰ What is particular about the ekphrasis in *Escaped Alone* is that, despite its vivid language, what emerges are not descriptions that impact the mind's eye of the listener so intensely that they feel as if they were present at the events described. On the contrary, the audience's ability to visualise is simultaneously encouraged and hindered by Mrs J's

³⁰⁸ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 22.

³⁰⁹ Frank J. D'Angelo, 'The Rhetoric of Ekphrasis', *JAC* 18, no. 3 (1998): 446.

³¹⁰ Diana Shaffer, 'Ekphrasis and the Rhetoric of Viewing in Philostratus's *Imaginary Museum*', *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 31, no. 4 (1998): 303.

monologues. There is an overload of information and details, but these details are too outrageous and extreme to allow any realistic images to be formed. It is, therefore, better to characterise these descriptions as ‘negative ekphrasis’—a term coined by Marjorie Perloff that refers to verbal evocations being intentionally incommensurate with the visual object and vice versa to ‘problematise the process of perception itself’.³¹¹ Consequently, this negative ekphrasis also problematises the identity of Mrs J: ‘Is Mrs Jarrett a hardy survivor? A delusional lunatic? A gifted sci-fi storyteller? Or just a woman expressing acute anxiety about modern afflictions, heightened all the way into absurdity?’³¹² The answer is left to the interpretation of each audience member, and there is no way to confirm which possibility is more plausible or probable than others.

In both the cases of Leo in *The Wolf from the Door* and Mrs Jarrett in *Escaped Alone*, there is an attempt to unsettle the hero’s and heroine’s identity markers, which reflects speculative theatre’s cautious attitude towards identity politics. The focus on identifiable identities has indeed been proved to be essential for social progress, but its limitation lies in the fact that there are ‘certain important parts and aspects of us all that have no individuated, isolable identity’.³¹³ As a result, ‘only those identifiable as belonging to some definite group are recognized as warranting protection and perhaps even compensatory privileges’³¹⁴ while those without a label risk not being even considered as existing.³¹⁵ Furthermore, as Walsh and Causey argue, we are at a stage where ‘neoliberal culture has absorbed any agency that politicized identities were once presumed to have’ and capitalism ‘does not simply respond to

³¹¹ Marjorie Perloff, ‘The Demise of “and”’: Reflections on Robert Smithson’s Mirrors’, *Critical Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (September 1990): 81–82.

³¹² Sophie Gilbert, “‘Escaped Alone’ Finds Comfort at the End of the World’, *The Atlantic*, 21 February 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/02/escaped-alone-caryl-churchill-bam/517191/>.

³¹³ William Franke, ‘A Negative Theological Critique of Postmodern Identity Politics’, *Religions* 10, no. 488 (August 2019): 2.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ Judith Butler is among contemporary thinkers who work to raise awareness on the risk of identity politics. She writes, ‘As much as it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse. This is not an argument against using identity categories, but it is a reminder of the risk that attends every such use. The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself: by the history of the usages that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblemizes autonomy; by the future efforts to deploy the term against the grain of the current ones, and that will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course of the terms in the present.’ See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 227–28.

identity distinctiveness but cultivates it for its own purposes'.³¹⁶ It is not difficult to find examples that show how capitalists and contemporary politicians exploit identity distinctiveness to incite antagonistic behaviour among different groups.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that speculative theatre does not seek to abolish all identities through the construction of an ambiguous hero/heroine figure. The function of characters such as Leo or Mrs Jarrett is to emphasise the need to overcome the limitations of fixed identity categories. While the struggles under the banner of identity are, in most cases, noble fights, we are to be reminded that fighting for our own identity is not exclusive of another identity, and this openness to another identity is what prevents totalitarianism, nationalism or egocentrism.³¹⁷ Rather than pursuing the affirmation and consolidation of a certain identity, it will be more fruitful to examine the nonidentity aspect shared by all living beings. Theodor Adorno's 'nonidentity' has often been misinterpreted as counter-identity (transconceptual particularity) or no-identity (radical negation of every identity). Such understandings prove to be problematic, for they perceive nonidentity either as a transcendental space existing outside of all social, historical constraints and codifications or as a space of indifference where all distinctions are eradicated. From the ethico-political point of view, both ways of interpreting nonidentity are detrimental to those exiled from identity. For Adorno, to contest the coercive character of identity, nonidentity should not be a separate, external space in relation to identity, nor is it to be depleted of all identities. As Fred Dallmayr argues, 'the turn toward nonidentity—as performed by Adorno—heralds not a retreat into indifferent vacuity but instead the encounter and contestation of distinct or differentiated identities, an encounter marked by a reciprocal transgression of self-enclosure'.³¹⁸ The condition of nonidentity does not exclude reconciliation; yet, this reconciled state 'would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own'.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Fintan Walsh and Matthew Causey, 'Introduction: Performance, Identity, and the Neo-Political Subject', in *Performance, Identity, and the Neo-Political Subject*, ed. Fintan Walsh and Matthew Causey (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

³¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 13-4.

³¹⁸ Fred Dallmayr, 'The Politics of Nonidentity: Adorno, Postmodernism, And Edward Said', *Political Theory* 25, no.1 (1997): 38.

³¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York & London: Continuum, 2007), 191.

This note on nonidentity serves both as the final remark of the current chapter and an introduction of the next. Throughout this chapter, I have examined how speculative theatre engages with both particular myth narratives and the general form of mythical speech. On the one hand, we are presented with several binary oppositions, such as the two opposing modes of apocalyptic imagination (a violent end versus a whimpering end), the emancipatory-oppressive potential of political myths or the two aspects of the Inhuman in neoliberal capitalist society. Speculative theatre's treatment of these binaries gives rise to a sophistic aporia—a state of perplexity and a suspension of judgement. This aporetic experience provides the audience with an opportunity to rethink their preconception of various myths but also of discourses enmeshed in mythical speech, including discourses on the end, revolutionary politics, equality, happiness and progress. On the other hand, speculative theatre's attempt to liberate the mythical object and hero from the frozen mythical speech presents itself as a Derridean aporia, since the condition of the theatre medium enables demythicisation is also the condition that makes remythicisation inevitable. However, both types of aporetic expressions in speculative theatre's mythopoeia manage to maintain an open and dynamic relationship between the audience and myth: the audience is no longer passive consumers but active participants in the process of myth-making, constructing their own narrative and drawing their own conclusion from the multiplicity of meanings with which they are presented. The fact that many speculative plays withhold an affirmative, constructive conclusion, therefore, should not be understood as escapist or relativist but an invitation extended to the audience to find a way out of the impasse they encounter. It is generally agreed that myth is indispensable in the construction of human identities. What speculative theatre suggests is not the abolish of myth but a different, utopian mode of myth-making and consuming grounded in aporia. Instead of fixed identities, its mythopoeia gives rise to nonidentity, through a commitment to nonidentity thinking. As a result of this resistance against the single-minded interpretation of the world, myth is denaturalised and repoliticised.

The interruption of the mythical language and its fixed identity categories is crucial for a new mode of living-together—a utopian community that is not a project to be realised or a product to be made but one that comes with the unmaking of identity-based communities. In Chapter 3, I will examine various strategies employed by speculative theatre to bring into relief the (im)possibility of nonidentity relationships. Once again, several binary pairs come into focus: the human and the non-human (animals and robots), perpetrator and victim, oppressor and the oppressed. In Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* and Stef Smith's *Human*

Animals, there seems to be a reversed hierarchy in the way humans and animals are portrayed: while the spectralisation of animals gives them the power to haunt and cause anxiety, human characters, in turn, perform the role of the comic, parochial animal. Similarly, in Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, man's status as a master of discourse is threatened by the unpredictability of the robots—entities that are supposed to be fully programmable and controllable but who turn out to have a life of their own. It is interesting to observe the resemblance in techniques used to dominate non-human beings and those imposed upon the marginalised and dispossessed human populations. Through linguistic determinism and actual objectification, Edward Bond's *The Under Room* and Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* disclose the extent to which dehumanisation has been normalised in contemporary society. However, it is also suggested that the dispossessed are not helpless victims of bio- and thanato-politics but individuals who consciously work to regain their agency, either by transforming their mutilated body into a gift or in the controversial act of suicide (as can be seen in Edward Bond's *Have I None* and *Chair*). In its treatment of all these binary oppositions, speculative theatre problematises the dogmatic understanding of power relations between different identities and exposes the instability in the definition of these identities. Instead of *communitas* or identity-based community, speculative theatre proposes another form of living-together known as *idiorrhymy*. This quasi-community, characterised by a multiplicity of voices and rhythms and a fluid boundary between individuality and collectivity, is also the utopian community that speculative theatre strives to create with its audience.

CHAPTER 3. RETHINKING COMMUNITY—THE APORIA OF LIVING TOGETHER

I. BECOMING ANIMAL, BECOMING MACHINE

In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann mentions post-anthropocentric theatre as one of the forms that postdramatic theatre can take. Unlike the dramatic theatre that revolves around human characters and human concerns, the post-anthropocentric theatres are ‘the theatre of objects entirely without human actors, theatre of technology and machinery [...], and theatre that integrates the human form mostly as an element in landscape-like spatial structures’.³²⁰ These descriptions recall the *postorganic* performance advocated by Futurist artists in the 1920s. As Matthew Causey remarks, ‘If we can read in the Futurist plays the displeasure of traditional models of identity and a clear anger at society there is also a large element of privileging plasticity, machinery and objecthood over the human.’³²¹ This prioritisation of the non-human over the human, while not completely excluding human actors, transforms them into just another element of the landscape, whose significance is no different from that of an animal, a plant or a rock. The actor in Futurist performance was ‘often de-centred, mechanized and altered through costumes, becoming an integrated element of the *mise-en-scène*, fully immersed or embedded in the picture’,³²² as can be seen in the metalisation of the actor’s body in Depero’s *Macchina del 3000* (1924) and Ivo Pannaggi’s *Balletti Meccanici* (1919), for instance.³²³

Based on this characterisation, contemporary speculative theatre can hardly be considered post-anthropocentric. However, I would argue that despite the prominence of the human body on stage and the lack of emphasis on the visual representation of the nonhuman,

³²⁰ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 81. One recent example of this form of object-oriented performance is Forced Entertainment’s *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*, originally conceived in 2015. In *Complete Works*, ‘six performers create condensed versions of all of the Shakespeare plays, comically and intimately retelling them, using a collection of everyday objects as stand-ins for the characters on the one metre stage of an ordinary table top’. See ‘Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare’, *Forced Entertainment*, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://www.forcedentertainment.com/projects/complete-works-table-top-shakespeare/>. However, it is also important to note that the appeal of these performances still very much derives from the human narrator and the audience’s ability to associate certain objects with certain characters. In other words, despite the lack of human actors, the general outlook here is very much anthropocentric.

³²¹ Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 84.

³²² *Ibid.*, 86.

³²³ In these performances, costuming with geometric machine forms is used to reconfigure the human body to create the effect of humanoid machines, robots, or cyborgs.

many speculative plays present an alternative approach to the human-versus-nonhuman dichotomy. Stef Smith's *Human Animals* and Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone* invoke the spectral presence of animals through language instead of bringing visible living animals on stage. Even when real animals are brought to the stage, as is the case of the insects in *Human Animals*, because of their discrete size, these animals give rise to a sense of presence-absence that troubles perception rather than providing any straightforward affirmation. This spectralisation temporarily reverses the hierarchy of power relation between humans and animals, as it is the latter that observe and haunt the former. Even though animals are not directly visible, their 'presence' can be perceived clearly through the traces they left on the human body and the effect they exert on human behaviour (more specifically, in the way they bring out the comic animal aspect of human beings). As a result of this dramaturgical strategy, the interdependence of human and nonhuman animals is brought into relief. In these speculative plays, we get a glimpse of another type of post-anthropocentric theatre, one that does not require transforming the human into the nonhuman or eliminating human actors and human struggles altogether in its quest for representing the radical alterity of the nonhuman. More than a power relation, what *Human Animals*, *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone* propose is a relationship of care based on nonidentity thinking. Such a relationship acknowledges and preserves the difference and distance of nonhuman animals without either annexing and reducing them to comic surrogates or abolishing the human dimension essential for any meaningful theatre experience.

In the like manner, speculative theatre's treatment of artificial intelligence and robots reveals an acute awareness of the aporia of the ethical, non-anthropocentric portrayal of the nonhuman. There is little focus on highlighting the visual difference of the robots in Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, as these roles are played by human actors who dress the same as other human characters. What sets the robots apart, as such, is not so much their mechanical appearance³²⁴ but their particular speech pattern. As programmable machines, these beings can only repeat what their owner wants to hear and are supposed to be fully subservient. In an attempt to reclaim agency for these nonhuman beings, speculative theatre draws our attention to the moments of rupture when the robot's voice escapes human control, either as a result of the irony and uncertainty of meaning in their repeated words or the unpredictability of speech caused by

³²⁴ In *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, there are scenes in which the audience witnesses the process of putting the android together but once he is assembled, his look is indistinguishable from that of the human son he is supposed to replace.

some machinery malfunction. This autonomy, however, does not mean that the robots have become more human, as usually implied in earlier speculative plays such as Alan Ayckbourn's *Henceforward...*(1987) and *Comic Potential* (1998), for instance. Contemporary speculative theatre's post-anthropocentric outlook is utopian because it dwells on uncertainty, pointing toward the possibility of reconciling the human and the nonhuman without having to sacrifice one to advance the other. Human beings do not have to be presented as mere background or pulled out of the performance. Likewise, animals do not need to undergo anthropomorphism, or intelligent machines behave and think like humans for these nonhuman beings to be cared for. Rather than erasing the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, *Human Animals*, *Far Away*, *Escaped Alone*, *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, and *Really Old, Like Forty Five* interrogate the inconsistency of binary identity categories. As Lehmann points out, 'When human bodies join with objects, animals and energy lines into a single reality [...], theatre makes it possible to imagine a reality other than that of man dominating nature.'³²⁵ Contemporary speculative theatre's approach to the human-nonhuman interaction, despite the appearance of being traditional (anthropocentric) dramatic representation, is the kind of approach that makes it possible to imagine a different (post-anthropocentric) reality of coexistence.

1. *The Spectral and the Comic Animal*

(*Far Away—Human Animals—Escaped Alone*)

In *Theatre and Animals*, Lourdes Orozco proposes several examples to illustrate the dilemma of an ethical response to animal representation on stage, among which is *After Sun* by the Spanish theatre-maker Roderigo Garcia in 2001. Halfway through the performance, the audience is introduced to a scene in which an actor mimes sex acts with two live rabbits. In a subsequent scene, a hamburger is cooked on stage. The reaction kindled by these two scenes could not be more contrasting: if the former was perceived as unacceptable mistreatment of animals and resulted in about one-third of the audience walking out in protest, the latter was received in a rather matter-of-fact manner, and there was not a single protest or walk-out. Orozco remarks, 'the spectators could not relate to the body of an animal that was no longer visible. The animal had become food, and that, somehow, seemed more acceptable

³²⁵ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 81.

than the mistreatment of live rabbits'.³²⁶ In other words, the reduction of a living animal into a piece of meat obliterates the act of killing, therefore, renders the animal's suffering invisible, which consequently makes the logic of murder possible. In this particular instance, the visibility of the animal (living and moving) body appears to be a more effective approach to generate an instant and intense ethical response from the audience.

This does not come as a surprise, for embodiment has increasingly been seen as a useful strategy to bring into relief the link between human and nonhuman animals. Thinking based on shared embodiedness, or 'creaturely thinking',³²⁷ to borrow the term from Anat Pick, focuses on the commonality of vulnerability, mortality and fragility inherent in the material body of both human and nonhuman animals rather than on the numerous differences that distinguish the former from the latter. As such, creaturely thinking opens up the door to new ethics and new politics that are capable of dealing more effectively with problems arising from human-nonhuman interactions. Nevertheless, the attempt to overcome the categorical distinction that is the basis of speciesism,³²⁸ to identify the animal within all humans through embodiment, proves to be a path replete with obstacles. Cora Diamond aptly remarks:

The awareness we each have of being a living body, being 'alive to the world', carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them. This vulnerability is capable of panicking us. To be able to acknowledge it at all, let alone as shared, is wounding; but acknowledging it as shared with other animals, in the presence of what we do to them, is capable not only of panicking one but also of isolating one [...].³²⁹

It can be speculated that among the audience members who walked out during the mimed sex scene of the actor and two rabbits in *After Sun*, there must be some who were disturbed by what they saw and whose reaction was prompted by an overwhelming desire to gain distance from the source of distress. In other words, in acknowledging the shared vulnerability between humans and animals, they also suffered from a panic attack that drove them to isolate themselves. While such a conjecture on the psychological state of these spectators remains contentious because of the lack of hard evidence, there was one concrete example that illuminates the paradoxical nature in the protest of the audience against what they

³²⁶ Lourdes Orozco, *Theatre and Animals* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 2.

³²⁷ See Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics—Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7.

³²⁸ 'Speciesism', according to Joan Dunayer, refers to 'the assumption that other animals are inferior to humans and do not warrant equal consideration and respect'. See Joan Dunayer, 'Sexist Words, Speciesist Roots', in *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999), 11.

³²⁹ Cora Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy', in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, by Stanley Cavell et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 74.

perceive as abusive treatment of animals. As Orozco observed, one viewer went as far as to shout ‘Animals!’ from the back of the theatre as an insult to the actor and Garcia’s creative team.³³⁰ It is an irony that in the manifestation of their concern for the two rabbits’ well-being, this audience member resorted to the word ‘animal’ in its most derogatory sense and consequently forced the subject of their care under the age-old violence of language. The juxtaposition of the two scenes in *After Sun*—the mimed sexual mistreatment and the hamburger cooking—also highlights the danger of animal embodiment on stage, as the audience took a mimetic act of violence seriously while turning a blind eye to the slaughter that actually transpired and the process of reification that transforms a living being to an object for consumption.³³¹

From this point of departure, we return to the British scene and realise that the decision of many contemporary British playwrights and directors to resist the use of real animals on stage derives from their wish not only to steer away from the scrutiny of various animal rights groups³³² but also to discover other more effective means of representation in which animals can regain agency. Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* (2000) and *Escaped Alone* (2016), as well as Stef Smith’s *Human Animals* (2016), are plays that consciously resist the visual imperative of theatre and instead adopt a seemingly counterintuitive approach in focusing on language in their animal representation.³³³ Such an approach appears to be counterintuitive, firstly, because, in the encounter with the animal, human language has been proved to be an ineffective tool. As noted by Akira Lippit:

³³⁰ Orozco, *Theatre and Animals*, 2.

³³¹ The decision to put living animals back into theatre and performance by many innovative twenty-first-century theatre directors does not resolve the aporia of animal representation. On the one hand, ‘putting an animal on to the stage necessitates training the living animal out of his or her bodily reactions and behavioural inclinations’ and, as such, reaffirms the right of humans to dominate other animals. On the other hand, it is undeniable that ‘staging the living animal can halt the automatic absorption of theatre’s anthropocentric emotionalism’ because the animal ‘can seem to bodily stand outside the human to human emotional exchange’. See Peta Tait, ‘Animals in Drama and Theatrical Performance: Anthropocentric Emotionalism’, *Animal Studies Journal* 9, no. 2 (December 2020): 229.

³³² Jamie Lloyd’s revival of *Richard III* in 2014 has a scene in which Clarence is drowned in a tank containing a goldfish, which causes the water and sediment to churn up. After the protest from PETA, the director decided to dispense with the fish, even though the director assured that he had taken expert advice to ensure the fish’s well-being. See Lyn Gardner, ‘Animals on Stage—Should We Allow It?’, *The Guardian*, 15 September 2014, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/sep/15/theatre-animals-on-stage-should-we-allow-it>.

³³³ Stef Smith’s *Human Animals* is an exception, for it still employs live insects on stage. Yet, many of the spectators are not aware of the existence of these animals until they are told, which means that despite their presence, the animals remain relatively invisible.

[I]f the animal is said to lack language, to represent the site of radical alterity, then words cannot circumscribe the being of animals as animals. The contact between language and the animal marks a limit of figurability, a limit of the very function of language'.³³⁴

Secondly, the spectralisation of animals—rendering them invisible yet present—can also be interpreted as another form of dispossession and denying them the agency very much needed for their emancipation from human domination. In this section, I would like to advance my argument that *Far Away*, *Escaped Alone* and *Human Animals* position these two concerns at the heart of their conception and production. Rather than proposing a simple reversal in the power hierarchy between human and nonhuman animals, these plays envision the possibility of 'becoming animal' through two strategies: the spectralisation of nonhuman animals, on the one hand, and the emphasis on portraying changes in the human mind/behaviour/body as a result of their interaction with these spectral animals, on the other. The 'animal' in 'becoming animal' invokes 'the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity'³³⁵ (and by extension, the violence and willful ignorance behind this homogenisation) but also Derrida's *animot*, which is neither a species nor a gender nor an individual but 'an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals', 'a sort of monstrous hybrid', a chimaera.³³⁶ As a result, the utopian dimension of this 'becoming animal'—understood as a form of nonidentity relationality—is at once aporetic, for identity thinking (the distinction between human and nonhuman animals) is the condition that makes it both possible and impossible to foster nonidentity relationships between the two identities.

It must be emphasised that Churchill's and Smith's take on language in the three plays mentioned above is never meant to affirm the ability of words and narrative in capturing the animal as it is; on the contrary, they strive to destabilise language and dismantle the violence it has imposed on animals. The primacy of language in these plays enables a move toward subverting the symbolic, allegorical and metaphorical significance usually assigned to animals and generates a paradigm shift in the anthropo-logocentric approach to animal representation on stage. The comic effect emerging from these narratives, accordingly, has nothing to do with subjecting animals to semiotic derogation, as is often the case with traditional animal comedy.³³⁷ If there is an animal to be laughed at in these three plays, it is

³³⁴ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis & London: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 163.

³³⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 415.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 409.

³³⁷ By 'traditional animal comedy', I refer to the type of comedy in which animal characters are heavily anthropomorphised and the narrative they help generate has nothing to do with the animals themselves.

the human characters whose behaviour is ludicrously absurd and inconsistent with the claim of superiority founded upon the human privilege of rationality. Likewise, the spectralisation of animals, far from depriving them of agency, in reality, unsettles the normative, hierarchical power relation between human and nonhuman animals based on visual authority. The spectral nonhuman animal, when leaving its mark on the human body, in placing a strong emphasis on mutual embodiment, is also capable of initiating a profound reflection on a human-nonhuman relation that exceeds the common anthropocentric way of thinking about relationality.

In the third and final act of Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, the world has descended into complete chaos, and everyone, everything, is at war against each other—a total war that involves not only human beings but also animals and natural phenomena. The two characters Harper and Todd are seen discussing who their allies and enemies are supposed to be. When it comes to the deer, Harper gives the audience a curiously aporetic description.

HARPER [...] Because [sweet little bambis] burst out of parks and storm down from mountains and terrorise shopping malls. If the does run away when you shoot they run into somebody else and trample them with their vicious little shining hooves, the fawns get under the feet of shoppers and send them crashing down escalators, the young bucks charge the plate glass windows [...] and the old ones, do you know how heavy their antlers are or how sharp the prongs when they twist into teenagers running down the street.³³⁸

This description is aporetic in the sense that it enables contradictory interpretations and retains a high degree of ambiguity. The little bambis, the does, the fawns, the young bucks and the old deer all behave violently, as can be seen in Harper's verb choices, including 'burst out', 'storm', 'terrorise', 'trample', 'charge' and 'twist'. Perhaps the best way to characterise the deer's behaviour, regardless of their gender or age, is 'vicious' and hateful to human beings. At the same time, because of the shopping mall and the shooting references, one cannot help but perceive a hint of critique against consumerism, destruction of the natural environment and violence against animals. In her analysis of this paragraph in *Far Away*, Laetitia Pasquet draws attention to the manner allegories are deconstructed and suggests that the resulted impasse gives rise to an unexpected and subversive comic.

La vision qu'elle offre est terrible mais ne semble pas cibler un message clair : est-ce une critique de la société de consommation ? Une mise en scène des conséquences monstrueuse

Animals in traditional comedy are mere symbols or metaphors for humans and human's relations. In the field of theatre, Ionesco's *The Rhinoceros* (1959) can be said to be a representative illustration. In terms of fiction, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) is another good example of the tendency to exploit animals in the bestiary tradition, in which each animal is assigned certain vice or virtue. In short, the link between real animals and animal characters in these works is completely severed.

³³⁸ Churchill, *Far Away*, 39-40.

de notre irrespect pour l'environnement ? C'est-à-dire, les animaux sont-ils évoqués pour eux-mêmes ou comme des allégories de comportements humains ? La pièce ne confirme ni n'infirme aucune hypothèse. L'impasse de l'allégorie tend vers la cocasse, vers un comique de l'inattendu qui piétine les règles du monde au point de faire affleurer la violence.³³⁹

It is interesting to observe how this unexpected and subversive comic is further pursued as Harper's initial aporetic description of the deer gives way to an affirmative conclusion (for the time being). As soon as she gets Todd to admit that they had all the reasons to hate the deer, Harper contradicts herself by claiming that 'their natural goodness has come through. You can see it in their soft brown eyes'.³⁴⁰ This sudden reversal of opinion derives from the fact that the deer changed sides three weeks ago, and they are now with 'us'. Faced with Harper's accusation that he hates the deer and admires the crocodiles (which are always evil), Todd confesses: 'I've lost touch because I'm tired.'³⁴¹ The instability in the characters' perception of the deer highlights the fact that the symbolic meanings we attribute to different animals are but constructs used to serve our interests, that there is no correlation between these attributes and the animal nature. Harper's conviction of the deer's 'natural goodness' and the crocodile's natural evilness, ludicrous as it is, is also proof of the structural violence humans inflict upon nonhuman animals through language.

Such violence is by no means a modern phenomenon. It is perhaps impossible to determine the exact point in human history when animals were first employed as symbols or metaphors; however, it has been generally agreed that the source of most Western animal-based allegory, symbolism and imagery can be found most systematically in Medieval bestiaries. A literary genre in the European Middle Ages, a bestiary consists of a collection of stories depicting certain qualities of an animal, plant or even stone. These stories are ultimately derived from the Greek *Physiologus*, a text compiled before the middle of the second century AD that is closely linked to the Bible. Consequently, the 'facts' of natural science in the bestiary tradition often assign certain virtue or vice to a specific animal—exemplified in fables, from Aesop to La Fontaine—which is then appropriated for moral and

³³⁹ 'The vision it offers is terrible but does not seem to target a clear message: is it a criticism of the consumer society? A staging of the monstrous consequences of our disrespect for the environment? In other words, are animals evoked as themselves or as allegories of human behaviour? The play neither confirms nor invalidates any hypothesis. The impasse of allegory tends towards the comic—a comic of the unexpected that tramples on the rules of the world to the point of bringing violence to the surface.' Laetitia Pasquet, « Dynamitage cocasse de l'anthropomorphisme dans quelques satires contemporaines », *Sillages critiques*, n° 20 (1 mars 2016).

³⁴⁰ Churchill, *Far Away*, 41.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

religious instruction.³⁴² The bestiary tradition was so popular and influential that we can still feel its vivid impact in the contemporary world, where the mere mentioning of an animal almost always conjures up its associated symbolic meanings. However, the long bestiary tradition also means that there exist various and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the same animal, which can be used to expose and interrogate the symbolic violence directed against animals.

In *Escaped Alone*, another of Caryl Churchill's plays, four women in their seventies are sitting in an English garden and exchanging pleasantries when one of them mentions the eagle and steers the conversation to a comic direction due to their mismatched views on the animal.

LENA	Eagles you get eagles as national
VI	eagles are fascist
LENA	America has the eagle
VI	well
MRS J	I wouldn't mind being an eagle
SALLY	very often fascist
LENA	shame for the eagle really, it little knows
VI	an eagle wouldn't have much empathy ³⁴³

As the US national emblem, the bald eagle stands for long-life, strength, majestic appearance, as well as uniqueness—all qualities that the US prides itself on as a democratic, world-leading nation. Yet, one is also reminded that eagles used to feature prominently in fascist symbolism. It is a 'shame for the eagle' indeed, for the animal does not have any say in choosing what it represents. Human beings do not only give themselves the right to name animals but also to essentialise them and appropriate these sometimes-contradictory interpretations as they see convenient. The subjugation of animals at the symbolic and linguistic level through essentialisation is brought into relief. Here, laughter may emerge from recognising the inherently absurd aspect of human language in its attempt to anthropomorphise animals as well as the elusiveness, radical alterity of the animal that is never to be captured by language.

The linguistic violence that begins the process of framing nonhuman animals as the Other facilitates the physical violence that is to follow. Stef Smith's *Human Animals* is situated amid a mysterious wild animal outbreak in London. As the play progresses, the audience witnesses how a seemingly harmless anthropocentric mentality can evolve into a

³⁴² 'Bestiary | Medieval Literary Genre', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed 22 September 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/art/bestiary-medieval-literary-genre>.

³⁴³ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 26-27.

justification for animal genocide. In response to the escalating emergency and the fear of infection, the authority systematically exterminates first the pigeon, the fox, the rat, then domestic animals, and eventually zoo animals. What transpires in the play is organised cruelty against animals and can be characterised as ‘animal genocide’ from a non-anthropocentric perspective that considers animals a ‘kind’ or genus (*genos*), part of the entire group of living beings to which humans belong.³⁴⁴ In *Human Animals*, it is the rhetoric of sacrifice founded upon speciesism that enables such a genocide.³⁴⁵

JAMIE ‘There are five survivors, four normal adult human beings and a dog. The boat will support only four. All will perish if one is not sacrificed. Which one ought to be cast overboard?’

LISA The dog.

JAMIE Why?

LISA Because it’s a dog.

JAMIE What if three of them were in the Nazi Party, and one was a paedophile? And the dog was a Labrador.

LISA The paedophile.³⁴⁶

In the above conversation between the two characters Jamie and Lisa, which takes place in the early stage of the crisis, we are presented with a hypothetical situation, a classic game of ethical decision in which one member of a group must be sacrificed to save the rest. In this case, the group consists of a dog and four ‘normal’ adult human beings. The character Lisa does not have to think long to decide that the dog is the one that should be cast overboard. What appears to Lisa as self-explanatory, ‘Because it’s a dog’, in reality, conceals a deeply anthropocentric mindset that automatically grants a human life more valuable than that of a nonhuman animal. However, when it is specified what kind of individuals the four human beings are as well as the breed of the dog, Lisa alters her response because a Labrador is now considered more worthy than a paedophile. Lisa’s first choice demonstrates how the linguistic violence of ‘Because it’s a dog’ justifies the physical violence of sacrificing the animal. At the same time, the shift in her second choice suggests a potential remedy leading to an ethical encounter with animals. Instead of the generalised ‘normal adult humans’ and ‘dog’, the attempt to individualise, to give a distinct ‘face’ to each member of the group, both human and nonhuman animals, effectively erases the abstraction that enables mindless judgement and forces us to enter a more subjective area of ethics and personal responsibility. However, the fact that Lisa values a Labrador’s life more than that of a paedophile should not

³⁴⁴ Jean Grondin, ‘Derrida and the Question of the Animal’, *Cités* 30, no. 2 (2007): 37.

³⁴⁵ In a post-show discussion at the Royal Court, Stef Smith confirms that *Human Animals* is the result of her desire to dramatise the discussion on speciesism. See *Human Animals Post-Show Discussion* (London: The Royal Court Theatre, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-BA8Qoiot4>.

³⁴⁶ Stef Smith, *Human Animals* (London: Nick Hern, 2016), 12.

be seen as a purely positive sign either, for the simple reason that the animal's right to live is only taken into consideration once they are placed against the most undesirable, morally questionable kinds of human beings.

Thinking in terms of species does not only separate human from nonhuman animals but also reinforces a hierarchical structure among the latter, which is, once again, determined by humans. Not all animals are perceived the same way, which is not a problem in itself. What is problematic, however, is the fact that the basis of these different judgements has little to do with appreciating the particularity of each species; rather, it is another product of an anthropocentric worldview. In Smith's *Human Animals*, the pigeon, the fox and the rat are the first to be exterminated when London starts to be infested with wild animals. Next in line are domestic animals. Those perceived as favourite public figures such as the dolphin in the aquarium are last to be killed. One character aptly remarks, 'Funny that it's a pity when a dolphin is to be killed but not when it's a fox'.³⁴⁷ Similarly, one scene shows an argument breaking out between Lisa and Jamie because the latter has brought home an injured pigeon. In his attempt to persuade Lisa to let him keep the bird, Jamie suggests she considers it as a pet.

JAMIE [...] Plus you always wanted a pet.

LISA That's a lie... Though I wouldn't say no to one of those labradoodles... you know the dog that's a cross between a Labrador and a poodle /

JAMIE I know what it is... they're pretty cute—I'll give you that. It's something about how their ears... that's just /

[...]

LISA If it's going to make you that sad—keep the bloody pigeon. But if it's not dead in a week or for one minute I think it looks sick—you're letting it go.

Deal?

JAMIE Deal.

LISA Do you think we should get a puppy?³⁴⁸

According to John Berger, the practice of keeping animals as pets, regardless of their usefulness, is a modern innovation: 'It is part of that universal but personal withdrawal into the private small family unit, decorated or furnished with the mementoes from the outside world, which is such a distinguishing feature of consumer societies.'³⁴⁹ While it is true that the majority of pets nowadays do not serve any specific purpose, as opposing to domestic animals of the past such as guard dogs, hunting dogs or mice-killing cats, they provide their owners with a promise of completion: 'The pet *completes* him, offering responses to aspects

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

³⁴⁹ John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?', in *About Looking* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 14.

of his character which would otherwise remain unconfirmed. [...] The pet offers its owner a mirror to a part that is otherwise never reflected.³⁵⁰ In the case of Lisa, a puppy would give her the sort of undivided attention that she has always wanted and perhaps even an outlet for her maternal instinct. Understandably, her preference for a labradoodle is based on the aesthetic criteria of ‘cuteness’. The ‘bloody pigeon’, in addition to being perceived as harmful, does not fit into this criterion. As a result, the latter’s suffering does not induce any sympathy or affection in Lisa. It becomes clear that animals who contribute to the well-being of humans, be it as food, tools of production or spiritual/emotional support, are placed in a higher priority compared to those perceived as harmful, useless or simply too inferior to even be taken into account. Likewise, those whose appearance corresponds to the common standard of beauty established by humans receive more protection and privilege compared to others. It is not a coincidence that the useless or harmful animals are also often depicted as uncomely creatures and used as allegorical stand-ins for vices.

What makes the discussion on animal treatment in *Human Animals* particularly thought-provoking is the fact that it not only reveals the ubiquity of explicit speciesist thinking and behaviour but also addresses the aporia of animal activism. Specifically, the play draws our attention to the (im)possibility of fighting for animal rights from a non-anthropocentric perspective. Unlike Lisa, Jamie holds a nonconformist stance and always tries to protect the animals, even at the cost of his own safety. At the beginning of the crisis, he decides to bury a dead fox in their garden, which greatly upsets his partner.

LISA Are you telling me there is a fox buried in my garden?

JAMIE It’s our garden.

LISA Couldn’t you have just left it where you found it?

JAMIE I had to do something with it.

LISA No you didn’t! Normal people just leave dead animals. I hope you washed your hands before touching anything,

JAMIE I’m trying to be respectful.

LISA I’m not sure foxes give a shit about respect and it’s not the fox’s garden.

JAMIE Well maybe it is.

LISA What?

JAMIE Maybe, just maybe a fox and his kids lived there, hundreds of years ago and then we came along and fucked it up for him. I mean I would say he has a right to be buried there, on his great-grandfather’s father’s land, on his ancestors’ land.

LISA Is this really what you’re saying?

JAMIE What I’m saying is that fox—out there—has a right to be buried wherever he wants.³⁵¹

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

³⁵¹ Smith, *Human Animals*, 14-15.

Here, Jamie's reasoning for the fox's right to be buried wherever he wants because the land might have belonged to that fox's ancestors presents an intrinsically ambiguous attitude in advocating for animal rights on the basis of human rights. On the one hand, we tend to concur with Jamie's argument for the animal share in the planet ownership claim that humans often make.³⁵² On the other hand, we are reminded that internment is essentially a ritual that only human beings perform or care about. Furthermore, it is questionable if a fox is familiar with concepts such as inheritance or ancestor. Jamie may think that he is showing respect to the dead fox by burying him while, in fact, he is unconsciously subjecting the fox to our human systems of morality, ethics and value judgement. Lisa's rebuke—"I'm not sure foxes give a shit about respect"—is, therefore, a valid remark and a powerful reminder of Jamie's anthropocentric assumptions.

I strongly believe that Churchill's and Smith's decision not to show the animal and showing that they are not willing to show is an attempt to generate a non-anthropocentric theatre experience. Their emphasis on language and narrative instead of visual representation has invested in animals a spectral quality capable of inducing fear and anxiety among those humans who are haunted. In all three plays, *Escaped Alone*, *Far Away*, and *Human Animals*, the notion of the animal as spectre is suggestive of Derrida's hauntology. Defining the spectre, Derrida writes:

C'est quelque chose qu'on ne sait pas, justement, et on ne sait pas si précisément cela est, si ça existe, si ça répond à un nom et correspond à une essence. On ne le sait pas : non par ignorance, mais parce que ce non-objet, ce présent non-présent, cet être-là d'un absent ou d'un disparu ne relève pas du savoir. Du moins plus de ce qu'on croit savoir sous le nom de savoir. On ne sait pas si c'est vivant ou si c'est mort.³⁵³

The spectre, neither dead nor alive, neither present nor absent, defies knowledge and threatens the very foundation of the human notion of scientific progress, which largely relies on an epistemic approach. Frederic Jameson further elaborates on this point as he explains that a belief in spectre has nothing to do with believing in the existence of ghosts, either literally or metaphorically. He writes:

³⁵² The belief that humans are the master of the world, as well as all living beings that move on the earth, can be traced back to the Bible: 'Elohim said: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness! Let them have authority over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens, over the cattle, over all the wild beasts and reptiles that crawl upon the earth!" Elohim, therefore, created man in his image, in the image of Elohim he created him. Male and female he created them. Elohim blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, have authority over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens, over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" [Gen. 1:26-28; trans. Dhormes]. See Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', 384.

³⁵³ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris : Galilée, 1993), 25-26.

Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.³⁵⁴

The power of a spectral figure, thus, lies in its ability to expose the truth of lack and limitation of the living present, the porous fabric of the world we live in and with it, all known power relations, including that between human and nonhuman animals. As a result of this exposure, man is made acutely aware of his unstable status as the master of all living beings. The ubiquity of animals in the three plays examined, despite their invisibility (or, precisely because of their invisibility), can be said to be the cause of panic, fear and anxiety for many characters as they find themselves back in the trauma of predation—one of the original traumas of human beings as preys, whereas animals once again assume the role of predators. Such atavistic fear and instinct are something modern humans tend to forget, especially since we are born and raised in a society that incessantly disseminates the self-assuring message of man as *the* conqueror of nature. Faced with an open challenge to their status, it is only expected that humans would do whatever it takes to re-establish their dominance, no matter how extreme or irrational such action might be.

In *Escaped Alone*, one of the four characters, Sally, suffers from a severe cat phobia.

SALLY[...] 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 they could get in a window I have to go round the house and make sure all the windows are locked and I don't know if I checked properly I can't remember I was too frightened to notice I have to go round the windows again back to the kitchen back to the bedroom back to the kitchen back to the bedroom the bathroom back to the kitchen back to the door [...]³⁵⁵

The lack of punctuation and the repetitive structure in Sally's explanation corresponds to the nature of phobia and anxiety—an endless, relentless chain of compulsive behaviour that reinforces its vicious cycle to entrap its victim. It is simply a matter of time before the victim abandons all rational thinking and gives in to fear completely.

[...] once they're in they could be anywhere they could be under the bed in the wardrobe up on the top shelf with the winter sweaters [...] a cat could be in the biscuit tin, a cat could be in the fridge in the freezer in the salad drawer in the box of cheese in the broom cupboard the mop bucket a cat could be in the oven the top oven under the lid of the casserole in a box of

³⁵⁴ Frederic Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Spectres of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London & New York: Verso, 1999), 39.

³⁵⁵ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 25.

matches behind a picture under a rug [...] a cat could be under my hand when I put out my hand³⁵⁶

Here, the spectral characteristic of the cat allows them to exist in the most improbable places such as in the freezer, in a box of matches, or under one's hand, and this, in turn, compels us to reconsider the hierarchy of power in human-animal relation. The forever elusive but omnipresent cat conjured up by language, by a mere mentioning or a passing thought, haunts Sally and inflicts on her the most primal fear—a sort of dominance that is intangible and therefore inescapable.

In the like manner, *Human Animals* and *Far Away* address the theme of human captivity caused by animals and the impact this confinement has on the human characters' psychology and behaviour. In *Far Away*, the crisis of trust creates a scenario in which humans are trapped in the watchful, omnipresent gaze of animals and nature. Towards the end of Act Three, when Joan risks everything to reach Harper's place, Harper anxiously questions her niece, 'Did anyone see you leave? which way did you come? were you followed? There are ospreys here who will have seen you arrive.'³⁵⁷ To these, Joan simply replies, 'Of course the birds saw me.'³⁵⁸ She also adds that on the way, she was forced to cross a river to avoid running into the Chilean soldiers upstream and the fourteen black and white cows downstream having a drink. From Joan's account, we can see that it is the animal that defines human behaviour, which implies that human beings occupy a passive, reactionary position. As a way to unsettle the audience's anthropocentric perspective, Caryl Churchill has employed what I would refer to as a 'not-seeing' strategy in animal representation. 'Not-seeing', according to Anat Pick, 'complicates the act of seeing, making seeing tentative and uncertain'; it 'does not merely alter the optics of the human-animal encounter but mitigates human desire to make animals unconditionally visible'.³⁵⁹ It is important to note that Pick's notion of 'not-seeing' is distinct from John Berger's endorsement of the censorious attitude to animal images, nor is it an attempt to mythologise animals as some mysterious beings. Her use of 'not-seeing' 'connotes the mundane, civic notion of animal privacy that denies human eyes and their technological proxies unlimited access'.³⁶⁰ Compared to Churchill's plays, the 2016 production of *Human Animals* at the Royal Court seems less radical in its 'not seeing' strategy, in the sense that technology still

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁵⁷ Churchill, *Far Away*, 42.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁵⁹ Anat Pick, 'Why Not Look at Animals?', *NECSUS* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 108-09.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

provides unlimited access to the private life of animals. There is a camera attached to each insect cage, which shows a live feed of the insects on a screen from time to time. However, I believe that rather than reinforcing the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience or the power hierarchy between human and nonhuman animals, the intervention of technology here alludes to the captive, panoptic condition that characterises contemporary life in general. The fact that the insect cages are miniatures of the set makes it clear that the human characters are also imprisoned, only in a bigger cage. As a result, the mediated images of animals in the 2016 production of *Human Animals* serve as a reminder of the shared predicament of humans and animals.

Another example of the non-anthropocentric discussion on animals in Churchill's *Far Away* can be found in the way animals generally thought of as being fully domesticated and tamed are portrayed as a threat to man's self-proclaimed superiority because of their utter unpredictability.

HARPER The cats have come in on the side of the French.
TODD I never liked cats, they smell, they scratch, they only like you because you feed them, they bite, I used to have a cat that would suddenly take some bit of you in its mouth.³⁶¹

Todd's opinion on cats can be said to be an attempt to see animals as they are, to establish an animal relationship with them and unsettle the ideal, familial images of cats that have been widely circulated in social media in our contemporary society. Moving one step further, Jamie in *Human Animals* seems to have figured out that the only solution for a better understanding of animals lies in acknowledging the fact that their behaviour does not conform to human norms and expectations.

LISA How do you know it's not infected?
JAMIE Infected with what?
LISA They're worried people can get it.
JAMIE Get what!
LISA Whatever it is that's making the birds and the foxes and the rats crazy.
JAMIE Oh, heaven forbid the animals are acting like animals. I'm more scared of humans than foxes. That's the truth.³⁶²

What Lisa views as crazy behaviour from the bird, the fox, and the rat are, in reality, a natural reaction to dramatic changes in their environment. Ironically, the only animal that behaves insanely in this situation is no other than humans themselves. Without any scientific basis on the nature of the infection, or if there is any infection, to begin with, their immediate solution

³⁶¹ Churchill, *Far Away*, 36.

³⁶² Smith, *Human Animals*, 32.

is to impose quarantine and exterminate all living beings that are not human. Such a reckless response shows a strong influence from speciesist ideology, which not only separates the human from the nonhuman animal but also considers human's life to be more valuable. The entrapment occurring here is both physical and spiritual, as many of the characters refuse to break free from the constraint of human exceptionalism to engage in a more fruitful, meaningful manner with animals.

In bringing into relief the comic animal aspect of humans as a result of their interaction with the spectral animal, *Far Away*, *Escaped Alone*, and *Human Animals* attest to Derrida's argument that discussion on the boundary between the human and the animal only becomes interesting once, 'instead of asking whether or not there is a discontinuous limit, one attempts to think what a limit becomes once it is abyssal, once the frontier no longer forms a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line, once, as a result, it can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible'.³⁶³ It is noteworthy that all three plays resist visual anthropomorphism or zoomorphism, despite both being frequently employed as a device to blur the single divisible line between human and nonhuman animals. We are reminded that both approaches have been known for their problematic implications. Anthropomorphism, while extending to animals the principle of moral and legal equality, simultaneously confirms the unbridgeable gap between humans and animals and denies the specificity of the latter altogether. On the other hand, zoomorphism appears to be more empowering for animals, as it is the animal that defines the human. However, one cannot overlook the fact that the animal is still subject to the rhetoric of symbol and metaphor in the first place, either intentionally through the writer's and/or director's decision or unintentionally as a result of the audience's interpretation. However, that is not to say that we should completely renounce these approaches. There are still cases in which zoomorphism and anthropomorphism manage to represent animals without subjecting them to the anthropocentric way of thinking. One example among others is Edward Albee's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1975 play *Seascape*. In the second part of the play, the audience is presented with an interspecies encounter between a retired couple and a pair of human-size lizards that are played by human actors wearing lizard costumes. Despite the appearance of being another anthropomorphist attempt, *Seascape* calls into question the self-proclaimed superiority of human beings rather than reaffirming the power hierarchy expounded by speciesism. As a result, Albee 'implies that it is only when the fixed mode of hierarchical, dualistic thinking is

³⁶³ Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', 399.

destabilized that human/nonhuman connection can be likely to occur'.³⁶⁴ As a playwright well-known for his commitment to animals, Albee has successfully created an unsettling experience in *Seascape*, one that invites the audience to reexamine their assumptions rather than subjecting nonhuman animals to symbolic violence.

The closing scene of Stef Smith's *Human Animals* is another interesting case. Instead of visual anthropomorphism or zoomorphism, it depicts a process of metamorphosis as a flock of pigeons transforms into human beings after feeding on the corpse of a woman who hung herself in a sacrificial act. This metamorphosis, however, is not visually staged; instead, the actors take turns to voice a verbal description.

Hundreds of pigeons.
Beaks scratching at her
 Picking her apart
 With feathers falling through the air
Black and blue and green fell from the sky.
Blood tipped and torn
And the noise of the flesh tearing
The sound of bones being ripped from muscle
Eating the bones and the bile and blood
Wings fluttering on top of one another
And as the body began to disappear
Their beaks turned into noses
And their wings into arms
Their feathers flatten and dulled into skin
Squawks became shouts
Eyes shifted to the front of their head
And they grew teeth
 And tumours
 And toes
And their bodies became wrapped in cloth
And they wiped the blood off their faces and topped up their Oyster cards
And took the District Line into town
And no one noticed.³⁶⁵

This scene recalls a similar scene in Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door*, in which the actors also join on stage to describe the violent overthrowing of the government. The choric elements in these two scenes create a defamiliarizing effect and situate the events in a fictive, fantastic zone characterised by ambiguity. In the case of *Human Animals*, this ambiguous atmosphere further highlights the porous boundary between human and nonhuman animals. The frenzy with which the pigeons attack the woman's corpse, which is rendered vividly and audibly—'beaks scratching at her', 'picking her apart', tearing her flesh, 'the noise of the

³⁶⁴ Chin-ying Chang, 'Ecological Consciousness and Human/Nonhuman Relationship in Edward Albee's *Seascape*', *Neohelicon* 39, no. 2 (December 2012): 399.

³⁶⁵ Smith, *Human Animals*, 104-05.

flesh tearing’, ‘the sound of bones being ripped from muscle’, ‘eating the bones and the bile and blood’—is not meant to be read as a testimony of the animal’s violent nature. On the contrary, I would argue that the intention behind this description is to display the violent nature of human beings: it is only by committing an act of ruthless and bloody consumption of the Other that animals are transformed into humans. If Derrida’s suspicion is true, that ‘the promotion, on the part of human beings, of the difference incarnated by human reason is founded upon an act of forgetting, of repression, even of originary violence, the denial of the animality of human beings, leading to a denial of their mortality’³⁶⁶ is the violence that is literally equivalent to a ‘denaturing’ of human beings, then the metamorphosis scene above in *Human Animals* can also be read as an attempt to ‘renature’ human beings.

Churchill’s and Smith’s decision to avoid both visual anthropomorphism and zoomorphism provides an alternative to bringing prominence to the positive aspect of undecidability when it comes to distinguishing the animal from the human. As a result of this undecidability, there emerges a zone of proximity in which ‘becoming animal’ is possible. Becoming-animal, according to Deleuze and Guattari, ‘does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal’.³⁶⁷ To become, as Deleuze argues,

is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferenciation where one can no longer be distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule—neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and non-preexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form.³⁶⁸

Donna Haraway is highly critical of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s workings of ‘becoming-animal’, pointing out how they use the term ‘animal’ in an abstract manner that has nothing to do with actual animals. She writes:

[...] I find little but the two writers’ scorn for all that is mundane and ordinary and the profound absence of curiosity about or respect for and with actual animals, even as innumerable references to diverse animals are invoked to figure the authors’ anti-Oedipal and anticapitalist project.³⁶⁹

Instead of the impersonal (and exploitative) relation with animals implicit in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s becoming-animal, Haraway proposes another approach known as ‘becoming-with’, which calls for private, personalised relationships with individual, actual animals (starting with pets) to generate emotional exchanges. The ‘becoming animal’ that contemporary

³⁶⁶ Grondin, ‘Derrida and the Question of the Animal’, 35.

³⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 238.

³⁶⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London & New York: Verso, 1998), 1.

³⁶⁹ Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 27.

speculative theatre suggests can be said to oscillate somewhere between Deleuze's becoming-animal and Haraway's becoming-with, as it strives to negotiate the dichotomies of the particular versus the universal, the personal versus the impersonal, practice versus theory. This becoming animal 'necessitates of an act of awareness in which one is not merely transformed into the other but becomes aware of the possibilities that one lives in relation to others, that the boundaries of one's individuality are porous as Derrida suggests'.³⁷⁰ It explains the reason why accompanying the primacy of language in animal representation in Churchill's and Smith's three plays is an equally strong emphasis on portraying the interaction between the human and the nonhuman.

This takes us back to the beginning of this section, in which animal embodiment has been called into question as it presents us with a dilemma in ethical response. Instead of focusing on the materiality of the animal body, contemporary speculative plays such as *Far Away*, *Escaped Alone*, and *Human Animals* pursue another form of non-anthropocentric animal representation, which is based on dramatising the impact of the spectral nonhuman animals on the body and behaviour of the human actors. In *Stigmata*, Hélène Cixous recounts the story in which she was bitten by her dog, Fips. Cixous describes these indelible scars as *felix culpa*, or 'blessed wound', which resides in her mind like a stigma and renders Fips 'the most living of the departed'.³⁷¹ These scars, which return in the text as a spectral presence, lead to a transformation in Cixous's thinking not only about their shared fate and suffering but also their unbridgeable difference. Her early self-interest is replaced by a profound reflection on animal-human relations: Fips suffers from violence because he is like her, identified as a member of a Jewish family; at the same time, he suffers because he is different from her, identified as a nonhuman being.

The same revelation occurs in *Human Animals* when Jamie is bitten by a fox that he is trying to protect from authority.

LISA	Does it hurt? When they eat you?
JAMIE	No more or less than anything else. If you roll up your sleeves they can get a better bite. ³⁷²

The wound on Jamie's hand is a constant reminder of the shared vulnerability of humans and animals in the face of violence. It represents a site of indifferentiation where the animal and

³⁷⁰ Lourdes Orozco, 'Animals in Socially Engaged Performance Practice: Becomings on the Edges of Extinction', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 38, no. 2 (May 2018): 180.

³⁷¹ Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 184.

³⁷² Smith, *Human Animals*, 101.

the human converge in their suffering; at the same time, it calls attention to the extra violence inflicted upon animals: the bite sure hurts, but it is hardly comparable to what has been done to animals during the crisis. The spectral animals in contemporary speculative theatre, liberated from linguistic and symbolic constraints, gain more agency than ever, not only through their power to evoke the comic animal aspect within man but also through the mark they leave on the human body, psyche and behaviour, which facilitates the process of becoming animal. What emerges, as a result, is a nonidentity form of relationality between human and nonhuman animals, which acknowledges the particularities of the animal and its multiplicity but which proximity prevents the act of annexing these differences or fitting them into a human value system.

2. *Programmable Bodies, Unpredictable Voices*

(Instructions for Correct Assembly—Really Old, Like Forty Five)

Contemporary speculative theatre's attempt to initiate a non-anthropocentric discussion is not limited to the relation between human and nonhuman animals but also addresses that between humans and inorganic beings such as androids, robots or artificial intelligence. It has been exactly a century since Karel Čapek first introduced the word 'robot' to the English language and science fiction through his play *R.U.R.* (1920), whose title stands for *Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti* (Rossum's Universal Robots). According to Adam Roberts, the name 'Rossum' is a play on the Czech word *rozum* which means 'reason' or 'intellect', while 'robot'—deriving from *robota*—refers to a particular form of Czech serfdom, forced labour, or slavery. The under-title of Čapek's play, as such, can be translated into 'Reason's Universal Serfs', which points to a larger theme of 'conflict between reason—or maybe a better word would be "will"—and the reservoir of creative, productive capacity in humanity's power'.³⁷³ What Čapek brings to the stage is not simply the robot apocalypse that has become a particularly popular trope in science fiction, a sort of cautionary tale that warns about the threat of an AI (artificial intelligence) takeover. Rather, the human-robot interaction brings into relief the need to reconsider the validity of modern liberal humanism, in particular its confident distinction between the human and the non-human, as well as the anthropocentric thinking that places human beings at the top of all hierarchies.³⁷⁴ *R.U.R.* reveals the systemic

³⁷³ Adam Roberts, 'Introduction', in *RUR*, by Karel Čapek (London: Hachette, 2013).

³⁷⁴ Nicholas Anderson argues that we should not consider *R.U.R.* as futurological science fiction but 'rather as a theoretical and ethical critique of modern liberal humanism—at least, a traditional form of

violence in the paradoxical operation of manipulating and assimilating the *robot-as-other* while simultaneously preventing them from being fully assimilated into society, as a way to maintain the *status quo* of power relations—a classic example of the scapegoat. In this section, I will explore this paradox as it emerges with the voice of the robots in Thomas Eccleshare’s *Instructions for Correct Assembly* (2018) and Tamsin Oglesby’s *Really Old, Like Forty Five* (2010), with reference to two Alan Ayckbourn’s plays, *Henceforward...* (1987) and *Comic Potential* (1998), all of which feature artificial mechanical organisms. In particular, I will focus on the manner in which these artificial organisms are given a voice so that they can fulfil their prescribed roles and participate in various social interactions with humans. However, because of their ‘inferior’ status, both their speech and action are programmed, which means that the voice granted them is circumscribed in the same way Echo’s voice is limited to speaking the last words spoken to her in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Paradoxically, the robots, like Echo, also have the ability to appropriate the speech forced upon them to speak for themselves. Furthermore, the supposedly ‘fault’ in their design enables an unexpected eruption of inappropriate speech that liberates the robot’s voice. On the one hand, these so-called ‘robot plays’ raise certain epistemological, ontological and ethical questions pertaining to artificial intelligence and technology in general. By exposing the problematic human-robot relationships, contemporary speculative theatre not only warns against the consequences of maintaining an anthropocentric mentality but also creates an aporetic theatre experience which, because of the uncertainty surrounding the robot characters, both in terms of their identity and their consciousness, enables a kind of nonidentity relationship between the audience and these characters. On the other hand, we come to realise that there is nothing science-fictional or futuristic about having a robot character on stage. These complex organisms, like the nonhuman animals, are simultaneously themselves—an alternate ontology—and a point of departure to think about all liminal, ersatz identities, which are silenced and destroyed as soon as they start speaking and thinking beyond the censored range allowed them. Striving for a different way to relate to these beings, as such, would have important reverberations in the human society of the present.

At the end of the play text, Thomas Eccleshare acknowledges a number of artworks that inspired him while writing *Instructions for Correct Assembly*. Among these, at the level of plot and character creation, we can directly notice the influence of David Sheff’s memoir,

humanism that seeks to distinguish, with epistemological and ontological certainty, that which is human from that which is not’. See Nicholas Anderson, “‘Only We Have Perished’: Karel Čapek’s *R.U.R.* and the Catastrophe of Humankind’, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 25, no. 2/3 (91) (2014): 227.

Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey through His Son's Addiction (2008), and Hari Kunzru's short story *Bodywork* (2008). The former tells the story of a father's struggle to come to terms with his son's addiction, in particular with the three Cs he is told in AI-Anon Meetings: 'you did not cause it, you cannot control it, and you cannot cure it'. In *Instructions*, not only that the name of the couple's real son, Nick, is probably inspired by Sheff's son, Nic, but Eccleshare also brings in some of the book's main themes, such as the conflict between a well-loved son who becomes an addict and his parents, as well as the psychological and emotional strain from which both parties suffer every time Nick relapses. In turn, Hari Kunzru's *Bodywork* provides Eccleshare with the idea of individuals transforming themselves into cyborgs because of their inability to face the messiness and dissatisfaction of their reality. The husband in Kunzru's short story, like Hari and Max in *Instructions*, longs for the mechanical perfection, certainty and clarity that would allow him to be unbothered by his failed marriage and a wife he has come to loath.

I'll always know what to do because the answers will be there inside. Neat rows of electrons stacked like soldiers on parade. Yes-no, yes-no, yes-no. I'm excited, and why not? This is it. The last fuzzy bit of me is about to fall away. I'll be as clean and bright and perfect as a racing car. All the dead stuff falling off me like leaves in Autumn.[...] Will I still get excited, after? Will I still think of things like Autumn leaves? Won't be any need, most probably.³⁷⁵

In both *Bodywork* and *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, the characters are fully aware of the price they have to pay for this transformation and still choose to proceed because they are driven by a will to happiness when circumstances have made their life unbearable. These characters demonstrate how the most human desire is paradoxically fulfilled through the denouncement of their humanity.

Even though not mentioned by Eccleshare in his acknowledgement, there is another name that instantly comes to one's mind when reading or seeing *Instructions for Correct Assembly*. As remarked by the critic Michael Billington, it is not difficult to notice the striking similarity between Eccleshare and the renowned playwright Alan Ayckbourn, not only in their shared interest in the themes of robot-human interaction or of the potential and danger of technology, but also in their techniques of bringing into relief comic situations.³⁷⁶ Frequently referred to as a non-political playwright, Alan Ayckbourn was initially dismissed

³⁷⁵ Hari Kunzru, 'Bodywork', *Hari Kunzru*, 17 December 2008, <https://www.harikunzru.com/bodywork/>.

³⁷⁶ Michael Billington, 'Instructions for Correct Assembly Review—Bonnar and Horrocks Star in Clever Sci-Fi Satire', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2018, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/apr/15/instructions-for-correct-assembly-review-bonnar-and-horrocks-star-in-clever-sci-fi-satire>.

as a ‘boulevardier’—a writer of popular but trivial comedies whose sole purpose is entertainment. It took a long time for the prolific playwright to be taken seriously and for the bleak undertones of his plays to be appreciated as a form of political engagement, but by the end of the twentieth century, Ayckbourn’s reputation ‘was now one of an accessible dramatist with steel-edged observation and an eye on the social zeitgeist’.³⁷⁷ It appears that Ayckbourn’s desire to be in the middle of opinion even in the most tumultuous moments of history, previously regarded as an escapist attitude, has come to be interpreted as a political expression in its own right: ‘The political content of Ayckbourn’s work is important precisely because, for so many of his critics and much of his audience, it is invisible, masked by the day-to-day background noise of their own preconceptions.’³⁷⁸

Despite the reluctance to be politically radical and the preference to be chronicles of human behaviour and social changes, Ayckbourn’s works are surprisingly innovative when it comes to incorporating different genres of speculative fiction. The well-known dystopian play *Henceforward...*, written in 1987, marks the beginning of a long period in which Ayckbourn has been consistent in his exploitation of elements from the horror, science fiction and fantasy genres in his plays.³⁷⁹ *Henceforward...* is also the play that introduces the audience to the first of Ayckbourn’s many androids. NAN 300F, a malfunctioning robot nanny that serves as the sole companion of Jerome, a self-absorbed composer who neglects his family in a quest, ironically, to ‘express the feeling of love in an abstract musical form’.³⁸⁰ In Act One, NAN is played by the actress who plays Corinna—Jerome’s ex-wife—in Act Two. In an attempt to trick Corinna into believing that he has changed and become responsible enough to care for Geain, their daughter, Jerome transforms NAN into a perfect partner: the robot now has the voice and appearance of Zoe, an actress Jerome hired to do some recording. Jerome does not bother to conceal his real intention in reshaping NAN: ‘I want to present them with a relationship that’s so perfect that not only can she [Corinna] not find fault with it, but doubles her up with jealousy. It leaves her eating her heart out with

³⁷⁷ Michael Holt, *Alan Ayckbourn* (Devon: Northcote, 2018), 69.

³⁷⁸ Martin McGrath, ‘Ayckbourn’s Artificial People’, *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* 46, no. 128 (2017): 62.

³⁷⁹ It must be noted that *Henceforward...* is not the first speculative play written by Ayckbourn. When the author was eighteen, he wrote *The Season*, a time-travel story, but the play was never performed. His first professional speculative play is *Standing Room Only* (1961), which is set in a distant future—1997—in a world plagued by overpopulation. However, it is not until *Henceforward...* that elements of speculative fiction make their recurrent presence in Ayckbourn’s works. Among thirty-one adult plays he has written since 1987, fifteen contain some genre element. See McGrath, ‘Ayckbourn’s Artificial People’, 62.

³⁸⁰ Alan Ayckbourn, *Henceforward...: A Play* (London & New York: Samuel French, 1988), 30.

envy and frustration.’³⁸¹ It becomes clear that regardless of which ‘identity’ or role she finds herself in, NAN is ruthlessly exploited by Jerome as a mere instrument for his selfish goals: at first, he moulds her into the shape of Corinna so that he can abuse her in the evenings; later on, she is given Zoe’s look and pushed beyond her ability to cope just so Jerome can create the illusion of being a man capable of love and maintaining a happy relationship in order to have his revenge. Both NAN of *Henceforward...* and Jån of *Instructions for Correct Assembly* are not allowed to be anything but copies of other human beings. While these humans have escaped from abusive relationships, the robots, unfortunately, do not have any other option but to endure. However, it is in the very aporia of autonomy that these mechanical substitutes find a way to redefine their identities beyond the mere high-tech dummy-marionettes.

The humanoid in *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, being a duplicate of Hari’s and Max’s lost son, is meticulously programmed and closely controlled, any individuality perceived as undesirable constantly suppressed. Setting Jån up, in the beginning, was a challenging task, and it took the couple a long time through many trials so that Jån could reflect their worldview and say exactly what they wanted to hear. For instance, Jån’s initial response to the immigrant issue reveals unmistakable xenophobic sentiment: ‘England should stay English what’s so complex about that? There are parts of Birmingham that have Urdu street signs.’³⁸² After two modifications, he finally arrives at an opinion Hari and Max approve: ‘The whole idea of traditional Britishness is fake anyway, we’ve always been a tapestry of influences.’³⁸³ In fact, like the example quoted above, all the dialogues in *Instructions for Correct Assembly* between the couple and their surrogate mechanical son do not aim at establishing any meaningful exchange of ideas or a plurality of positions. Rather, they are oriented towards the dogmatic monologization of views. Hari and Max already know in advance what they are going to hear from Jån because the robot’s speech is but the externalisation of the couple’s thoughts and desires.

MAX You have to prune the leaves to keep them all thriving.

JÅN It’s hard work.

MAX It can be but the satisfaction is enormous. Just think when we’re done we can enjoy the garden.

JÅN Come out here and read.

MAX Yes.

JÅN Or have some friends over for a glass of wine.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁸² Eccleshare, *Instructions for Correct Assembly*.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

MAX Lovely idea.
JÅN Or just come out here in the evening and take in the air.
MAX *My thoughts exactly.*
JÅN I could definitely get used to it.³⁸⁴

The above exchange between Max and Jån, despite the presence of two voices, gives the impression of being closer to Max's soliloquy. This, however, does not seem to bother her—after all, Jån's ability to articulate his mother's thought the way she wants it is precisely the kind of success and validation that eluded the couple in their first attempt at parenting, that which motivated them to build a replacement robot. Jån's situation recalls that of the nymph Echo in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who is deprived of the ability to speak for herself and forever trapped in repetition. This association may seem quite far-fetched; however, as I will strive to demonstrate subsequently, what characterises the similarity between the robots in many contemporary speculative plays and Echo is not only the linguistic constraint but also the strategies they may adopt to negotiate this constraint and regain their subjectivity.

As pointed out by Pleshette DeArmitt, 'it can be argued that Echo is nothing but voice, yet has no voice of her own, and that she is simply a reflecting surface for Narcissus, yet has no image herself.'³⁸⁵ At first glance, such is certainly the case of Mimi, a Robot Nurse in Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five* (2010). In this not-too-distant future, faced with the increasing burden of an aged population, the government encourages the elderly to remain active social contributors by 'adopting' orphaned grandchildren. Those who are ill and unfit for any task, however, are admitted to the Ark, which is said to be a care facility but, in reality, is a test centre where radical 'treatments' are used to slowly kill off the elderly to alleviate the costs to society. It is in the Ark that empathic robots like Mimi are tested to help patients deal with loneliness and disorientation in a new environment.

AMANDA Well we all know about the therapeutic effect of pets. When you stroke a cat the cat purrs and this in itself is a reward. Well Mimi's function is identical. Her response (and she is essentially reactive) serves to press certain Darwinian buttons in the patient which convince them that they're in a relationship with her. She reflects the patient's emotions back to themselves and in so doing helps them deal with them.³⁸⁶

As explained by the researcher Amanda, Mimi (whose name already contains repetition) is 'essentially reactive', which means that, like Echo, she is incapable of initiating speech. The robot is conditioned to be a mere instrument to reflect the patient's emotions to themselves

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

³⁸⁵ Pleshette DeArmitt, 'Resonances of Echo: A Derridean Allegory', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 42, no. 2 (2009): 90.

³⁸⁶ Tamsin Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five* [2010], ebook (London: Oberon, 2012).

and, in the process, creates an illusion of conversation and relationship. However, it is from within this inescapable law imposed on the robot that emerges the possibility of subverting the power hierarchy between the human and the nonhuman. Unlike the couple in *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, the patients in *Really Old, Like Forty Five* do not possess a remote control to manipulate the robot as they wish but, on the contrary, have to adjust their own behaviour if they want to remedy an undesirable situation.

AMANDA [Mimi's] states of mind are affected by how she's treated. For example, is she stroked gently or aggressively? If she's provoked physically she'll back away. If she's spoken to angrily she might bristle, as it were, and the patient, you see, would notice this and instinctively take measures to soothe her and in so doing soothe themselves.³⁸⁷

It is a paradox that Mimi regains power while occupying the most powerless position. Even though she is not capable of answering violence with violence in a direct manner, her defensive or hostile tone and attitude force her interlocutor to come face to face with their own aggressiveness and anger. Furthermore, the robot's status as a mere acoustic and emotional mirror momentarily upsets the power relations between human and robot, subject and object. It could be argued that Mimi in *Really Old, Like Forty Five* embodies a Derridean Echo figure, who attempts the impossible—'to appropriate the inappropriable, the foreign, the transcendent, the absolutely or wholly other'³⁸⁸ in the act of miming. In his interpretation of Echo in *Metamorphoses*, Derrida contends that her submission to the curse that prevents her from speaking for herself is not without irony.

Echo might have feigned to repeat the last syllable of Narcissus in order to say something else or, really, in order to sign at that very instant in her own name, and so take back the initiative of answering or responding in a responsible way, this disobeying a sovereign injunction and outsmarting the tyranny of a jealous goddess. Echo thus lets be heard by whoever wants to hear it, by whoever might love hearing it, something other than what she seems to be saying. Although she repeats, without simulacrum, what she has just heard, another simulacrum slips in to make her response something more than a mere reiteration.³⁸⁹

In the case of the robot in *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, the jealous goddess is replaced by humans who are determined to have complete control over their creations. At the Ark, Mimi is assigned to Lyn, who has Alzheimer's disease, and the fact that Lyn starts to be fond of the robot more than of her own daughter, Cathy, does not sit well with the latter. Witnessing her mother becomes increasingly dependent on Mimi for her emotional well-being, Cathy openly expresses her initial dislike and eventual hostility towards the robot,

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ DeArmitt, 'Resonances of Echo: A Derridean Allegory', 92.

³⁸⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), xi-xii.

whom she sees as a mere machine but at the same time a very real rival for Lyn's affection and a threat to her identity as a daughter. It is in her interaction with Cathy that Mimi reveals the mischievous way she takes on the words thrown upon her and makes them her own. In Act Two Scene 3, after Lyn stormed out of the room as a result of misunderstanding and miscommunication, the following brief exchange takes place between Cathy and Mimi.

[LYN] *goes.* CATHY *looks at MIMI.* MIMI *returns the look.*
CATHY Shouldn't you go after her?
MIMI Shouldn't you go after her?
CATHY *stares at MIMI.* MIMI *shudders.* *Silence.*³⁹⁰

Mimi's response to Cathy's question can be interpreted from two perspectives: either as a proof of her mechanical, unspontaneous speech and therefore of her prescribed identity as a mere thing or, on the contrary, as a sign of intelligence that exceeds her programming, if we take it that Mimi is indeed a Derridean Echo figure. From previous examples, the audience gets to know that there is always a certain calculation in Mimi's choice of what to repeat to convey specific emotions.

LYN She understands everything you say you know. Isn't she marvellous?
CATHY Is she?
LYN *(Pets MIMI)* Yes you are, aren't you?
MIMI I am?
LYN Yes you are.
MIMI You are.³⁹¹

As can be seen here, Mimi's decision to keep or change the personal pronoun in her answer makes all the difference. In the end, she manages to steer the conversation away from herself to say that it is Lyn who is marvellous, all by appropriating words spoken to her. Such is not a simple deed even for humans since it requires a level of mastery over language that reminds us of the practice of a skilled constrained writer.

To return to the scene between Mimi and Cathy, the fact that Mimi is conceived to be an acoustic *and* emotional mirror means that her response is not only a repetition of Cathy's words but also a reflection of the antagonism directed towards her. She could have said, 'Shouldn't I go after her?' but instead keeps the personal pronoun 'you'. It is Mimi who controls the situation by forcing Cathy to face her responsibility: as Lyn's daughter, Cathy should be the one that goes after her. There is a pronounced shrewdness in Mimi's playing with language and nuance to create different meanings. The robot's single repeated sentence

³⁹⁰ Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

allows Cathy, for the first time, to recognise the possibility of Mimi being a threat not only to her identity as a daughter but also to human identity in general. This awareness, however, is accompanied by uncertainty and another more daunting awareness, that of the impossibility of determining whether the robot is a mere machine or a speaking consciousness playing the role of the Derridean Echo figure. Consequently, Mimi's shudder at the end of the brief episode can also be interpreted as a reflection of Cathy's uneasiness when facing an embodiment of radical otherness, a voice that cannot be mastered.

Cathy's anxiety in *Really Old, Like Forty Five* recalls the anxiety and denial expounded by the human characters in Alan Ayckbourn's *Comic Potential* (1998). The play is set in a future world in which android actors—known as *actoids*—have replaced human actors in television production. JCF 3I333 (Jacie Tripletree) is different from her fellow actoids because of her laughter and her ability to appreciate humour, which are considered faults by other humans and even by Jacie herself. Several times during the course of the play, people threaten to melt down the actoid because her existence jeopardises the human-machine boundary and hierarchy. In the beginning, except for Adam, who falls in love with Jacie and treats her as a human being, other characters hold the opinion that she is nothing more than a machine and constantly refer to her as 'it'.

PRIM What it talks about, Adam—the words it uses—its so-called conversation—that's merely an amalgam of all the conversations of all the characters it's played in all these shows it's ever been in. Its personality is nothing more than that. Every time you speak to it, you trigger some response. It pulls it out of its memory bank and blurts it back at you. That's all it's doing.

ADAM Maybe that's all any of us do.³⁹²

In this scene, Prim, the programmer for actoids, is trying to persuade Adam that there is nothing special about Jacie by highlighting the mechanical nature of her speech. Ironically, as pointed out by Adam, Prim's explanation only shows how similar humans and machines actually are. In the same way that Jacie's personality is the amalgam of all the characters she has played or her speech the echo of all the words spoken by these characters, each human individual can be said to be an amalgam of different roles they play throughout their life and their speech the echo of things they have read or heard. Prim's opinion, as such, reveals the truth about the artificiality of the human-machine distinction and hierarchy, as well as the anxiety to preserve the imaginary uniqueness of human beings.

³⁹² Alan Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* (London & New York: Faber & Faber, 1999), 60.

Unlike Jacie of *Comic Potential* and Mimi of *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, who defy the expectation imposed upon them by being too human, Jân of *Instructions for Correct Assembly* demonstrates the subversive potential in the robot figure by doing the exact opposite. At the outset, Jân is expected to be a perfect son, which means that first of all, he is to behave as human-like as possible. To fulfil his role, Jân must also be able to articulate naturally, and this requires a certain degree of spontaneity in his speech, which is beyond the programmable. It appears that he is capable of recording words, sentences or ideas from various sources, and when prompted, he is supposed to pull out from this database a response best corresponding to Hari's and Max's setting. Jân's occasional slips of inappropriate remarks, which have been noticed in the early days and believed to have been rectified by a chip replacement, turn out to be a more persistent problem. During the house party that his parents arrange as an occasion to showcase him as an ideal son, Jân starts to malfunction. When talking about his dream to open a restaurant, Jân unexpectedly blurts out his plan to 'do sort of really low-quality fried chicken and chips', together with nuggets or pie produced from scrap meat to save costs and maximise profits. However, after being questioned by the neighbour Laurie about the ethics of his business plan, Jân completely changes his mind and reverts to being the ideal person expected of him.

JAN And the chicken was a stupid idea. I think I'd rather sell organic tacos with a vegan twist. [...] Or Moroccan influenced burritos. [...] Or locally sourced chutneys. I haven't decided yet. But I know I want it to be good. I want it to be successful. But I don't just mean financially; the most important thing is the quality of the work³⁹³

He then goes on and on, ranting about the meaning of work, value judgement and the organic, inartificial happiness that his parents pursue (which is full of irony, considering how they are realising their dream through an artificial, inorganic being). One moment, Jân is a decent young man who aspires to great things—'I'd like to be a human rights lawyer one day', 'I'd like to take a year out to work for an NGO,' 'I'd like to write novels that subtly reflect the contemporary condition,' 'I want to be the CEO of a huge company', 'I want to be the editor of a national newspaper'. The next moment, he tries to rape the neighbour's daughter, Amy, in the middle of the dining room. He desperately makes up for his misconduct by complimenting the neighbour's wife, Laurie, only to abruptly reveal that he sexually fantasises about her as well as her husband.

³⁹³ Eccleshare, *Instructions for Correct Assembly*.

Jân's constant oscillation between his Jekyll and Hyde personalities during the dinner party is not only a comic strategy to evoke laughter but, in my opinion, also an attempt to give back agency to the robot and draw attention to the significance of the vocalic nature of communication. From this scene, Jân emerges not as a Derridean Echo figure capable of appropriating words to say something for herself but as a purely vocalic echo that dissolves the semantic register, the same kind of echo that infants produce before they are subject to the law of speech.

Through the fate of Echo, logos is stripped of language as a system of signification and is reduced to a pure vocalic. And yet this is not just any vocalic, but rather a vocalic that erases the semantic through repetition. Repetition—the very repetition that is the famous mechanism of the 'performative', through which meaning is stabilized and destabilized—here turns out to be a mechanism that produces the reverse effect. Echo's repetition is a babble that dissolves the semantic register entirely, leading the voice back to an infantile state that is not yet speech.³⁹⁴

Adriana Cavarero's above interpretation of Echo in *Metamorphoses* argues that rather than being driven towards meaning, Echo's repetition signals a rebellion against logos and brings into relief a voice in its infantile state that is not yet speech. Understood this way, echo is neither a result of irony and calculation nor a form of regression but rather, as Cavarero affirms, it 'rediscovers, or remembers, the power of a voice that still resounds in logos'.³⁹⁵ Such an infantile state of the voice is something Jân is deprived of since it is incompatible with the purpose of his existence. The linguistic violence which Hari and Max inflict upon the robot from the first moment he is activated already forecloses the possibility of creating relational dialogues since it denies him the meaningless cries of a baby—the sonorous bond of voice to voice that 'establishes the first communication of all communability'.³⁹⁶ The couple's obsession with the content of Jân's speech effectively erases his voice and with it the prospect of making him anything more than a mere machine. Paradoxically, thanks to a defect in production, Jân regains the infantile voice through the ability to echo indiscriminately contradictory ideas and attitudes. Not only do his unruly speech and behaviour in the dinner party thwart Max's and Hari's delusional plan of constructing a perfect son, but they also liberate the robot from all semantic constraints and reinvest in him the agency of an autonomous speaking subject, neither machine nor human.

³⁹⁴ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul Kottman (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 168.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

In the stage direction of *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, Eccleshare suggests that the son (Nick) and the humanoid (Jân) are played by the same actor so that there may be tension, even confusion, about who we are watching, as the scenes go back and forth between the past and the present. This proves the playwright's intention to accentuate the shared predicament of the human and nonhuman characters: despite their irresolvable differences, Nick and Jân are both victims of their parents' expectations, their status anxiety and their desire for domination. Both are invested emotionally and financially, protected and cultivated so that they can return the parents some affective dividends—an exemplary illustration of how family relations are conceived in terms of economic transaction in a neoliberal model. In the like manner, NANA of *Henceforward....* and Jacie of *Comic Potential*, being robot and female, suffer from a double stigma that further silences their voice. Ayckbourn's female artificial people, as such, draw attention to the way patriarchal society preconditions women and traps them within preconceived expectations. What distinguishes *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and *Really Old, Like Forty Five* from Ayckbourn's android plays, however, is the former two's non-anthropocentric approach in characterising the robots. Ayckbourn's robots are perceived as being more human than humans and often display the kind of 'selfless emotional attachment'³⁹⁷ that the human characters are incapable of. On the contrary, the robots in *Instructions* and *Really Old* still preserve their alterity and resist being annexed, mastered or deciphered. They affirm their status as subjects of society; at the same time, they do not subscribe to the standards of the human moral, epistemological and emotional systems.

As mentioned in the introduction of this section, the robot-human interaction in the plays examined here raises certain questions about the ethics of technology as well as making way for further discussion about human power relations. I would argue that the latter is made possible precisely because the robot characters are played by human actors, which is not merely a matter of budgetary or technical constraint but rather a conscious dramaturgical choice. In recent years, several theatre practitioners have been experimenting with bringing real robots on stage. One of the most prominent names in this movement is the Japanese playwright and director, Oriza Hirata. Working in close collaboration with Hiroshi Ishiguro, a leading researcher on robotics and androids at Osaka University, Hirata and his Seinendan Theater Company have staged some original works such as *I, Worker* (2008) and *Sayonara* (2010), as well as adapted Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* into

³⁹⁷ Clare Brennan, 'Henceforward... Review—Darkly Funny Ayckbourn Revival', *The Guardian*, 18 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/sep/18/henceforward-stephen-joseph-scarborough-review-ayckbourn>.

android plays in 2012 and 2014 respectively. There is no denying that Hirata's robot/android theatre performances are intriguing both in terms of their entertainment quality and their intention to challenge our preconception about the human-nonhuman distinction. However, I would argue that the focus on representing the robot as they are tends to direct the audience's attention towards the robots and, therefore, makes it difficult to extend the theatrical language into topics other than the ethics of technology. On the contrary, plays such as *Henceforward...*, *Comic Potential*, *Really Old*, *Like Forty Five* and *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, through their low-tech approach that renders the robot both present and absent, facilitate both the discussion about human-nonhuman boundary and the process of associating the robot figure with those human beings who suffer from the same kind of violence. At the same time, it will be erroneous to claim that because of this desire to create a link between the nonhuman and the human that contemporary speculative theatre is limited by an anthropocentric concern. It is not as if the animal and the robot are exploited as mere metaphors for human relations, but on the contrary, as I have attempted to show in the previous pages, these non-human agents are both themselves and an excess that accommodates other meanings.

In the same way that contemporary speculative theatre gives rise to a non-anthropocentric experience with nonhuman animals, as I have demonstrated in the previous section, Eccleshare's and Oglesby's plays prompt the audience to contemplate the possibility of a non-hierarchical, non-anthropocentric relationship with inorganic beings and artificial intelligence. Such is not merely a hypothetical question but a real pressing issue, considering the pace of technological development in recent years. It is important to come up with a different understanding of the human and humanity which are distinct from but not opposed to the animal and the machine. The aporia of this nonidentity relationship between the human and the nonhuman, as examined in *Far Away*, *Escaped Alone*, *Human Animals*, *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, does not discourage the audience from striving for an ethical position. We are reminded that as a Derridean impossible, 'becoming animal' or 'becoming robot' does not foreclose possibilities but is the very condition of the possible.

Fostering a mode of relation based on nonidentity thinking is essential to get closer to a different, ethical way of being-together, not only regarding the human-nonhuman interactions but also those between different groups within the human population. As I will strive to elucidate in the next part, there is a striking parallel between the strategies used to

dominate animals and robots and those imposed on certain disadvantaged groups of human beings. Consequently, there are certain similarities in the strategies speculative theatre proposes to reclaim agency for the dispossessed, such as spectralisation or the emphasis on the materiality of the voice instead of the sense-making function of language.

II. UNSETTLING NORMALISED VIOLENCE

As we have seen in the previous part, an essential condition for framing nonhuman animals and robots as the Other lies in language use. Similarly, power hierarchies among different groups of human beings have much to do with the regulation of language and meanings. Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, Edward Bond's *Chair* and *The Under Room* highlight the detrimental effect of monologism, showing how this approach to language constitutes an act of ontological violence. In the same way that several speculative plays show the audience how the restriction of the robot's voice deprives them of autonomy and subjectivity, King's and Bond's plays remind us of the enabling role of monologism, performed by both the authority and individual citizen, in the process of dehumanising other human beings. As a way to resist this form of linguistic violence, speculative theatre suggests the need to shift the focus from the sense-making function of language to the materiality of the voice; in other words, to a vocalic communication that does not seek to master the other's language or forcing one's language upon others. This commitment to dialogue without logos is especially effective in approaching the other's trauma, as it prevents unproblematic identification but still maintains a space of proximity where mutual understanding and rehumanising are possible.

Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* and Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five* warn the audience against the danger of speciesist thinking, which is pervasive not only in human treatment of nonhuman animals but also in our treatment of the homeless and the elderly—people who are often categorised as the surplus population in a capitalist society. It is not a coincidence that these disadvantaged groups are often victims of animal metaphors since this linguistic dehumanisation clears the path for the physical violence that comes next. *Radiant Vermin* and *Really Old, Like Forty Five* expose the way biopolitics has been transformed into thanatopolitics and how the capitalist logic of exchange and utility is exploited to justify systematic cruelty against the homeless and the elderly. At the same time, these plays also strive to undermine the stereotypical and overgeneralised representation of these groups through the spectralisation of the homeless characters (which recalls the strategy used in animal representation discussed in the preceding part) or placing emphasis on the multiplicity of the category known as 'old people'. What these strategies aim to achieve is to disrupt the process of abstracting real, living people and the normalisation of violence enabled by such abstraction. Last but not least, instead of portraying these 'surplus' populations as a burden for society, Ridley's and Oglesby's plays invest in them the power to

give the impossible gift. *Foxfinder*, *Chair*, *The Under Room*, *Radiant Vermin* and *Really Old, Like Forty Five* invite the audience to dwell on the aporia of an unknown language and unstable power relations as a way to engage ethically with the dispossessed, and it is in the creation of this aporetic experience that speculative theatre fulfils its utopian impulse.

1. *Discursive Death of the Other—The Danger of Monologism*

(*Chair—The Under Room—Foxfinder*)

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words, and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever.

(George Orwell, 1984)

Linguistic determinism, a familiar trope in speculative fiction, can take on very different forms. It can be the replacement of an old language by a new, highly restrictive language aimed at dominating all aspects of thinking, such as the Newspeak in George Orwell's *1984*. It can be the omission of specific words and concepts, such as the prohibition of the word 'I' in Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1938) to preserve the ideology of absolute collectivism or the constructed language in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) that excludes the means for expressing possessive relationships. However, it is important to be reminded that the impoverishment of language is not necessarily linked to the number of words or phrases that are made available. The Ascian language in Gene Wolfe's science fiction series *The Book of the New Sun* (1980-1987), for instance, despite being wholly composed of direct quotations from governmental propaganda materials known as 'Correct Thought', retains its communicative function. The people of Ascia, being reduced to speaking only with their masters' voice—a status that does not differ much from that of the androids explored in the previous section—have made of this constrained language a new tongue and managed to express whatever thought they wish. Like the Derridean figure of

Echo, the Ascian achieve freedom of thought and expression through repetition and *différance* in a situation that appears to be hopeless. This example makes clear that it is of vital importance in the resistance against linguistic domination to preserve not only the diversity of language quantitatively speaking but also the multiplicity of meaning and voice within any oral or textual use of language—*heteroglossia*, in short.

In the field of theatre, there are several plays that engage with the subject matter of explicit linguistic constraint as an instrument for thought control. Tom Stoppard *Dogg's Hamlet* and *Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979) are perhaps two of the best-known examples. The two plays are written to be performed together and, as an attempt to teach the audience a coded language to bypass the authoritative surveillance, they are also meant to be a critique against censorship and totalitarianism. Stoppard dedicates *Cahoot's Macbeth* to the Czech playwright Pavel Kohout, who was barred from working in the theatre under the communist reign. The first play, *Dogg's Hamlet*, '[deriving] from a section of Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations',³⁹⁸ dramatises the instability of meanings in language. The Dogg language spoken by the actors, despite sounding like standard English, has completely different meanings. For instance, 'Breakfast, breakfast... sun—dock—trog' can be translated to normal English as 'Testing, testing... one—two—three'. At the end of *Cahoot's Macbeth*, a speech from *Dogg's Hamlet* is repeated, and the audience, by now familiar with the meanings of Dogg's words, realises that the seemingly nonsensical speech is, in fact, a subversive message from the Resistance.

Compared to Stoppard's plays, contemporary speculative plays seem less experimental or perhaps simply set for another approach that is less challenging for the audience. Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, Edward Bond's *Chair* and *The Under Room*, despite their totalitarian and futuristic setting—one of the most characteristic elements of dystopian fiction—present a linguistic landscape that is strikingly similar to that of the contemporary world. This is because the Newspeak of these dramatic universes, as well as that of the audience's reality, is no longer a separate set of language that can be distinguished from Oldspeak but has been thoroughly integrated into language itself. In a situation that reverses the example of the Ascian mentioned above, many characters in *Foxfinder*, *Chair* and *The Under Room* are reduced to be the mere mouthpiece of the regime, completely incapable of forming individual thought, even though there is no apparent restriction on the language they

³⁹⁸ Tom Stoppard, 'Introduction', in *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* (London: Samuel French, 1980).

can use. This Newspeak that makes ‘heretical thought’ impossible emerges from the monologic approach to language that is self-certain, impenetrable and, therefore, unfavourable to the development of one’s ethical relations with others.

William in *Foxfinder* and the unnamed welfare officer in *Chair*, two representatives of the authority in their respective world, demonstrate two contrasting ways in which monologism operates through officialese. First, the welfare officer in Bond’s play, whom we only know as Welfare Officer Fourth Class VK74K through her introduction to Alice at the beginning of the interview, is a great example of the extent to which consistent use of a rigid, impersonal bureaucratic language negatively affects an individual’s ability to relate to other human beings.

WELFARE OFFICER [...] In the course of the incident the soldier’s tunic (fatigues) sustained three tears. An elderly escortee was shot once. Terminal. No known next of kin. A chair sustained damage.
[...] The chair was deemed unsalvageable. The department does not accept liability for replacement. The cost of repair to the soldier’s uniform falls below the recovery minimum. Accordingly the department lodges no claim for damages. The female escortee had already forfeited her civil rights. I deem the incident to have resulted in no significant material damage.³⁹⁹

It is immediately noticeable that the welfare officer’s words convey the whole ideology of absolute equality that the regime claims to uphold. They are detail-oriented yet concise. Each of the three ‘objects’ involved in the incident is assigned the same amount of attention and addressed with utmost clarity: the soldier’s tunic, the chair, and the escortee. Within this language of rationality and efficiency, the inclusion of the escortee—who is no longer considered a person because she is condemned by the state for some unknown crime—among other damaged objects is perceived as completely logical. As the officer further explains, ‘Criminals are public enemies. They cannot be tolerated. You would agree if you knew the harm and suffering they cause. Pity for them is an insult to the law. It is a conspiracy with the criminal to aid and abet the crime.’⁴⁰⁰ Within the mode of thinking that is shaped by this monologic language, it is incomprehensible that Alice could bring a chair down to the elderly prisoner. Her action presents an anomaly that cannot be tolerated in a society that requires every word spoken, every action performed to fulfil the only purpose of consolidating the state’s ideology.

³⁹⁹ Bond, *Chair*, 97-98.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

William, the young foxfinder in Dawn King's play, unlike the welfare officer in *Chair*, speaks a language that is highly embellished and constantly resorts to metaphor in opposing pairs, most notably the light versus darkness and civilised versus savage metaphors. From 'a country marches on her stomach', 'the night is darkest just before the dawn. We suffer and toil to bring our country back into the light', 'I have to examine every part of my patient. Otherwise how can I be sure that I haven't left the tumour festering in the dark?', to 'Hunger is a suitable reminder of the spectre of starvation that haunts our land', it is as if William is reciting from an epic poem in which the hero is not himself as an individual but the country of England of which he is a member. Compared to the efficient, rigid language in *Chair*, the foxfinder's language seems to be much freer; nevertheless, I would argue that it is just another form of officialese, specifically adapted to accommodate the condition for domination. Oppression in the world of *Foxfinder*, while still relying on rigorous law enforcement, derives its sustenance from people's fear and anxiety. For these emotions to thrive, imagination is indispensable. It is, therefore, essential for the dominant language to appear vague, almost poetic so that there is always room for imagination. However, it is but a deceiving surface since at the core of this ornate language is the same obsession with maintaining a single predetermined meaning to all linguistic expressions and a dualistic mode of thinking. Several times during the course of the play, William resorts to direct quotations from his training manual, which effectively forecloses the possibility of genuine dialogue because differences in opinion simply cannot exist.

JUDITH We don't have foxes.

WILLIAM Continued denial of the infestation is one of the signs of collaboration. The corrupt farmer wants to hide the truth for as long as possible so that they can continue to sabotage their own farm and—

JUDITH But we'd never!

WILLIAM hasten the collapse of civilisation. Is that what you want? To live wild and savage? To rut in the woods, grunting and sweating like a filthy beast?⁴⁰¹

Despite the contrasting appearance of their bureaucratic languages, William and the welfare officer are united in their total submission to conventional codes of expression from which only the authoritative voice can be heard. It has been pointed out that in her analysis of Eichmann's crime, Hannah Arendt assigns a central role to language, and her coining of the phrase 'the banality of evil' is used to address this specific character of his crime in relation to language. She writes:

⁴⁰¹ King, *Foxfinder*, 44

[...] officialese became his language because he was incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché [...] The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.⁴⁰²

Arendt identifies Eichmann's adherence to clichés, stock phrases, conventional codes of expression and conducts a demonstration of his 'authentic inability to think'.⁴⁰³ Eichmann does not speak the Nazi language but is rather spoken by it. His continued impersonation of technocratic Nazi language is, for Arendt, the utmost moral scandal.⁴⁰⁴ Arendt's 'banality of evil' has often been misunderstood and misinterpreted as proclaiming that evil is common to everybody or that there is an Eichmann in each one of us. The 'banality' that Arendt has in mind, however, refers to the rootlessness of evil, the absence of evil motives. She further explains:

Evil is a surface phenomenon, and instead of being radical, it is merely extreme. We resist evil by not being swept away by the surface of things, by stopping ourselves and beginning to think, that is, by reaching another dimension than the horizon of everyday life. In other words, the more superficial someone is, the more likely will he be to yield to evil. An indication of such superficiality is the use of clichés, and Eichmann [...] was a perfect example.⁴⁰⁵

It is important to note that the allure of the mode of communication that relies on clichés, stock phrases and expressions with predetermined meaning, however, affects not only those who work for the regime like Eichmann, William in *Foxfinder* or the welfare officer in *Chair* but everyone who desires domination over others. A monologic approach to language can be seen both in the top-down operations carried out by a bureaucratic machine and in the everyday language of common people in their interaction with each other. It is perhaps in the latter that monologism produces an even more destructive impact in the form of normalised violence.

Here, I will turn to the last of Edward Bond's trilogy, *The Under Room*, to demonstrate how the *agon* of the play eventually boils down to the struggle between monologism and heteroglossia among common people, as foreshadowed in Joan's insistence during the first moments of their meeting that the immigrant call the place where he is hidden 'cellar'—the correct word—and not 'under room'—the immigrant's own made-up word.

⁴⁰² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 48-49.

⁴⁰³ Hannah Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture', *Social Research* 38, no.3 (1971): 417.

⁴⁰⁴ Gideon Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 332.

⁴⁰⁵ Hannah Arendt, quoted in Bethania Assy, 'Eichmann, the Banality of Evil, and Thinking in Arendt's Thought', *The Paideia Archive: Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 6 (1998): 7-15.

Writing on monologism, Mikhail Bakhtin contends that it is a form of violence imposed upon the other so that the speaker can be shielded from reality.

Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (*thou*). With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) *another person* remains wholly and merely an *object* of consciousness, and not another consciousness. No response is expected from it that could change everything in the world of my consciousness. Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive* force. Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materializes all reality. Monologue pretends to be the *ultimate word*. It closes down the represented world and represented persons.⁴⁰⁶

Heteroglossia, on the other hand, is '*another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way', a speech that 'constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*'.⁴⁰⁷ If monologism reduces *another person* to the status of an object of consciousness, heteroglossia de-objectifies and brings into relief the existence of another consciousness. In *The Under Room*, Bond seems to suggest that to resist the temptation of monologism and preserve the heteroglossia of language, it is important to commit oneself to the unintelligible—the voice in its pure expression. This commitment, this openness to vocalic exchange, as a result, can bring one closer to the other's trauma as well as to the suppressed aspects, the 'stranger' within oneself, as we shall see in the case of the character Jack.

The Under Room, first staged in 2005 by Big Brum at Roade School, Northampton, is also set in the year 2077. Like *Have I None* and *Chair*, *The Under Room* introduces the audience to a totalitarian state where humanity is severely put to the test, and the characters are forced to make impossible choices to preserve their humanness. The play revolves around three characters: an immigrant, Joan and Jack. Joan comes home one day to discover that an immigrant has broken into her house to hide from the army. Instead of reporting him to the authority, Joan decides to keep the immigrant hidden in the cellar and helps him find a way to cross the border to the North by contacting Jack, a fixer. Tension arises when the money the immigrant brought with him mysteriously disappears, and Jack threatens to turn both Joan and the immigrant over to the army. It is now revealed that Jack is a swindler who works for both the resistance and the army. Unexpectedly, the immigrant finds himself drawn to this

⁴⁰⁶ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 292-93.

⁴⁰⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

‘evil’, seemingly immoral character more than to the charitable Joan and expresses his wish to run away with Jack. Joan kills the immigrant in an outburst of rage.

What makes *The Under Room* a piece of remarkable formal experiment is the split of the immigrant character into body and voice.⁴⁰⁸ In his stage direction, Edward Bond explains in a detailed note about this split.

*The DUMMY ACTOR speaks the DUMMY’s words. Usually he stands upstage left. He wears blue jeans, brown suede shoes and a bright, deep-red shirt buttoned at collar and cuffs. The DUMMY is a basic human effigy: trunk, arms, legs, head. It has no other features. It suggests stuffed white pillowslips or bolsters. It is about half the size of the DUMMY ACTOR.*⁴⁰⁹

The appearance of a Dummy and an actor speaking its words instantly conjures up the art of ventriloquism. Nevertheless, against expectation, the Dummy resists its role as an instrument for the illusion forming process, as its lack of facial features and its idleness throughout the whole play prevent it from ‘coming to life’. In addition, the distance between the Dummy and the Dummy Actor, as well as their minimal interaction, deny the necessary conditions for a conventional ventriloquist performance. If ventriloquism is ‘illusion without deception’,⁴¹⁰ to quote David Goldblatt’s succinct definition, such an apparent lack of illusion raises concern as to whether what transpires in *The Under Room* qualifies as ventriloquism at all. When asked how the Dummy Actor is supposed to act, Bond replies: ‘The actor has to be like the Dummy: impassive. He gestures only rarely and usually speaks without emotion. The emotion is in the Dummy.’⁴¹¹ In other words, the faceless, nameless Dummy is the vent that speaks through the actor, who is effectively transformed into its mouthpiece. Ventriloquism in *The Under Room*, as such, is further complicated, for it is not simply the matter of giving voice to an inanimate object but of returning the human voice to a subject who has been reduced to a mere thing. At work is a double-reification. On the one hand, the immigrant dehumanises himself in his struggle with the trauma of a lifetime plagued by war and violence. He is acutely aware of his dummy status, claiming, ‘I am nothing. I make myself nothing. It is better. Since a long time. I am not real. I listen to myself and I say who is that

⁴⁰⁸ For another analysis of this theatrical choice, see Eléonore Obis, « Corps et voix du pantin dans *The Under Room* d’Edward Bond », in « Où est ce corps que j’entends ? » : *Des corps et des voix dans le théâtre contemporain*, éd. par Pierre Longuenesse et Sandrine Le Pors, Études littéraires (Arras : Artois Presses Université, 2020), 55-66.

⁴⁰⁹ Edward Bond, *The Under Room*, in *The Chair Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), 38.

⁴¹⁰ David Goldblatt, *Art and Ventriloquism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 37.

⁴¹¹ Edward Bond, quoted in David Tuailon, *Edward Bond: The Playwright Speaks* (London & New York: Methuen Drama, 2015), 96.

who is speaking those stupid things'.⁴¹² As the play progresses, we witness the immigrant's ongoing negotiation between the materiality of his body and the immateriality of his voice in a quest to regain his subjectivity and humanness—a process symbolised in the act of exchanging clothes between the Dummy Actor and the Dummy. Parallel to the immigrant's movement towards the human is Joan's attempt to objectify him, which serves as a defence mechanism to help her cope with an otherness that she has never before experienced.

It can be argued that Joan's reification of the immigrant's identity is a result of her extreme monologic approach to language, which in turn stems from her desire to dictate the relationships with the immigrant and the alien within herself. From the beginning, Joan is presented as a character highly susceptible to influence. In their first encounter, Joan asks the immigrant how long he has been in the country, to which he replies: 'It is better I dont say that. It is better to know nothing. Then when you are asked it is easier to be silent.'⁴¹³ Later, when she is questioned by Jack, she parrots almost to the letter the immigrant's utterance: 'It's better to know nothing isnt it. Then if we're questioned we cant say anything.'⁴¹⁴ Throughout the play, Joan continuously demonstrates her superficiality, not only in her submission to clichés but also in her reluctance to engage with ambiguity. Joan holds an unshakable conviction that she is a good person who can perform good deeds and manage to live in decency, regardless of how unfavourable her circumstances may be. Furthermore, she expects it to be the case for everybody as well, which explains her inability to accept the immigrant's claim that there may be a reason for Jack's wickedness.

Describing the character Joan, Bond writes:

At the beginning of the play, when she discovered the alien, she feared he could put her into trouble with the police. So she acted like the police herself and began by asking him a lot of questions. But the longer he stayed the more questions she had to ask herself about herself and what she is doing. Those questions are too much for her to ask, she cannot face them. Joan has found the alien in herself, which is very destructive if it gets frustrated.⁴¹⁵

In other words, as the immigrant works through his trauma, Joan also goes through a journey of self-discovery and what she finds threatens her sense of security and integrity. If the social function of clichés, stock phrases, standardised codes of expression and conduct is to protect one against reality, then it is only understandable that Joan resorts to these practices, considering the kind of brutal world she finds herself in. With the arrival of the immigrant,

⁴¹² Bond, *The Under Room*, 43.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴¹⁵ Bond, quoted in Tuailon, *Edward Bond: The Playwright Speaks*, 95.

however, her shield starts to dissolve little by little, which is frightening but momentarily motivates her to react and think differently.

I know that now. When you're not free you lose everything. I'm an immigrant in my own country. This house is my prison. This is the last night I'll spend in it. I was so proud of my little flat. Now I long to leave. I was proud of my job. Yet I was afraid to read the papers that passed through my hands. The things you told me haunt me. I can't get the pictures out of my head.⁴¹⁶

With this realisation, Joan assumes the existence of an ontological common ground between her and the immigrant, from which she attains a sense of connection and belongingness. However, faced with the immigrant's unintelligible language of trauma, Joan starts to doubt their mutual likeness.

Describing the immigrant character, Bond writes:

Normally he is logical, pragmatic and cold-blooded—because he is in a situation where he thinks only of how to survive. Even when he tells Joan about his most traumatic experiences he isn't demonstrating that he is a poor wounded human being. Only later, when he is asleep and relives his experiences of terror in his dream, do all his emotions, fears, indignation, all he represses, come out in this language that the others can't understand. It is like verbal bleeding.⁴¹⁷

The traumatic experience mentioned here is one in which, as a child, the immigrant was forced not only to kill one of his parents but also to choose which one to be his victim. He then became a child soldier for seven years. The language that seeps out in his sleep is unintelligible, not as an unintelligible foreign language that may become intelligible once it has been mastered, but as the language of trauma that is never meant to be understood or interpreted. From a psychoanalytic perspective, his somniloquy can be seen as the symptom that bridges the Symbolic and the Real. According to Žižek, the Real, which is disguised in its symptoms, is 'an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation'.⁴¹⁸ In Lacan's thought, the Real

became that before which the imaginary faltered, that over which the symbolic stumbles, that which is refractory, resistant. Hence the formula: 'the real is the impossible'. It is in this sense that the term begins to appear regularly, as an adjective, to describe that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ Bond, *The Under Room*, 60.

⁴¹⁷ Bond, quoted in Tuailon, *Edward Bond: The Playwright Speaks*, 96.

⁴¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 75.

⁴¹⁹ Alan Sheridan, 'Introduction', in *Écrits—A Selection*, by Jacques Lacan, trans. Alan Sheridan (London & New York: Routledge, 1977), x.

In their senselessness and meaninglessness, the immigrant's repetitive screams 'Brach! Brach! Brach!' or his unpronounceable lines such as 'Mnches. Mnches. Vczxq bzcvcx' rupture the materiality of language and illuminate the Real of trauma. These utterances can also be characterised as the 'signifier-in-isolation', to borrow from Tom Eyers—signifier referring to 'a material mark, isolated from networks of relational meaning'.⁴²⁰ The significance of the signifier-in-isolation, according to Eyers, is 'to hold the subject together' when functioning as the fourth of the Borromean rings that links the three registers of psychoanalytic experience—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In other words, it is through this unintelligible language of the immigrant that one can approach the Real of his subjectivity and his trauma.

To Joan's monologic and logocentric mind, the immigrant's screams must be stopped because she simply cannot relate to this type of language. When she fails to wake him up so that they can communicate in a language she can master, Joan suddenly becomes violent and starts attacking the sleeping alien, verbally then physically. The situation gets out of hand when the immigrant later announces that he prefers to run away with the fixer Jack rather than with Joan. Her hope for a different life thwarted, she falls back to cliché as a strategy of self-preservation. Joan's tendency to abandon her own thinking capacity in favour of ready-made statements, as seen in the examples mentioned previously, culminates in the most graphically violent moment of the play. Right before she repeatedly stabs and dismembers the Dummy in his sleep, using the very knife that killed his parents, Joan lets out a stream of accusation.

JOAN Immigrants. (*Stops.*) That's why they come here. Aliens. They want to take my house. Take our land. Loot the food from our stores [...] You killed your father and mother. That's easy! It's an offence against nature! It's harder to kill strangers! That's an offence against their community! They stick together! I'm alive after all your plots and schemings! [...] He's a suicide bomber [...] They're terrorists. He's keeping me hostage! [...] they used to be our streets.⁴²¹

The final clichés she lets out before committing the act of murder prove the lasting damage of a lifetime committed to monologism that renders Joan incapable of breaking free from the ideological constraint of her society. Despite moments of resistance, her desire for sameness, certainty and stability prevails. Just like Eichmann is spoken by the Nazi language, William in *Foxfinder* and the welfare officer in *Chair* spoken by the bureaucratic language of their totalitarian regimes, Joan is ventriloquising all the xenophobic sentiment, stereotypes and

⁴²⁰ Tom Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the Real* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 5.

⁴²¹ Bond, *The Under Room*, 70-71.

hatred perpetuated in her world. At this moment, Joan's voice, far from being her own and the symbol of her subjectivity, is hijacked by ideology. The physical violence shown on stage in the final scene, as such, points to a failure in resisting the power of monologism and engaging with heteroglossia.

However, it would be inaccurate to claim that *The Under Room* ends on a pessimistic note. While Joan fails to engage with the immigrant's voice of trauma, the fixer Jack somehow manages to create a rapport with this voice. Joan, in her desire to understand (so as to feel safe in a power relation) and in her obsession with the *content* and exact *meaning* of the immigrant's screams, is deaf to the materiality of his voice, which calls for acknowledgement rather than interpretation. Jack, on the contrary, never shows any sign of compassion for the immigrant, and he himself admits, 'I ain understand what a nasty time 'e's bin through!'⁴²² Some may say that Jack's reaction is immoral, which is not the case, for it is not a moral failure in recognising the inevitability of choice. Edward Bond makes a rather virulent comment on the purpose of having Jack and Joan as two characters with opposing personalities:

My play is actually written against all these normal left-wing propaganda plays, those awful vulgarized Brechtian tracks, where someone comes on stage to tell you what is politically obvious or say: 'How terrible!' Here, I make it a job for the audience to put all these things together so that they can understand the alien as his situation.⁴²³

If Joan, according to Bond, represents the left-wing mode of thinking, with her superficial sympathy and her unshakable conviction in moral righteousness, Jack is situated at the other extreme, as someone who seems callous and does not care what sort of questionable deed is asked of him as long as it helps him survive. As a playwright known for his skilful use of language, Bond successfully reveals the two characters' contrasting social and moral attitudes through different styles of speech. Joan's rather stylised speech is imbued with a rhetorical, pompous tone, while Jack's sociolect is on the verge of the vulgar: ''E's lucky. I 'elp people 'oo cant groan when they're awake! They 'ad their tongue cut out. 'N their limbs saw off. It's a merry ol' world ain it.'⁴²⁴ The peculiar spelling of contractions, which has featured in many of Bond's earlier plays, reflects the reality of social stratification.⁴²⁵ The fact that

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴²³ Bond, quoted in Tuailon, *Edward Bond: The Playwright Speaks*, 96.

⁴²⁴ Bond, *The Under Room*, 52.

⁴²⁵ See Hilde Klein, 'Edward Bond's Use of Sociolects in His Dramatic Work', *Atlantis* 13, no. 1/2 (1991): 93–101.

Jack's language is less pleasant to the ear already points toward a common ground between his voice and the traumatised voice of the immigrant.

Like the immigrant, Jack's situation is characterised by ambiguity: being both the resistance and the army, Jack serves as the subversive force that undermines the hegemony while working with the authorities to reinforce it. To Joan, the uncertainty of Jack's political and ethical position is not only incomprehensible but also unacceptable. In her usual practice of monologism, she must categorise him as evil and immoral. Jack's indifference to the distinction of good and evil does not necessarily mean that he has given up on humanity. It simply shows that he is pragmatic and capable of perceiving the complexity of reality without any desire to reduce it to a ready-made, graspable explanation. He is far from being innocent, yet, he does not turn to crime out of weakness but hope.⁴²⁶ It is this hope that has motivated him to seriously consider leaving with the immigrant, despite having derided the proposition at first. In his relationship with the latter, Jack never claims to understand what he has been through. This openness to the other's voice and language produces an unexpected therapeutic effect, as it helps the immigrant face his trauma and unearths his suppressed memory. Towards the end of the play, it is also Jack who gains the ability to perceive the Dummy Actor, who has, up until that point, remained invisible: '*He raises an arm and then points at him. He is going to speak. Instead he goes out up the stairs.*'⁴²⁷ Jack's reluctance to voice this discovery embodies his resistance against the monologic approach in his experience with the other, which proves to be much more ethical compared to Joan's emphasis on audible, understandable language.

It must be stressed here that Joan's submission to monologism and her failure to engage with the heteroglot language should not be subject to character judgement. As much as she performs the role of a perpetrator who relies on linguistic and physical violence to fulfil her desire for domination and security, Joan is also a victim of a system that perpetuates this kind of violence. While committing the act of murder, Joan blurts out several phrases in the immigrant's unintelligible language, as if she herself has been infected with this voice of trauma. In judging her action on an individual basis, the audience risks reproducing the same monologic relation that Joan has with the immigrant. If, as Bakhtin points out, 'in the presence of the monologic principle, ideology—as a deduction, as a semantic summation of representation—inevitably transforms the represented world into a *voiceless object of that*

⁴²⁶ Bond, *The Under Room*, 73.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid*, 68.

deduction',⁴²⁸ resisting monologism would be a political act that opens oneself up to other ways to experience the world, de-objectifies and gives back the voice to those who have been silenced by any form of linguistic determinism. In the next section, we will continue on this examination of speculative theatre's utopian impulse in creating an aporetic experience for the audience, this time in relation to two disadvantaged groups in a neoliberal capitalist society.

2. *Reclaiming Agency for the 'Surplus' Populations*

(*Really Old, Like Forty Five—Radiant Vermin*)

Like the mythologies of the age of science, the new planetary vulgate rests on a series of oppositions and equivalences which support and reinforce one another to depict the contemporary transformations advanced societies are undergoing—economic disinvestment by the state and reinforcement of its police and penal components, deregulation of financial flows and relaxation of administrative controls on the employment market, reduction of social protection and moralizing celebration of 'individual responsibility'—as in turn benign, necessary, ineluctable or desirable [...].

(Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, 'NewLiberalSpeak: Notes on the New Planetary Vulgate')

To press on with the question of dehumanisation, I will now turn to Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five* and Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* to demonstrate how the same kind of structural violence that we have witnessed in the totalitarian worlds of *Chair*, *Foxfinder* and *The Under Room* can still thrive in a (supposedly) democratic society. These two plays reveal the mechanism that exploits economic principles and the language of efficiency to justify the systematic elimination of people in two socially disadvantaged groups, the elderly and the homeless. In their different ways, *Really Old, Like Forty Five* and *Radiant Vermin* resist the simplistic portrayal of these marginalised groups as helpless victims in the face of institutionalised racism and the 'science' of eugenics. If the former re-establishes the individuality of the elderly as a way to counter the discourse that reduces them to mere statistic figures or problems to be dealt with, the latter invests in the murdered homeless a spectral quality that recalls the subversive quality invested in the spectral animal discussed in the first part of this chapter.

⁴²⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 83.

According to data from *World Population Prospects: the 2019 Revision*, by 2050, the population aged 65 and over will account for 16% of the world population, up from 9% in 2019. In the next three decades, one in four persons living in Europe and North America could belong to the demographic group aged 65 and over.⁴²⁹ What strikes me as remarkable but also inevitable in my cursory reading about the ageing population issue is the fact that most official documents on the topic use the age associated with retirement⁴³⁰ (60-65, depending on geographical location) as a threshold that demarcates the old from the non-yet-old, the problematic from the yet-to-be-problematic categories. In assigning an identity to individuals based on a quantifiable criterion, that is, chronological age, discourses on the ageing population already identify themselves with market-driven biopolitics. The particularity of each and every aged individual is obliterated and replaced by the generality of a group that, despite its heterogeneity, is to be treated as one big problem.

With Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, the audience witnesses the juxtaposition of the official biopolitical discourse and the specific case of a dysfunctional family whose ageing and ailing members struggle to maintain their individuality and their place in society. In the second scene of the first act, the government policy official Monroe is giving a presentation on how to solve the problem of overcrowding streets caused by slow-walking elderly and introducing the plan to 'return to the elderly a sense of purpose' by forcing them to either take up an active grandparenting role or participate in medical Trials. Those who do neither, however, will be 'assisted' with the 'increasingly popular option of Home Deaths'.⁴³¹ It becomes clear that Monroe's project is informed by the logic of social and economic utility, of which the only alternative is death. Within this scheme, the elderly are either associated with illness and infirmity or with the positive paradigm of 'active ageing', as reflected in the footage shown at the beginning of Monroe's presentation.

MONROE *addresses a conference from a podium.*

⁴²⁹ 'Ageing', United Nations (United Nations), accessed 23 September 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/ageing>.

⁴³⁰ The initial age of retirement proposed by the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1880 was 70, not as a result of any extensive research, but simply because he knew that the majority of people would not live to that age and those few who did would only benefit from pension for several years at most. Only in 1916 that retirement age was lowered to 65, perhaps as an attempt to make the scheme a little more realistic, even though life expectancy in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century still fluctuated around 46 (See James C. Riley, 'Estimates of Regional and Global Life Expectancy, 1800-2001', *Population and Development Review* 31, no.3 (2005): 537-43). That is to say, neither 70 nor 65 has anything to do with the nature of old age. Regardless, these figures representing chronological age, chosen arbitrarily for political and economic purposes, have come to dominate the way old age is defined and perceived.

⁴³¹ Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

The speech is simultaneously broadcast from a screen against a background of diverse footage representing old age and infirmity.

A street scene: the old people are circled and highlighted for the various obstructions they seem to cause with their sticks and buggies and general lack of purpose.

A hospital scene: elderly patients on drips, struggling and sleeping.

These scenes are contrasted with those of:

Grandparents: as they read stories to small children; swing them in the air; play happy families.⁴³²

The ailing and infirm body of old age, which symbolises all that is obstructive and undesirable, is here juxtaposed against the active body of a person who, despite their age, still retains their usefulness. Since the late 1980s, the positive articulations of old age, including ‘healthy ageing’, ‘productive ageing’, ‘active ageing’ or ‘successful ageing’, have gained much currency and introduced a crucial conceptual shift from the prevalent cultural imagination of senescence. The emphasis on lived experience, on ageing as a process rather than a state, is meant to reclaim the agency and autonomy of older people from the negative paradigm. However, it also runs the risk of becoming another justification for violence. Oglesby’s play demonstrates how ‘active ageing’, defined by the World Health Organization as a mode of thinking or a policy direction that ‘allows people to realize their potential for physical, social, and mental wellbeing throughout the life course and to participate in society according to their needs, desires and capacities, while providing them with adequate protection, security and care when they require assistance’,⁴³³ can easily subscribe to capitalist ideology and be used as an excuse for the oppression of the older population. It is also noticeable how Monroe’s claim of empowering the elderly by subverting the negative association of old age with redundancy and irrelevance, by ‘[giving] everyone a function, regardless of their age, and [making] their last days on earth as fulfilling as they can possibly be’, resonates with the Hegelian paradigm of ‘becoming a subject’. Humans can only defeat the ‘animal’ in our natural being by confronting death through struggle and work, which, translated into the language of neoliberal capitalism, means that the useless, the idle or the purposeless only have themselves to blame if they are not treated as human subjects.

This explains how dehumanisation becomes an essential instrument in normalising violence against the elderly, starting with dehumanisation through language. Several times in his presentation, Monroe makes a seamless transition from animals to old people to reinforce the idea that these two groups occupy the same status. Addressing the problem of

⁴³² *Ibid.*

⁴³³ World Health Organization, ‘Active Ageing: A Policy Framework’ (World Health Organization, 2002), 12.

overpopulation, he mentions the self-regulation strategy used by chimpanzees, which is devouring each other. The official then clarifies that the purpose of raising this example is not to suggest that we should eat old people since, apart from the ethical question, people are ‘of dubious nutritional value once past the age of child rearing’.⁴³⁴ Instead, under the noble banner of contribution to scientific progress, the elderly can be used as a more advanced version of lab animals: ‘Even if the hamster could remember how many times he’s gone round the wheel he couldn’t possibly tell us. So. And. What we now need, on a large scale, is people.’⁴³⁵

Dehumanisation takes on another form in the erasure of individuality and the generalisation of all those assigned to a specific group. In the case of *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, we witness the realisation of a technology of power that ‘introduces mechanisms such as forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures’, whose purpose ‘is not to modify any given phenomenon as such, or to modify a given individual insofar as he is an individual, but, essentially, to intervene at the level at which these general phenomena are determined, to intervene at the level of their generality’.⁴³⁶ Faced with the problem of overcrowded streets, the government is looking into the possibility of creating a senior lane reserved for the elderly, whose slowness and purposelessness have become a source of irritation for others. A researcher involved in the project, however, challenges the plausibility of this plan, citing the heterogeneity of the category known as ‘old people’.

AMANDA I don’t see how you can legislate for all old people this way. What’s the cutoff? What about old people who are fast? Young people who are slow? At what age can you use the lane? What happens when two people are travelling at the same speed in different lanes. How do you indicate that you want to overtake?⁴³⁷

Amanda’s concern is simply brushed off by Monroe since it is evident that they will not be able to establish any boundary if all variables are taken into consideration. The fast old people or the slow young people are anomalies to be eliminated from the equation if biopolitics is to be employed to manage society.

⁴³⁴ In an interview, Oglesby reveals that *Really Old, Like Forty Five* was inspired by Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* and through it, she wants ‘to provoke the kind of shock that is funny at the same time’. See Tamsin Oglesby, quoted in Keith Watson, ‘Tamsin Oglesby Views Age with Shock and Awe’, *The Metro*, 27 January 2010, <https://metro.co.uk/2010/01/27/tamsin-oglesby-views-age-with-shock-and-awe-60352/>.

⁴³⁵ Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

⁴³⁶ Michel Foucault, ‘*Society Must Be Defended*’: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, ed. François Ewald, trans. David Macey (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 246.

⁴³⁷ Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

There is absolutely no question relating to an individual body, in the way that discipline does. It is therefore not a matter of taking the individual at the level of individuality but, on the contrary, of using overall mechanisms and acting in such a way as to achieve overall states of equilibration or regularity; it is, in a word, a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined, but regularized.⁴³⁸

Both the disciplinary and regulatory technologies of biopower are technologies of the body, but ‘one is a technology in which the body is individualized as an organism endowed with capacities, while the other is a technology in which bodies are replaced by general biological processes.’⁴³⁹ The obfuscation of the individual at the level of individuality in regulatory technologies is also an essential precondition for a quantitative approach in measuring the efficacy of any policy or scientific research that involves large groups of human beings. The fact that people are transformed into statistics, however, also makes it possible to discuss their suffering and death in an impersonal manner completely void of emotion or moral engagement.

MONROE	[...] No-one has died from Ryanol.
AMANDA	Fifty four percent of our patients have died within the first four months of admission.
MONROE	They’re old. Forty six percent haven’t.
AMANDA	After suffering paralysis.
MONROE	Temporary.
MIKE	The majority do tend to recover.
AMANDA	Experiencing severe loss of balance.
MIKE	Sixty three percent.
AMANDA	Headaches, insomnia, low blood pressure and incontinence.
MONROE	But in the process a significant percentage of these people are recorded as having experienced total recall.
MIKE	That’s a <i>hundred percent</i> . ⁴⁴⁰

In the above exchange, the accountant Mike and the policy official Monroe advocate the continuation of the Ryanol drug trial on the institutionalised elderly, although this drug, meant for memory improvement, has produced detrimental side effects that make it a poison more than a remedy. Mike’s and Monroe’s goal-oriented mind, driven by the sole concern for concrete results required by investors, can only think in terms of numbers. Statistical figures dictate that compared to the fifty-four per cent death rate and the high percentage of patients suffering from paralysis, severe loss of balance, headaches, insomnia, low blood pressure and incontinence, the perfect rate of total recall is indisputable proof of the drug’s efficacy. In the name of promoting life and improving the quality of life, science becomes instrumental to a biopolitical economy that not only lets dies but also actively creates conditions of death for a

⁴³⁸ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 246-47.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴⁴⁰ Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

specific group of marginalised people. As a result, the old people who are killed or poisoned by Ryanol are no longer perceived as individual human beings but generalised and then abstracted into workable numbers.

Similar to *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* exposes the logic of disposability in neoliberal capitalism, and the way institutionalised racism enables and justifies violence directed toward the most vulnerable populations. Jill's and Ollie's commitment to serial murdering the homeless after witnessing the magical transformation of a vagrant's corpse into a designer kitchen is undoubtedly motivated by self-interest. Nevertheless, it is racism that provides the young couple with the necessary justification for their action. Racism, according to Foucault, is not the traditional notion of an ideology or hatred directed against a societal group distinguished from others by religion, skin colour or language, for instance. For Foucault, racism in the twentieth century has turned into a biological struggle for existence, 'the internal means of defense of a society against its abnormal individuals'⁴⁴¹. It is 'primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die'⁴⁴² so that it is possible to create a new relationship of war. In this new antagonistic relationship, killing is not a matter of ensuring personal safety but maintaining collective well-being.

The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer.⁴⁴³

The homeless, identified by Jill and Ollie as 'the ones who will never contribute', 'the scum', 'the scroungers', 'the sponger', and 'the vermin',⁴⁴⁴ deserve to be killed because their existence supposedly poses a threat to progress. This logic of social and economic utility enables the couple to draw the conclusion that it would be better for their victims to become objects of more practical use, such as a coffee table or a lawnmower. Like the elderly in *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, the homeless in *Radiant Vermin* suffer from linguistic dehumanisation in the form of animal metaphors. While the former is subsequently reduced to statistics, the latter is literally reified in the sense of being transformed into objects.

⁴⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (London & New York: Verso, 2003), 317.

⁴⁴² Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 254.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁴⁴⁴ Ridley, *Radiant Vermin*, 47.

The rhetoric of utility as justification for violence, however, soon exhausts itself as Jill and Ollie embark on the quest for perfectibility. It is now made clear that the basis for ‘natural selection’ is not an individual’s ability to contribute to society but the individual’s ability to contribute to the production of surplus value and the accumulation of capital—‘the moral law that is expressed in the platitudes of neoliberalism’.⁴⁴⁵ The couple in *Radiant Vermin* does not stop renovating, even though their initial goal—a comfortable house for their baby—has been achieved. It is no longer a matter of satisfying a need but of gratifying insatiable desires. Their obsession with remodelling their house and expanding their properties once the present house stops changing mirrors the continuous self-propelling process with no end in sight of neoliberal capitalism’s ‘economic growth’. This acceleration of disposal is emblematic of what Zygmunt Bauman terms the ‘consumerist syndrome’ which ‘consists above all in an emphatic denial of the virtue of procrastination, of the “delay of satisfaction” precept—those foundational principles of the “society of producers” or “productivist society”’.⁴⁴⁶ Consequently, it is not the desire for possession *per se* but the ephemeral bliss associated with the moment of acquisition that sustains contemporary consumerism.⁴⁴⁷

The shift from possession to acquisition, from duration to transience, forecloses the possibility of establishing any meaningful relationship between humans and objects. As pointed out by Bernard Stiegler:

Consumers must not become attached to their objects: they must consume, precisely, by detaching themselves from them, by destroying them and by disposing of them in order to follow the diversion of the energy of their drives toward the ever-newer objects propelled towards them by industrial innovation.⁴⁴⁸

In the case of Jill and Ollie, this detachment from objects of consumption reveals not only the madness of a consumerist model that promotes addiction but also the unethical aspect inherent in the predetermined disposability or planned obsolescence of objects, how it completely disregards the process and the human resources it takes for these objects to come into existence. By laying bare the violence, exploitation, and sacrifice involved in transforming human beings into things, *Radiant Vermin* provides a poignant criticism against

⁴⁴⁵ Simon Clarke, ‘The Neoliberal Theory of Society’, in *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 55.

⁴⁴⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, quoted in Chris Rojek, ‘The Consumerist Syndrome in Contemporary Society: An Interview with Zygmunt Bauman’, *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4, no. 3 (2004): 293.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁴⁴⁸ Bernard Stiegler, ‘Pharmacology of Desire: Drive-Based Capitalism and Libidinal Dis-Economy’, trans. Daniel Ross, *New Formations*, no. 72 (2011): 151.

the consumerist logic. In the same way that Ollie and Jill avoid getting too personal with their victims, the couple is incapable of establishing any emotional bond with their own house, simply because it is but an aggregation of disposable objects. As soon as they acquire something new, this newness has already lost its value, and the thing is then to be replaced as soon as possible.⁴⁴⁹

Through the young couple's behaviour, the audience may get a glimpse of not only how biopower and psychopower coexist but also how different bio- and psychotechnologies work together to help consumerism and neoliberal capitalism constantly reorganise and reinvent themselves. Drawing on Foucault's notion of 'biopower', Bernard Stiegler further develops the concept of 'psychopower', which he characterises as the power that 'controls the individual and collective behaviour of consumers by channelling their libidinal energy toward commodities'.⁴⁵⁰ The use of psychotechnologies such as marketing techniques or algorithmic driven analytics to create unsatisfied needs and generating wants ultimately results in 'the destruction of the libido and with it the sublimatory capacities of humanity, which lie at the basis of every civilization'.⁴⁵¹

As the victim of both biopower and psychopower, it appears that the homeless in *Radiant Vermin* are utterly powerless in the face of state-sponsored and systematic violence. Throughout the play, they remain nameless and faceless characters whose existence is limited to the extent they are invoked in Jill's and Ollie's narratives. Even though one homeless named Kay indeed made it to the stage, the fact that she is played by the same actress playing the Mephistopheles-like Miss Dee suggests that it is but a ploy to furnish the young couple with the moral justification they need—that is to say, to help them keep on killing with a clean conscience.

KAY [...] I should be scared. But I'm not. Just the opposite. I feel... calm. More calm than I've felt in a long time. It's as if... all my stumbling, all my mistakes, everything has led me here. For the first time in my life, I'm exactly where I should be.

⁴⁴⁹ As Bauman remarks, 'Consumerism's seductive power rests in its promise of liberation from the power of "things". Things are important not because they are owned (the incarcerating, immobilizing impact of possessions is openly challenged and rejected), but because they can be consumed—that is "used up" and disposed of immediately after—before they have a chance to harden or petrify into rocks barring the way...' See Bauman, quoted in Rojek, 'The Consumerist Syndrome in Contemporary Society', 294.

⁴⁵⁰ Stiegler, 'Pharmacology of Desire', 150.

⁴⁵¹ Pieter Lemmens, "'This System Does Not Produce Pleasure Anymore'—An Interview with Bernard Stiegler', *Krisis—Journal for Contemporary Philosophy*, no. 1 (2011): 34.

[...] I want to be part of your home, Jill, Father—Oh, yes, yes, I know you're not really a priest. But in my eyes... you are. Only a man of God could've offered me... this chance—
[...]⁴⁵²

Kay, being willing to sacrifice herself to become part of Jill's and Ollie's home, also expresses her profuse gratitude towards her murderers for helping her fulfil the purpose of her life. It is hardly conceivable that such is the reaction of someone who is about to be electrocuted by a cattle prod. It would be more accurate, therefore, to think of Kay's visibility not as an example of successful resistance against the biopolitics that obscures the individual body or a rare moment of human connection between the perpetrator and the victim but proof of further dispossession imposed on the homeless. This shows that their voice, when not being silenced, is hijacked by the authority to sublimate and perpetuate the very violence inflicted upon them.

That is not to say there is no attempt to create situations in which the homeless victims can regain their agency. In the same way the spectral animal is capable of subverting the power relation between the human and the nonhuman, as I have explored in the first part of this chapter, the spectral homeless return to haunt their murderers in *Radiant Vermin*.

She starts to look around at everyone.
She's trying to say something.
The words won't come.
She keeps trying.
Nothing.
Then...
She flinches as if she's heard something.
She looks around.
She flinches again... again...
She is becoming increasingly fearful.
She starts to let out tiny gaps.
She gets more and more agitated.
She gaps get louder until—
*She screams!*⁴⁵³

In a state of extreme agitation, Jill claims that the olives have become human eyes, and there is human hair growing on the sofa. It is as if the process of dehumanisation has been reversed and the spell that transformed the victim's body into things temporarily suspended, exposing the truth of the mutilated human body parts within the objects of consumption. The radical insecurity of the uncanny brought into relief in this moment of horror reclaims posthumous power for the homeless victims, as it ironically forces Jill into a condition of homelessness.

⁴⁵² Ridley, *Radiant Vermin*, 64.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 77.

‘Home’ is not simply house, roof, family. There are people who have houses and families but no ‘homes’. For this reason, familiarity is not in itself equivalent to ‘feeling at home’ though familiarity is, of course, an indispensable ingredient in any definition of ‘home’. Over and above this, we need the feeling of confidence: ‘home’ protects us. We also need the intensity and density of human relationships—the ‘warmth’ of the home. ‘Going home’ should mean returning to that firm position which we know, to which we are accustomed, where we feel safe, and where our emotional relationships are at their most intense.⁴⁵⁴

Instead of the feeling of confidence, the warmth and the safety of a familiar space, what Jill experiences in her dream house are fear and constant anxiety. In the 2015 production at Soho Theatre, the minimalist design of a ‘pristine white stage’⁴⁵⁵ encapsulates the barrenness and emptiness of Jill’s and Ollie’s house. Paradoxically, her being subject to the gaze of an inaccessible and inhuman Other also makes it possible for Jill to establish, for the first time, an intense emotional relationship with objects and, in so doing, disrupts the consumerist logic of detachment. The spectralisation of the homeless, compared to rendering them stage visibility as in the case of Kay, proves to be a more fruitful strategy in challenging the perpetrator-victim power relation and the ideologies upon which this relation is founded. Even though it is true that the effect of haunting does not last in the play, as Jill and Ollie soon overcome their moments of doubt and moral reflection to embark on an endless quest for dream houses, I would argue that it is with the audience that the effect of spectralising is to stay.

When Jill and Ollie ask us to ponder if we’d do what they did, it’s not that Ridley expects us to say yes. Rather, he seems to hope that we’ll look beyond the play’s ludicrous surface and consider, say, our roles in gentrification, or how we treat the poor and ‘undesirable’ of society.⁴⁵⁶

As pointed out by Jacob Horn in his review of *Radiant Vermin*, the question posed to the audience is not meant to elicit an answer but rather to open up a space for us to reflect on our complicity and responsibility in a society where institutionalised racism and neoliberal biopower have made it acceptable to maltreat, exploit and dispose of the poor and the ‘undesirable’. It is clear that Jill and Ollie should not be the only ones haunted by the ‘surplus’ people who have no worth either in life or death, according to capitalist value judgement. We do not need to see olives turning into human eyes or hair growing from a sofa in our house to be aware that we, too, are haunted. *Radiant Vermin* serves as a reminder that it is up to the

⁴⁵⁴ Agnes Heller, *The Power of Shame: A Rational Perspective* (London & New York: Routledge, 1985), 239.

⁴⁵⁵ Michael Billington, ‘*Radiant Vermin* Review—Philip Ridley’s Nightmare Tale of a Dream Home’, *The Guardian*, 12 March 2015, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/12/radiant-vermin-review-philip-ridley-soho-theatre-london>.

⁴⁵⁶ Jacob Horn, ‘*Radiant Vermin*’, *CurtainUp*, 2 June 2016, <http://www.curtainup.com/radiantvermin16.html>.

audience to choose how to respond to this disturbing knowledge—to negotiate a way to ethically address the spectral Other and the Other within us or flee from the burden of thinking and responsibility like Jill and Ollie.

Also working against the official biopolitical rhetoric that dehumanises, *Really Old, Like Forty Five* employs a somewhat different strategy than *Radiant Vermin*. The play attempts to rehumanise and give faces to old people by presenting the audience with three elderly siblings. Robbie, Alice, and Lyn, each with a distinct approach to the social pressure placed upon them, each chooses their own ‘technologies of the self’. If technologies of power ‘determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject’, technologies of the self ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’.⁴⁵⁷ In other words, while the former objectivises, by promoting an objective, impersonal approach to a population rather than to individuals and by objectifying human beings, the latter acts as a counterbalance that reinvests power in the subjective and the individual. Even though it is true that the choices of how individuals take care of themselves are shaped by socio-cultural narratives, there exists a mutual dependence between structure and agency. As we shall see with the three siblings in *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, the dominant narratives of old age do not completely disappear but are appropriated by each individual into diverse and complex versions that defy any attempt to assign fixed, stable meanings to them.

In their initial effort to prove themselves useful in society in compliance with the new government requirement, Lyn and Alice take care of their grandchildren, 16-year-old Milly and 13-year-old Dylan, respectively, whose parents are permanently away or busy. Their brother Robbie, who ‘looks as though he’s in his sixties but is dressed younger’,⁴⁵⁸ works as an actor, always keeps himself busy with auditions and is determined to affirm his virility by dating younger women. During the play, the three siblings’ plans to remain viable contributors prove to be untenable. Alice succumbs to illness and readily accepts her role as a Guinea pig for scientific research. Lyn, ‘a woman with a degree in genetic engineering’, who has written for the *New Scientist*, given lectures and been on University Challenge, in her

⁴⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock, 1988), 18.

⁴⁵⁸ Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

struggle with Alzheimer's, finds solace in the company of a robot nurse. Unlike his two sisters, who are sent to the Ark—the 'health' facility where medical Trials are carried out, Robbie manages to maintain a surface of efficiency until it is discovered that he is actually much older than he pretends to be. To hide his real age, which is eighty-five, Robbie not only puts a strain on his health with a heavy, active schedule but also goes to the extreme by wearing a face mask. His deepest fear of becoming invisible has motivated him to disguise himself to conceal the abject body of old age. On the one hand, it would be accurate to say that Robbie has subscribed to the assimilationist ideology, which embraces old people as long as they adhere to the norms, namely to the performance of what Julia Kristeva terms the *corps propre*—one's own clean and proper body. All traces of the ageing body's negativities are either erased when the circumstances allow or hidden when modification is no longer possible. On the other hand, the fact that Robbie successfully deceives people with his youthful performance highlights the performative, socially constructed aspect of ageing and, as such, contests the rhetoric of ageism, which 'legitimizes the use of chronological age to mark out classes of people who are systematically denied resources and opportunities that others enjoy, and who suffer the consequences of such denigration'.⁴⁵⁹

Compared to Robbie, who, despite his advanced age, is still capable of self-fashioning and self-management to a great degree, his sister Lyn finds herself in a much more challenging situation because of Alzheimer's. Paradoxically, the illness, while depriving her of memory and the ability to conform to the social norms of communication, also liberates her from all literary constraints. It is almost impossible to have a normal conversation with Lyn since she constantly jumps from one thing to another, mixing up stories from different periods in her life, but it is precisely in these disjointed, random details that the audience gets a glimpse of her emotion as well as her personal history. Not only so, because of her illness, Lyn is no longer trapped in the elderly identity forced upon her: there are moments when it looks as if she not only retrieves the memory but also relives the experience of being a child or a young woman. Chronological age is rendered irrelevant, and with it, all the normative expectations associated with age. What is of great importance in terms of agency, however, is not Lyn's quasi-power of time-travelling but the radical uncertainty one faces when trying to identify if her unconventional words and behaviour are a result of a shift in the temporal plane of perception and existence or, whether they have always been aspects of the elderly Lyn. Without aestheticizing illness, I believe that Lyn's memory disorder has facilitated the

⁴⁵⁹ Bytheway Bill, *Ageism* (Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1994), 14.

expression of her multiple identities. In one scene, Lyn mistakes the hospital for a hotel, believing she is on vacation and causing shock to all present by casually blurting out, ‘Only thing I miss is the sex’.

LYN Are we going? Well that’s marvellous, but I haven’t packed yet. Let me go and pack. I’ve got a few letters of complaint to write about the standard of food in this hotel I can tell you. I’ll be glad to see the back of this place. Only thing I’ll miss is the sex.

She goes.

DYLAN Did she say sex? (*Beat.*) Why did she say sex?

ROBBIE No idea.

ALICE She doesn’t even like it. It’s like pantomime, she used to say. Silly and rude, but at least it’s only once a year.

ROBBIE She must have meant something else.

DYLAN Maybe she meant drugs.⁴⁶⁰

It is inconceivable to Lyn’s brother and grandson that she means what she says, especially since her statement also suggests that she has engaged in sexual activity during her stay at the hospital. Of course, she could have meant drugs, but if we posit that it is sex she is talking about, we are still left with the unanswerable question of which identity of Lyn has uttered the sentence. It could very well be that at this moment, Lyn is reliving some forgotten past of her younger, wild self. It is equally possible that the speaker is no other than the elderly Lyn—a possibility the male members of her family (and perhaps many of the audience) reject, simply because it does not conform with the popularised image of old women as beings without sexual desire.

The last of the siblings, Alice, like Lyn, reiterates the narrative of decline that is conventionally associated with old age. As I have discussed above, Lyn undermines this narrative by showing not only that illness does not define who she is but also the fact that because of this illness, the multiplicity of her identity can be brought into relief. Alice presents yet another approach to individual resistant politics by embracing her *deviant body*, which ‘through illness, disability, or deformation deviates from the norm and causes an “amoral” fascination, unease or fear’.⁴⁶¹ She refuses to think of herself as a passive victim suffering from loss, accepting to be mutilated and tested because she wants to help with the research, believing that ‘there’s too much fuss made about bodies’, that ‘[i]n a hundred years everyone will understand that bodies are just bodies and there’s no such thing as death.’⁴⁶² When everyone in her family is alarmed by the amputation of her leg, Alice, on the contrary, remains unshakably optimistic, assuring them that stem cells can help grow things back and

⁴⁶⁰ Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

⁴⁶¹ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 95.

⁴⁶² Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

even if she cannot grow another leg, it does not matter because the old one ‘was no good anyway’. On the one hand, Alice’s willingness to sacrifice herself for science seems to endorse the neoliberal biopolitical argument for the regularisation of the human body based on economic and utilitarian principles. While no longer participating in economic activities, the deviant body of old age is still valuable as long as it contributes to the advancement of human knowledge. Understood this way, Alice’s calm attitude regarding the mutilation of and the experiment on her body, like Robbie’s busy schedule and his full-face mask, is motivated by a desire to remain socially relevant, regardless of the price she has to pay to be perceived as such. On the other hand, it would be wrong to assume that social recognition and inclusion alone can account for the drive behind Alice’s behaviour. Rather, I would argue that by willingly taking part in a human experiment, Alice transforms her body into a gift—a gesture of giving that affirms values exceeding the classical ‘exchangist’ economic terms. It must be noted that the discourse surrounding the nature of the gift comes from various disciplines and, very often, contains conflicting claims. Nevertheless, as I will attempt to demonstrate next, they all seem to converge at one point, which purports that the gift holds the potential to disrupt the logic of capitalist exchange—a logic that reduces everything, everyone to market value and the experience of exchange into instant satisfaction.

In his 1925 essay entitled *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, the French sociologist Marcel Mauss explores how exchange systems of various so-called archaic societies are built upon the obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate. Mauss’s theories of reciprocity and gift exchange have elicited a passionate rebuttal from Jacques Derrida, who goes as far as to say that the essay ‘speaks of everything but the gift’, that it ‘deals with economy, exchange, contract (*do et des*), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift and countergift—in short, everything that in the thing itself impels the gift and the annulment of the gift.’⁴⁶³ Derrida, seizing upon the aporetic nature of the gift which makes it another name of the impossible, provides us with a counter-intuitive and perplexing condition of the gift: ‘For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift.’⁴⁶⁴ Derrida’s notion of the pure, unconditional or free gift is, in turn, often criticised because of its overemphasis on unilateralism, which is ‘the

⁴⁶³ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 24.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

consequence of grievous alienation’⁴⁶⁵ and ignores the possibility of non-contractual exchange. In defence of Mauss’s reciprocity paradigm, Mary Douglas writes:

There should not be any free gifts. What is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor’s intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient. Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties. Once given, the free gift entails no further claims from the recipient.⁴⁶⁶

and

If we persist in thinking that gifts ought to be free and pure, we will always fail to recognize our own grand cycles of exchanges, which categories get to be included and which get to be excluded from our hospitality.⁴⁶⁷

Even though Douglas does not invoke Derrida’s name, it can be deduced that the above statements are responding to the Derridean notion of gift as the impossible. In a more direct attack, Terry Eagleton characterises the Derridean gift as promulgating a ‘perversely self-indulgent ethics’.⁴⁶⁸ For Eagleton, it is but another case that reflects Derrida’s ‘customary libertarian distaste for measure, regulation, identity, equivalence and calculability—unglamorous phenomena, to be sure, but vital to any form of social existence’⁴⁶⁹—a criticism that can be read as an accusation of idealism and elitism, not only against Derrida himself but perhaps against deconstructionism on the whole.

Despite their different points of departure and their opposing stance on the issue of what qualifies as gift, it is surprising to discover that many thinkers and writers who have written on the subject actually agree on the subversive power invested in the gift, even though this common ground is not extended to include the operation of such power. Mauss’s understanding of the gift as a total social fact and his emphasis on the obligations to give, to receive and to return envisions a circular gift economy in which the exchange of gifts is essentially agonistic—a status game in which the recipient strives to out-repay the previous gift to avoid humiliation. At first glance, it seems as if this gift theory subscribes to the logic of limitless and incremental growth that characterised capitalism. Nevertheless, I would argue that the social antagonism inherent in the practice of gift exchange does not necessarily lead to an overflow of commodity and consumption but, on the contrary, can be beneficial to the establishment of meaningful social relations even in a capitalist society, *provided that the*

⁴⁶⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice* (Yale University Press, 2018), 108.

⁴⁶⁶ Mary Douglas, ‘Foreword—No Free Gifts’, in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, by Marcel Mauss, trans. W. D. Halls (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), ix.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁴⁶⁸ Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 107.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

emphasis is placed not on the market value of the gift but on what Mauss refers to as the *hau* of the gift—the spirit of the gift in the language of the Maori.

The *taonga* [a certain article] and all goods termed strictly personal possess a *hau*, a spiritual power. You give me one of them, and I pass it on to a third party; he gives another to me in turn, because he is impelled to do so by the *hau* my present possesses. I, for my part, am obliged to give you that thing because I must return to you what is in reality the effect of the *hau* of your *taonga*.⁴⁷⁰

According to the above explanation of the gift exchange process that revolves around the *hau* of the gift, it is clear that Mauss' idea of reciprocity requires a third party whose role is to ensure that what is caused to circulate is not material objects but the profit one gains from the gift, 'the effect of the *hau*'. It is my belief that there must be a certain interval, not only between the act of giving and of being repaid but also between the act of receiving and passing the gift to a third party—a duration which makes it possible for the gift itself to be worked upon and transformed into something else before being given away again. This manipulation, despite altering the appearance of the initial gift, retains its *hau*. It is here that we encounter the utopian aspiration in Mauss' theory: the gift economy that obliges to give, to receive and to return holds the potential of reinforcing justice in the distribution of wealth, not only limited to economic wealth but extends to all forms of excess.

The problem that emerges when we try to transpose Mauss' idea into social theory is the anonymity that characterises most social exchanges. Within this paradigm, it is only possible to create ties among individuals and to foster just relationships if we know exactly from whom we receive and to whom we give, what we receive and give, which is not always the case in reality. It is here that Derrida's notion of the pure, unconditional gift shows its strength. Eagleton is probably right when he writes, 'To give unconditionally is to give whether a return is likely or not, not (as Derrida considers) to give without thinking of one'⁴⁷¹; however, Derrida's position is never a 'question of mental hygiene',⁴⁷² as Eagleton implies. What Eagleton seems to have overlooked is the fact that Derrida, despite asserting that it is impossible for the gift to appear as such, never says that there is no gift. For Derrida, a gift cannot be known, but it can be thought of, the act of giving can be done, even though—and here lies the aporia of the gift—it is 'something you do without knowing what you do,

⁴⁷⁰ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift—The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 15.

⁴⁷¹ Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 108.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 109.

without knowing who gives the gift, who receives the gift, and so on'.⁴⁷³ It is because of this *radical uncertainty* that the gift, if there is any, 'would no doubt be related to economy' but simultaneously, it is also that which, 'in suspending economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange', that which 'opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure, and so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return'.⁴⁷⁴ Derrida further elaborates:

If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible.⁴⁷⁵

To bring this all back to *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, the mutilated body of Alice can qualify as the unconditional gift discussed by Derrida.

LYN Why's she got her hand bandaged then? Why have you got that thing coming out of your nose?

ALICE Tests.

LYN What for?

ALICE Obesity.

LYN You're not obese.

ALICE No but other people are.⁴⁷⁶

Within this dramatic universe, Alice does without knowing what she does, without knowing the identity of those who will receive her gift and, because of the eradication of individuality in a biopolitical system, she will be just another nameless subject among many in scientific reports. As mentioned previously, Alice's gift is still related to economy—her participation in the medical trials is supposed to be an exchange for care and board in the hospital and, perhaps, for a sense of social relevance. However, it also produces an excess, which cannot be named or measured but which is essential in generating meaningful relations beyond known relations—those between Alice and the people of the future who benefit from the cure developed from the tests she is part of. It is, as Derrida concludes, 'The gift is not a gift, the gift only gives to the extent it *gives time*. The difference between a gift and every other operation of pure and simple exchange is that the gift gives time. *There where there is gift, there is time*. What it gives, the gift, is time.'⁴⁷⁷ This given time, within which new, unknown

⁴⁷³ Jacques Derrida, 'On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney', in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 60.

⁴⁷⁴ Derrida, *Given Time*, 7.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

⁴⁷⁷ Derrida, *Given Time*, 41, original emphasis.

relations emerge, defies the logic of instant consumption or satisfaction as well as the logic of exchange based on market value.

The way *Really Old, Like Forty Five* unsettles the binary paradigm of negative versus positive ageing, as well as the capitalist logic of exchange and gift economy falls in line with contemporary speculative theatre's attempt to create an aporetic experience of uncertainty in which the mode of dualistic thinking and the monologic approach to communication are challenged. In the following part, I will examine another issue important to rethink the relationship between an individual and their community, that of suicide. My goal is to show how the discussion and representation of this politically and ethically polemical issue further elucidate the aporetic nature of speculative theatre's utopian impulse. Following this examination of suicide, I will move on to explore the kind of community that speculative theatre hopes to foster, one that would maintain the proximity necessary for interactions but simultaneously resist the imperative to annex or eradicate differences.

III. IDIORRHYTHMY—THE POSSIBILITY OF LIVING TOGETHER

In the previous parts of this chapter, we have discussed how speculative theatre addresses several binary oppositions that obstruct the establishment of ethical relationships. These include the human-nonhuman division based on speciesism, the preference for intelligible and fixed language over unintelligible and unstable language or the capitalist value judgement imposed on disadvantaged groups such as the homeless and the elderly. The plays examined all converge in their pursuit of an aporetic theatre experience that brings into relief the possibility of a nonidentity relationship characterised by undecidability and proximity.

In the first section of this chapter's final part, I will examine another issue addressed in speculative theatre that is equally problematic because of the dualistic way it is often represented. I will demonstrate how Edward Bond's *Have I None* and *Chair* adopt a paradoxical approach in their representation of suicide, as the two plays dramatise it but simultaneously resist graphic violence. This dramaturgical decision embodies the two plays' ambiguous stance concerning the political and ethical implications of suicide. As a result of this ambiguity, the binary logic of value judgement in the interpretation of suicide is disrupted, and the suicide character reclaims the meaning of their own death in a thanatopolitic society. Being an aporetic experience, the audience's encounter with suicide in *Have I None* and *Chair* not only opens a space where ungrievable lives can be grieved but also facilitate the interrogation of the conditions that produce these ungrievable lives and make suicide the only solution to maintain one's humanity.

Sara's and Alice's suicides in Bond's plays push to the extreme the tension between the individual and the collective, which adds another dimension to the struggle between the self and the Other seen in the human-nonhuman interactions and the treatment of different groups of the human population examined in the previous parts. Contemporary speculative plays re-enact various types of being-together, which may appear different but which converge in their binary logic of belongness and exclusion. As an alternative, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* proposes another kind of relationality, an aporetic community known as *idiorrhythmic*—that is, a quasi-community in which individuals maintain their connection and proximity, not through their shared ideology or identity but their respect for the particularity of the rhythm of the others.

1. *Challenging the Binary Logic in Suicide Discourse*

(*Chair—Have I None*)

To take one's life is to force others to read one's death. For when we categorize a death we do not record a pure fact (if any such exist). Rather, we produce a reading that depends upon the physical and subjective context: natural or unnatural death, homicide or suicide. As with all human actions, we ask questions about free will and determinism. In the case of suicide the hermeneutic task is particularly elusive. [...] The difficulty or even impossibility of reaching a 'correct' reading has led some to consider suicide a random phenomenon that corresponds to the infinite variety of human motivations.

(Margaret Higonnet, 'Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide')

While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences—detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction, and eventually horror comics.

(Geoffrey Gorer, 'The Pornography of Death')

A represented suicide, that is, a suicide mediated through images, narratives or performance regardless of being real or fictional, asks to be read in two ways. The first, as pointed out by Margaret Higonnet, is a reading that revolves around the suicide itself—its possible causes and consequences, its meanings. The second, equally important and not completely separable for the first reading, has to do with examining the form in which a particular suicide is portrayed. It is by interrogating this 'framing', which determines what to include or exclude, that the audience/reader can gain some insight into the prevalent cultural perception of a contentious issue like suicide.

British theatre is not unfamiliar with the topic of suicide. Early modern English playwrights are known to have extensively exploited suicide (then referred to as 'self-slaughter' or 'self-murder') as a dramatic tool to create strong emotional responses from the audience. Shakespeare's tragedies are known for their enduring concern for suicide: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra* all feature characters committing suicide with various motives. At a time when the act of terminating one's own life was seen both as a crime and a sin, unanimously condemned and punished by the authority, the fact that suicide managed to have such a prominent presence on stage appears to be incomprehensible. However, we are reminded that before the emergence of the

regulatory function of biopower, it was of crucial importance for the sovereignty to display the discipline of the dead body of the suicide as a cautionary tale for others. The punishment for self-murder varied across Europe, but ‘dragging, desecration and crossroads burial was practised throughout’.⁴⁷⁸ In the case of a suspected suicide, the coroner would immediately inform the local authority, and a jury of male members was then formed, all to ensure that what had been an act of private desperation became ‘a very public spectacle, with the initial discovery and viewing of the body, the process of the inquest and then the ignominious nature of the public burial’.⁴⁷⁹ This need for a spectacle of death, especially when it is an unlawful and sinful death, is one of the reasons that made it acceptable for early modern English theatre to dramatise suicide, provided that it did not directly challenge the established legal and religious doctrines. While it is true that from the beginning of suicide’s representation, ‘there is some evidence of a structural disagreement between good and bad deaths that depended on motive and method and throughout the long history this disagreement is constantly in flux’,⁴⁸⁰ one factor remains constant: the binary logic of suicide discourse, this very desire to categorise suicide as good or bad, tragic or heroic, active or passive, an expression of freedom and resistance or a narcissistic resignation in hostile circumstances. Both artistic creation and scientific research have been complicit in perpetuating this binary system, especially in relation to gender. For instance, in Western culture, it is an enduring myth permeating contemporary cultural production that women die for love and men die for glory.⁴⁸¹ Gender assumptions are also used as a basis for interpreting the different methods of suicide among the two groups: men tend to resort to firearms—active, lethal, capable of producing visible bodily disfigurement; while ingested poison—passive, uncertain, and less visible—is seen as an essentially feminine method.⁴⁸² It seems, at times, that even a suicidal death in the twenty-first century cannot fully escape from the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres that has been extant in Western thought since Aristotle.

However, it is not to say that there has been no attempt in artistic practices to liberate the representation of suicide from the limitation of the binary logic. Nor is this resistant operation a recent phenomenon. In the field of theatre, Emanuel Stelzer notes that already in

⁴⁷⁸ Ron Brown, *The Art of Suicide* (London: Reaktion, 2001), 88.

⁴⁷⁹ Dolly MacKinnon, *Earls Colne’s Early Modern Landscapes* (Burlington & Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 213.

⁴⁸⁰ Brown, *The Art of Suicide*, 24.

⁴⁸¹ Silvia Sara Canetto, ‘She Died for Love and He for Glory: Gender Myths of Suicidal Behavior’, *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* 26, no.1 (1993): 1-17.

⁴⁸² For a comprehensive list of researches on this topic, see Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide: Knowledge Production, Theory and Suicidology* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 15-34.

early modern English drama, there are several plays such as George Wilkins' *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1607) and William Sampson's *The Vow Breaker* (1636), that 'show a wide array of emotional responses to suicide: horror, hostility, but also pity; commiseration, as well as ridicule'.⁴⁸³ Rather than situating suicide at the climactic moments, these plays rely on the polyphony of voices to 'dramatize the different reactions of a community'.⁴⁸⁴ Contemporary speculative theatre's experimentation with suicide representation in a critical manner that facilitates multiple interpretations, as such, is but a continuation of this tradition. Still, it remains true that the particular socio-political conditions of the present demand theatre to do more than just reflecting the diversity of emotional responses on suicide.

In the same way that the representation of the apocalypse resists graphic, visual violence, many speculative plays tend to obscure the self-annihilation act. The audience either only gets a glimpse of the aftermath, with the body of Alice hanging in the doorway at the end of Edward Bond's *Chair*, or is simply given a hint of what is about to transpire when Sara sways and falters on her way out of the house after drinking the poisoned soup in *Have I None*. There is little that can qualify as the fantasy or 'pornography of death' that Geoffrey Gorer condemns. These suicides, by refraining from spectacularising death and suffering, truthfully reflects what Foucault refers to as the 'disqualification of death' that is instrumental to the consolidation of biopower. Instead of being marked by 'spectacular ceremonies in which individuals, the family, the group, and practically the whole of society took part', since the nineteenth century, death has become 'something to be hidden away', 'the most private and shameful thing of all'—in short, 'the object of a taboo'.⁴⁸⁵ Paradoxically, the fact that this privatisation of death is represented on stage, no matter how abstract or ambiguous it is, 'requalifies' death by making it once again a public ritual. The framing of suicide in these plays does not provide the audience with a set of ready-made emotional responses, as in the case of some early modern plays mentioned above; rather, it simply creates the conditions that would allow the audience to form their own interpretation by interrogating the many political, social, ethical assumptions they have on the subject of suicide. Speculative theatre, through its staging of suicide, does not completely abandon the poetic and aesthetic aspects of this phenomenon, but these aspects are part of an effort to carve out a space where

⁴⁸³ Emanuel Stelzer, 'Social Implications of Love Suicide in Early Modern English Drama', *Critical Survey* 28, no. 1 (2016): 75.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 247.

ungrievable lives can be recognised and grieved instead of one where death is simply consumed or obfuscated.

In Edward Bond's *Have I None*, suicide has been lurking in the background long before Sara drinks the poisoned soup in the final act. The uninvited guest Grit brings with him the news of a suicide outbreak from where he comes.

GRIT [...] On the way to work I had to cross a bridge. Crowd on it. Sitting and standing both sides on the parapets. Done up in overcoats. Looked like rows of pigeons—roosting or walking up and down looking for a place. Then one of them'd throw theirself in the river. That started it. Splash—splash—splash. Five or six throw themselves in. Others climb up to fill the gaps they left. The ones in the river float off. Their overcoats are blown out on top of the water like bladders or big blisters [...].⁴⁸⁶

Grit's story immediately reminds Jams of the time when he was sent to an outbreak in Reading.

JAMS [...] They walked the streets carrying a knife in front of them—like this. (He holds his fork and arm's length.) Point up. Hundreds of 'em. Streets were chocker. Going up and down. Like sleepwalkers holding a candle out. Dead quiet. No one spoke. No one bumped into anyone. All of a sudden one of 'em'd stab theirself. Stab stab stab. Hacking and ripping. Arms and legs. Chest. Neck. As if they wanted to stab themselves as many times as they could before the knife fell out of their hand. Never stabbed anyone else. Rest didnt turn around. [...] The symptoms are always the same. That's why I asked if you saw their faces. Blanks.⁴⁸⁷

It becomes clear from these descriptions that suicide has become a collective, public phenomenon, one that is portrayed as an infectious disease by Jams. This medical reading (with the appropriate medical vocabulary such as 'symptom' or 'outbreak'), which is the official version of events fed to the resettled population, seems to be the most plausible explanation for the utter incomprehensibility of the suicide' behaviour. Driven by a mysterious, malevolent force, these people are no longer sane or conscious of their own actions.⁴⁸⁸ On the other hand, it is interesting how Grit's description of people lining up on a bridge and throwing themselves in the river, while resembling the pigeons, also invokes the popularised image of the mass deaths of lemming, which has been used by some animal activists to show that animals share the human capacity for self-reflection and intent,

⁴⁸⁶ Bond, *Have I None*, 9.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ Mass suicide caused by unknown force has emerged as a popular trope in the (post-)apocalyptic thriller genre in recent years. *The Happening* (2008) and *Bird Box* (2018) are two of the best-known films that exploit this trope. Despite the initial perplexity, however, the protagonists in these films always manage to figure out the exact cause and the manner in which one is 'infected' (the toxin released from trees that target ever smaller groups in *The Happening*, supernatural entities affect through sight in *Bird Box*) so as to protect themselves from the suicide curse. The solution for an overarching need to see through the mystery is always a singular, certain explanation. Such is not the case with *Have I None*.

including the intent to kill themselves. However, scientific research has debunked this myth and claimed that lemmings do not suicidally hurl themselves off cliffs, but their deaths are ‘an unfortunate consequence of a dense population of creatures emigrating together at the same time’.⁴⁸⁹ Perhaps like the lemmings, the suicidal people in *Have I None*, in some inexplicable, mysterious way, overwhelmed by herd mentality, have lost the capacity to think and act rationally on an individual basis. As Jams remarks, ‘They all do the same—whatever it is’.⁴⁹⁰ Once again, at work is the operation of dehumanisation that renders the suicides a non-human status even before their death.

These two readings attest to a thanatopolitics that strive to control and administrate not only death but also the hermeneutics of death. The notion of thanatopolitics, despite not being explicitly mentioned by Foucault, is already implied in his conception of biopolitics in *History of Sexuality*, where he discusses the ‘disqualification of death’. Among all deaths, suicides occupy a particular position since it is perceived as a transgression from both the disciplinary and regulatory perspectives. Foucault rarely touches upon the question of suicide, but when he does, it is to highlight the subversive quality invested in the act of deliberate self-destruction.

It is not surprising that suicide—once a crime, since it was a way to usurp the power of death which the sovereign alone, whether the one here below or the Lord above, had the right to exercise—became, in the course of the nineteenth century, one of the first conducts to enter into the sphere of sociological analysis; it testified to the individual and private right to die, at the borders and in the interstices of power that was exercised over life. This determination to die, strange and yet so persistent and constant in its manifestations, and consequently so difficult to explain as being due to particular circumstances or individual accidents, was one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life.⁴⁹¹

Suicide, as such, poses a threat to both biopolitics and thanatopolitics, and it is of vital significance that a thanatopolitical state controls the meaning and interpretation of suicidal death. As Stuart Murray aptly points out, ‘what is intolerable to the state is less the living,

⁴⁸⁹ Melissa Hogenboom, ‘Many Animals Seem to Kill Themselves, But It Is Not Suicide’, *BBC*, 6 July 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20160705-many-animals-seem-to-kill-themselves-but-it-is-not-suicide>.

⁴⁹⁰ Bond, *Have I None*, 9.

⁴⁹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 138-39.

who can be administrated, but the dead, whose posthumous claim threatens to disrupt the system'.⁴⁹²

This explains why both Grit and Jams avoid talking about a third possible explanation for the mass suicides in their world: that people deliberately and consciously kill themselves to challenge the state's abuse of power, from the abolishment of the past and all personal relations to the policy of 'resettlement' that strips people of all personal possession. Within the context of *Have I None*, what seems to be the most individual of acts—suicide—turns out to be the manifestation of a collective consciousness that values freedom and the possibility of choice. Bond himself reveals:

By committing suicide, the people in the play are acting like those people in prison who deliberately wound themselves—as if their body was the prison and they were destroying it to get out... They only manage to hurt themselves, of course. In the play they commit suicide not because they are fed up with life but because they want to live. But they are not allowed to live as they want and they should. They enact the reality of their social situation. One character saw people jumping off a bridge in a river and he says their coats blow up like big bubbles in the water inflated with their last breath. This is an image of humanness that can't be destroyed in that way—as if, in the end air will invent lung so it can be breathed.⁴⁹³

Here, suicide performs a paradoxical operation: it blurs the boundary between the public and the private in order to preserve *both*, under the pressure of a biopolitical state that sacrifices individuality for the sake of absolute equality. The desire to stage a symbolic transgression against totalitarianism disguised as a politics of administering life explains the apparent theatricality of the mass suicides mentioned by Grit and Jams.

It is within this larger social phenomenon of mass suicide that Sara's suicide is to be considered. On the one hand, her deliberate self-harm deviates from the deaths caused by mass suicide since the act is performed at home rather than in a public space and by one individual rather than a group of people. These details are of special importance since they invalidate the two explanations of infectious disease and perverse herd mentality. There is no sign to support the claim that Sara was not of a sane mind when she decided to drink the poison. This reindividualisation and privatisation of suicide, on the other hand, risks falling back to the traditional, romantic paradigm of personal mental and moral weakness. While there is no arguing that Sara's decision is infused with a painful awareness of her dejected

⁴⁹² Stuart J. Murray, 'Thanatopolitics', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Jeffrey R. Di Leo (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 719.

⁴⁹³ Bond, quoted in Tuailon, *Edward Bond: The Playwright Speaks*, 161.

situation, it will be erroneous to jump to a conclusion and claim that her suicide communicates a disempowering message concerning bare lives.

To better explain the above statement, we shall turn to Giorgio Agamben for a brief moment. It should be noted that Agamben does not negate the potential of bare life completely, even though he considers the living human body as ‘always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power’.⁴⁹⁴ One critical example he comes up with in *Homo Sacer* is ‘the Muslim’ or *der Muselmann*. For Agamben, this character is ‘a being from whom humiliation, horror, and fear had so taken away all consciousness and all personality as to make him absolutely apathetic (hence the ironical nickname given to him)’.⁴⁹⁵ Nevertheless, having already had the worst done to him, this figure paradoxically embodies resistance to further violence.

We can say that [the *Muselmann*] moves in absolute indistinction of fact and law, of life and juridical rule, and of nature and politics. Because of this, the guard suddenly seems powerless before him as if struck by the thought that the *Muselmann*’s behavior—which does not register any difference between an order and the cold [that is, between something done to him by human beings and the material world around him]—might perhaps be a silent form of resistance.⁴⁹⁶

While it is true that Agamben gives us the good news that even in the most reduced circumstances, we remain essentially resistant beings, albeit silent resistant beings, it is also undeniable that the option proposed here is particularly grim, for it implies that there is nothing more we can do except prolonging that grim existence.

Seen in this light, Sara’s suicide is proof that she has taken resistance one step further, as she is not satisfied with Agamben’s silent form of resistance. There is a paradox at the root of her seemingly defeatist choice, which can be best explained in Bataille’s words: ‘if one perceives the profound absence of escape, the profound absence of goal and meaning, then—but only then—the mind liberated, we approach practically, lucidly, practical problems.’⁴⁹⁷ It is by acknowledging this truth that an individual, having been reduced to the mere material of the biopolitical regime, can regain sovereignty. The intentional loss of life through suicide is meant to reclaim power and control; it is a form of protesting, condemning and challenging

⁴⁹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 187.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁷ Georges Bataille, ‘Politics’, in *On Nietzsche*, trans. Stuart Kendall (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), 225.

the social conditions which have driven people to their last resort. In a world where even furniture is hardly tolerated by authorities while it is the only thing a person can still possess, people like Jams and Sara cling to it with all their power. Unlike Jams, who is able to feel satisfied with this false comfort, Sara sees through the real meaninglessness of their situation. The meaninglessness imposed on our characters is artificial, consciously manipulated and reinforced through ideology, which ultimate goal is to deprive people of all their humanness, to the extent that their lives are not even theirs. To quote Edward Bond:

Ideology corrupts the humanness it represses so that it cannot threaten its existence [...] Ideology depends on suffering and degradation. It sustains itself by taking over our passions and desires, our aspiration for the transcendental, and legitimates itself by turning them into suffering.⁴⁹⁸

In such a situation, the loss of one's life through suicide can be understood as the extreme and sole measure to recover one's possession of one's own life. When it is no longer possible to imagine that Sisyphus is happy, one's suicide becomes a defiant, rebellious act filled with symbolic significance, one that proclaims that even the barest of lives holds the potential, the possibility of emancipation. Sara's suicide, as such, can be said to be an example of Bataille's subversive sovereignty, which is 'the power "invoked" by the tragedy of self-loss, powerlessness and abjection, [...] the revolutionariness of anguish'.⁴⁹⁹ We are here presented with the creative, generative quality of loss, even in its most extreme form—loss of life.

After consuming the poisoned soup, Sara asks Jams to take her outside because she does not want to die being trapped in the house, only to face Jams' unequivocal refusal: 'Be seen in the street walking a dying woman on my arm? I wont! I cant! It's conduct unbecoming! I'd be court-martialed! Chopped! And she's my wife!'⁵⁰⁰ He then releases Grit so that the latter can help his wife. While struggling to get out of the house, Sara reveals that her active demand for visibility, especially visibility in death, is inspired by the story she has heard about the mass suicide in Reading.

The self-sacrifice is a spectacularized symbol of the injustice suffered by a community, which speaks to the fear that allows the continuation of a status quo and conformity with it. The

⁴⁹⁸ Edward Bond, *The Chair Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), xl.

⁴⁹⁹ Jesse Goldhammer, 'Dare to Know, Dare to Sacrifice: George Bataille and the Crisis of the Left', in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 21.

⁵⁰⁰ Bond, *Have I None*, 34.

most individual of acts, the destruction of the body, becomes the expression of a community's struggle for recognition.⁵⁰¹

For Sara, at least, these suicides are acts of self-sacrifice that directly challenge the authority's desire for total control over life and death, and she herself wants to take part in this resistant politics. At this precise moment, Sara has become the epitome of bare life in two senses: she is baring her life to the eyes of anyone who dares to look, a life that has been reduced to a nonhuman status, so bare that only in death can she regain her individuality. The destruction of her body, as such, 'becomes the expression of a community's struggle for recognition'.

Sara's suicide, however, reveals its limit when we press further with the question of suicide as a political expression. The controversy relates not only to the ethical validity of accepting self-harming behaviour as a means of protest when all other means have been exhausted but also to the extent to which suicide is capable of producing palpable ethical and political impact, if any. Bond makes sure to create a tension that helps restrain the audience from approaching the issue with a celebratory attitude. He does it through his description of Jams' reaction after Sara has drunk the poisoned soup and asks Grit to carry her out to the street.

JAMS Keep her upright! You can't trust him to do—(*Yells.*) Don't let her stagger! O God get her round the corner before anyone—! (*Whines.*) They're opening their doors! (*Shuts the door.*) I can't look!

He goes to the table. Sits. Drags the soup bowl towards him. Eats.

Chopped! That Johannson'll get my seat in the truck! Twisted little bed-wetter! (*Sobs.*) She brings crates into the house—then as if that's not enough—(*Shakes salt on the soup.*)—she kills herself (*Eats. Splutters. Spits.*) O God what if she switched them round! ... (*Collapses across the table. Weeps. Bangs the table with his fist.*) It's her revenge because I sat in her chair!

He gets up. Still howling he goes to the door, opens it and shouts into the street.

Leant! Leant—you bitch!

[...] *Howling, he staggers towards the kitchen. There is a knock at the door. He turns and shouts to it.*

JAMS Bugger off!

*He goes off to the kitchen howling.*⁵⁰²

Here, it is evident that Sara's suicide does have some impact on Jams, yet, it is far from being the inspiring, revelatory impact that one expects from such a desperate and powerful political statement. Jams is seen crying and howling, but his tears probably do not have anything to do with grieving the loss of a loved one or being moved by her sacrifice. What Sara's action

⁵⁰¹ K. M. Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 246.

⁵⁰² Bond, *Have I None*, 35-36.

effectuates in her partner is better characterised as fear and anger—fear for his own life and career (‘That Johansson’ll get my seat in the truck!’), anger with what he mistook as her revenge because he sat in her chair.

Until the very end, Jams believes that Sara made her decision based on her obsession with a piece of furniture. It is not inconceivable that deep down inside, he can sense her true motive; nevertheless, such a radical idea is too much for his rational mind to come to terms with, so he instead convinces himself to believe in a much simpler, immediate explanation for her ‘insanity’. This interpretation, which places emphasis on Jams’ denial, seems to hold the ground. In the final scene, after hearing a knock at the door, Jams shouts ‘Bugger off!’ and proceeds to go to the kitchen—chasing away and running away from the spectral, unknown figure outside his comfort zone. When Sara hears a similar knock at the opening scene of *Have I None*, her reaction is rather different. Like Jams, she tries to get rid of it by shouting, ‘Go away! Go away!’ but if Jams can easily ignore this knock and removes himself from it, Sara finds it harder to resist.

A knock at the door. It is insistent but not aggressive.

SARA does not move.

Silence.

SARA stands and goes to the door. She opens it. No one is there. She stands in the doorway and looks out. She turns back to the room and closes the door. She goes back to the same chair. Sits.

Silence.

SARA stands and goes to the door. She stops by it. Listens.

Pause.

SARA Go away! Go away! (Pause.) What d’you want? (She bangs on the door.) You hear!

Silence.

SARA snatches at the handle—yanks the door open. No one is there. She closes the door and walks back into the room.

Short pause.

A knock.

SARA stands still.

Pause.

SARA goes to the table and sits in the same chair.

Silence.⁵⁰³

Despite the fact that the knock resists her effort to know and, therefore, to master it, Sara does not run away from it as James does. Already, in the first moments of the play, we are given a hint of Sara’s willingness to coexist with the incomprehensible and uncertainty. From their contrasting reactions, it is unlikely that Sara’s suicide will inspire Jams to perform any

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.* 3.

subversive act, nor will it facilitate the reclaiming of his humanity, which has been lost to ideology and the totalitarian authority to which he submits.

Rather than a straightforward endorsement of suicide as resistant politics, I would argue that Sara's suicide provides an opportunity to interrogate the logic of sacrifice inherent in both biopolitical and thanatopolitical thinking. If the rhetoric of biopolitics contends that 'killing or the imperative to kill is acceptable only if it results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the elimination of the biological threat to and the improvement of the species or race',⁵⁰⁴ thanatopolitics reinforces this justification by controlling the way death, in particular suicidal death, is framed and interpreted within a binary logic. To honour Sara as a martyr who sacrifices herself to make a political statement for the sake of other oppressed people in her society is to feed into the rhetoric of 'justifiable' violence.

It is in *Chair* that Bond manages to convey in a more perceptible manner the political and ethical ambiguity of suicide. After the interview with the welfare officer about the chair incident, Alice, being aware that she would be sent to PrisCit sooner or later, takes it upon herself to plan her death. She carefully instructs her son, Billy, on the steps he has to follow to ensure her burial rite.

ALICE [...] He will give you a box. Not big. Put on your overcoat and scarf—
BILLY Like when we play dressing up?
ALICE Go down in the street. (BILLY *groans and turns to go to the door to the other room.*) You must help me Billy.
BILLY (*stops*) ... Go down to the street.
ALICE Dont look back. It might frighten you—and you'd come -. Just walk.
BILLY Where?
ALICE Keep walking till you find a car park. You know what that is. You've seen the newspapers. Not a small one. You must walk till you come to a big one. Then hide till it's dark.
BILLY Why?
ALICE People drive away then. The car park will be empty. Walk to the middle.
BILLY Yes—in the dark—'cause no one will see me.
ALICE Open the box. Inside there's a canister. Unscrew the lid. Take out the dust. Throw it on the car park. On the ground. Scatter it. Dont get it on your clothes.⁵⁰⁵

Alice's determination to get a personalised burial despite the authority's doctrine of absolute equality—'in death democracy',⁵⁰⁶ in the words of the welfare officer—can be interpreted as a symbolic rebellion against the thanatopolitical state that claims ownership over its citizens' dead body and the narratives accompanying their death.

⁵⁰⁴ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 256.

⁵⁰⁵ Bond, *Chair*, 108-09.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

Strangers will take me away. Strangers will put me in the furnace. A stranger will bring you the box. There'll be no flowers. No music. No speaking. No people standing in line. No grass. No stone. Nothing they can get their hands on and say it's theirs. Nothing. I was never here. I was never anywhere. I never was. I was nothing. Not even a piece of dust.⁵⁰⁷

Alice makes all the necessary arrangements so that her corpse would be picked up and cremated, the remains are then given to Billy to be dispersed all over the city. That is to say, in choosing her own way of dying and erasing her body from the earth, Alice not only refuses to be killed by the state but also denies the authority the possibility of subjecting her dead body to any further ideological exploitation. Her suicide is a radical negation that usurps the affirmative power over life and death of both biopolitics and thanatopolitics. Alice, like Billy, is not only the epitome of bare life but also ungrievable life—a life that is not supposed to be grieved, ‘a life that is not supposed to have existed at all, whose “negation” is built into its very public definition’.⁵⁰⁸

By ‘radical negation’, I also mean that Alice’s suicide refuses to be identified with any fixed quality, be it political or ethical. In her world, because of the non-existence of such a thing as the distinction between public and private life, it is also impossible to think of Alice’s self-destruction in straightforward terms, either as a narcissistic desire to perpetuate the ‘I’ of her individuality at the cost of the ‘I’ of her experiences and suffering or as ideological disobedience. Likewise, the framing of her suicide casts doubt upon any simplistic interpretation of Alice’s decision to engage Billy in her burial rite. She must have been fully aware that sending her son out into the world like that would equal sending him off on a suicide mission. And yet, because of her wish for a personalised burial, she selfishly demands his help anyway. The time, effort and money Alice invested in planning her suicide could have been used to make future arrangements for Billy so that he would be able to live on without her. The opposing view, however, would claim that since she could do nothing to change Billy’s fate, the very least Alice could do is help him realise his dream of being outside, even only for a day.

Growing up in secret, Billy has never set foot out of the room where he is kept hidden. His desire to explore the outside world is reflected in his drawings, in which a man gets up one morning and decides to go to the furthest place in the whole world. On his way, the protagonist endures all sorts of trials, including jumping over a big ditch with snapping teeth

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁰⁸ Judith Butler, ‘Judith Butler—Ungrievable Lives: Discussion with Nelly Kambouri’, *MR Online*, 21 May 2009, <https://mronline.org/2009/05/21/judith-butler-ungrievable-lives/>.

and climbing a high mountain in order to finally reach the shore. Mr Dot, the name Billy later gives his hero, is able to walk across the sea since he accidentally lost his shoes, which happens to be the secret of walking on water. He walks miles and miles, thinking that he may have been lost, until he notices his footsteps remaining on the water and decides to go all the way back and start again. Unfortunately, a big black storm suddenly comes up and erases all of his footprints.

BILLY [...] The storm's washed out his footprints. All of them. Gone. Poor Mr Dot. He's lost. (*Sucks breath through his teeth—ends in a harsh little giggle.*) Phew! What a story. The man didn't get to the furthest place in all the world. It doesn't matter. That's where the storm came from.⁵⁰⁹

Billy's infantile drawings and his seemingly senseless story, rather than being proof of an underdeveloped mind, are the manifestation of the social conditions that make it impossible for Billy to grow up. When finally, he can make it to the outside world, like Mr Dot in his drawings, Billy is lost.

BILLY stands in the morning light. He wears his overcoat and scarf. He carries a pale-coloured carton. His expression is rapt but blank. The sound of children playing in a school yard.

BILLY stands at noon. The same expression. Industrial sounds over suburban roofs. Hollow bangs. Scaffolding. A hooter. A lorry backs.

BILLY stands in the afternoon. The same expression. A city river. Ship's hooter. Cranes moving containers. Birds. Voices calling on the shore. BILLY half turns. His free hand gestures towards the river.

BILLY stands at dusk. The same expression. He is hot. He has taken off his scarf and unbuttoned his overcoat. He looks down from a bridge. Monotonous pulsing tragic.

BILLY stands in the dark. City nightlife. Music. Parties. Pub choruses. Traffic. Yobs. Police siren. BILLY stares. He makes his grating sound. He walks away. Emptiness.⁵¹⁰

The image of Billy standing motionlessly with a rapt but blank expression as the day passes, against the backdrop of a bustling city, effectively conveys the paralysing effect the sudden admission to society after a lifetime of isolation must have on him. He is completely absorbed by his new surroundings, but his fascination does not lead to active exploration of the world. On the contrary, Billy seems to be frozen, not knowing what to do, unable to relate to either the children playing in the schoolyard or the adults who are busy with their daily life activities. Billy's upbringing has not prepared him for the complexity of life outside the flat without his mother, Alice. His being shot dead in the car park, therefore, is an inevitable outcome of an individual's quest for freedom and maturity in a society that considers an act

⁵⁰⁹ Bond, *Chair*, 91.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

of kindness such as bringing a chair to a soldier or an elderly woman a ‘mutation in public sentiment’.

As mentioned above, Alice must have been aware of Billy’s fate when she asked him to disperse her remains. But rather than being a selfish unethical act or a sign of resignation, Alice’s decision to kill herself and to create the conditions for Billy’s death can be seen as a truthful reflection of a thanatopolitics that consciously produces ungrievable lives. The staging of Billy’s final moments when he performs the burial ritual for Alice (but also prematurely for himself), as such, creates a space where their deaths can be grieved without judgement.

BILLY in the car park. He stands in the middle. Floodlight in the darkness. Silence. He opens the top of the carton. Puts his hand inside. Unscrews the container lid. Looks inside the container—doesn’t take it out of the carton. Puts the lid in his overcoat pocket. Puts his hand in the container. Takes out a handful of dust. Stares at it expressionlessly. Drops it experimentally on the ground—running the last of it through his fingers. Takes out a handful of dust. Scatters it more widely. Watches it fall. Tilts the carton slightly. Cranes his neck sideways to peer in to see what’s left. Takes out a handful of dust. Throws it in the air over his head. Stares expressionlessly as it floats down. Puts the carton on the ground. Crouches. Digs both hands into the carton. Brings out two fistfuls of dust. Stands and at the same time hurls the dust high into the air.⁵¹¹

This detailed stage direction, which focuses on the movement of Billy, invokes a ceremonial dance that achieves its poetic and aesthetic effect through repetition. Every time Billy takes out the dust, he spreads it wider and higher: first on the ground, more widely, then in the air over his head and, in the end, hurling it high into the air. It is as if with each movement and each handful of dust, both Billy and the remains of Alice manage to find a little more freedom. This graceful dance, however, comes to an abrupt end as Billy is seen by someone and shot dead, the dust floating down on him. The play closes in a ‘purely theatrical moment deeply saturated with human mortality’⁵¹², but it is also a moment destined for public grieving of the lives that would remain ungrieved for in an unjust society.

In Edward Bond’s *Have I None* and *Chair*, suicide is presented as an expression of political resistance, which, in extreme circumstances, allows an individual to challenge the biopolitical/thanatopolitical regime and reclaim their body as well as their agency. In actively choosing death and the way they die, Sara and Alice escape all power and retreat into their own privacy. As Foucault puts it, ‘Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵¹² Sean Carney, *The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary English Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 174.

death.’⁵¹³ This emphasis on the individual, micro-resistance based on the symbolic function of suicide, however, is not meant to encourage self-sacrifice or self-inflicted violence for the sake of the community so that the suicide can be perceived as a martyr. Rather, it challenges the notion of a community that is formed upon homogeneity and conformity—the very kind of community that the authority in *Have I None* and *Chair* strives to establish. If Sara’s and Alice’s suicides refuse to communicate a definitive message concerning their political and ethical implication, it is because they invite the audience to create their own readings. Bond’s plays enable a space for ‘public mourning’, but as Judith Butler rightly points out, ‘[it] is not enough to have a politics that has “public mourning” as its final goal.’⁵¹⁴ If anything, grieving the ungrievable lives is but the first step in examining alternative social arrangements that do not consciously produce ungrievable lives, communities in which there is no need for martyr or scapegoat. It is toward this type of community that we will turn next.

2. *The (Im)possible Community*

(Escaped Alone)

The idea behind deconstruction is to deconstruct the workings of strong nation states with rigorous immigration policies, to deconstruct the rhetoric, the politics, and the metaphysics of native land and native tongue, the politics of sites, of propria and my-ownness, to remain as vigilant as possible about the community of fusion. The idea is to disarm the bomb of identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against Jews and Arabs and immigrants, against *les juifs* in Lyotard's sense, against all the Others, all the other Others, all of whom according to an impossible formula, a formula of the impossible, are wholly other.
(John Caputo, ‘A Community without Truth’)

The question of cohabitation that opens this chapter, up until this point, has been explored under the lens of power struggle: between the human and the nonhuman, between the marginalised, dispossessed human populations and the biopolitical, thanatopolitical structure that intentionally creates the conditions for their death and suffering. Consequently, this emphasis on domination and resistance gives rise to a language of war, in which relations are not a matter of ‘living together’ but of ‘uniting against the Other’. The forming of communities within this context, as such, embraces communitarianism, its logic of exclusion

⁵¹³ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 248.

⁵¹⁴ Butler, ‘Judith Butler—Ungrievable Lives’.

and its fiction of homogeneity. Speculative theatre presents the audience with a number of fictional collective bodies which, despite their different forms of manifestation, are to be characterised as *communitas*.

A *communitas* is a military formation, referring to the common defense we build against the other, the fortifications built around the city: *munire*, to fortify ourselves, to build a wall, to gather ourselves together (*com*) for protection against the other; to encircle ourselves with a common wall or barrier that protects the same from the incoming (*invenir*, *invention*) of the other, that keeps the same safe from the other.⁵¹⁵

In Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur*, the Hobbesian state of nature forces people to stick together to form a sort of tribal community whose sole purpose is survival. In a lawless world invaded by hallucinogenic butterflies, where it is either to kill or to be killed, the two brothers Elliot and Darren work with two siblings, Lola and Spinx, to plan 'parties' for powerful guests who seek to realise their darkest desires. In exchange for the safety of their own, their friends, and their unhinged mother known as the Duchess, Elliot and Darren are willing to be complicit in unspeakable acts of violence. However, the wall they build around their micro-community is threatened by a newcomer, Naz, whom the brothers are unable to sacrifice at the last minute. Set in a somewhat similar chaotic world, Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* portrays another type of community, one that is constantly in flux because of the shifting of the alliance. Nevertheless, behind this superficial flexibility and the arbitrariness of association is the rigid binary structure of the us-versus-them mentality. Moving closer towards the possible, the communities in Dawn King's *Foxfinder* and Edward Bond's *Chair* plays are perhaps the most alarming expression of *communitas*, as the rhetoric of fusion and homogeneity is pushed to the extreme. With *Foxfinder*, the people of England are all supposed to unite against the malignant fox in a heroic struggle to preserve civilisation. *Have I None* and *Chair* envision a society of absolute equality where the militant, totalitarian state swiftly detects and eliminates all internal anomalies. Joan's initial hospitality in *The Under Room* gives a ray of hope for a different kind of community; however, as Joan is incapable of opening herself to the unintelligible language of the immigrant, her hospitality soon turns into rage, hatred and ends up in murder. Finally, Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*, which social and economic settings highly resemble reality, present the audience with neighbourhoods where inhabitants are united by their shared submission to capitalist-consumerist ideology and, driven by status anxiety, constantly compete against each other. It is not simply a matter of introducing their humanoid

⁵¹⁵ Caputo, 'A Community without Truth', 25.

son Jân to their neighbours that Max and Hari in *Instructions for Correct Assembly* plan a dinner party. The main goal, of course, is to show the neighbours that if they can raise a daughter who goes to Oxford and aspires to become a neurologist, then Hari and Max can also have a perfect son whose sole purpose of existence is to realise the dreams of his parents and make them proud. The same antagonistic force is at work in *Radiant Vermin*, which drives the young couple Ollie and Jill to renovate their house constantly to gain the upper hand in the competition to be the best. It is an irony that towards the end of the play, Jill and Ollie receive a warning letter from their neighbours, concerning their frequent reception of vagrants: ‘To conclude, by helping the homeless—not to mention some of the eccentric behaviour on display at your own child’s birthday party—you are bringing the value of our houses down. This must stop forthwith.’⁵¹⁶ The couple’s murderous scheme, misinterpreted as an act of kindness, turns them into a threat to be either neutralised or excluded from this newly formed community of consumerists. Eventually, Ollie and Jill choose to leave and embark on a journey of endless ‘renovation’ projects.

Rather than providing individuals with an environment to nurture their differences and, in turn, improve the conditions of living together, communities in these speculative plays seek to impose a monologic unity by assimilating and erasing these differences. This violent operation is especially prominent in the case of a revolutionary community, as seen in Rory Mullarkey’s *The Wolf from the Door*. Here, people from all walks of life momentarily come together to achieve a specific goal: liquidating the elite and eradicating all social hierarchies. The arbitrariness of association and diversity among the participants of the usurp, however, conceal the reality of a dangerous ‘we’ identity. Catherine, one of the masterminds behind the revolution, constantly resorts to this first personal plural ‘we’ in her manifesto-like lengthy speeches.

CATHERINE [...] We are sleepwalking through our days. We are not alive, we are merely existing. We are lonely and angry and sad. And this is not only the way the system wants us to be, this is the only way we can be under this system. We cannot change this by law, we cannot change this by raising taxes or voting in people from less privileged backgrounds. If a patient has cancer, do not give them paracetamol: cut off the infested organs and burn them. This is the only way for us to do it. This is the only way to start again.⁵¹⁷

One cannot help but wonder who exactly are the ‘we’ that Catherine refers to here. It appears that in those moments of revolutionary passion, she attempts to speak on behalf of *all* the oppressed, all of humanity. For a cause that is meant to be radical equality, these words come

⁵¹⁶ Ridley, *Radiant Vermin*, 111.

⁵¹⁷ Mullarkey, *The Wolf from the Door*, 31.

across as ironically patronising. What is more striking, however, is that, despite her grandiose speeches, Catherine probably does not care at all about the very people she is trying to liberate from the oppressive, unjust system. In fact, she is utterly indifferent to others' suffering and struggles, as can be seen in her cold-blooded decapitation of a Tesco assistant manager or in her interaction with the minicab driver in Scene 10. In this scene, the driver desperately tries to initiate a conversation with Catherine and Leo, going through all his familial, financial, psychological problems, only to be met with a deafening silence from his passengers. It becomes clear that Catherine's preaching does not live up to her actual behaviour. It is unlikely that someone with a privileged background such as herself has ever been oppressed, and the anger she feels, as such, does not stem from her own condition but from the condition of an imaginative mass that she claims to emotionally identify with. The only voice the audience hears in *The Wolf from the Door* is the monologic voice of Catherine that forbids even the act of questioning or resisting the spirit of the 'we'. When the two English Civil War re-enactors claim that armed resurrection is not their type of thing and refuse to get involved, Catherine makes it clear that they have no choice if they want to live. Everyone either accepts their role as an active participant or gets ready to be eliminated because their inaction would be interpreted as identification with the old regime. Consequently, the kind of community that emerges—'a harmonious group, consensus, and fundamental agreement beneath the phenomena of discord or war'—holds as much threat as promise, according to Derrida.⁵¹⁸

The problematic communities mentioned above, due to their emphasis on fusional communion, close upon themselves and reduce the state of being-in-common to the realisation of a 'common being'. Driven by an oppositional, antagonistic force, these communities perpetuate a social order based on violence and material self-interest. The portrayal of the community in many speculative plays, however, is not meant to suggest that we should all retreat further into individualism and denounce any form of collective identity or association. Not only that such a thing is impossible but also undesirable, for the rejection of collective life would leave open a gap to be filled by whatever appealing and destructive ideology happen to gain access to people. Rather, speculative theatre invites the audience to reconsider the definition of community and envision different forms of living together that are not characterised by *communitas* and its frozen mythical language but by an openness to difference. In this utopian vision of a community-to-come, there is no authoritative voice that

⁵¹⁸ Derrida, *Points . . .: Interviews, 1974-1994*, 355.

dictates individual members' desire and behaviour but a multiplicity of voices, each with its own rhythm and is equally heard.

Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* gives us a glimpse of how such a community can be imagined. In *Different Spaces*, Foucault remarks, 'The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and the whole world at the same time.'⁵¹⁹ The garden in *Escaped Alone*, as such, can be interpreted as a site of intimacy, friendship and community and, above all, a female community. The fact that the play introduces four characters, all of whom are women in their seventies, speaks volumes about Churchill's aspiration to empower women, specifically elderly women, to give them a voice in a society in which being female and being old are a double disadvantage. However, to read the garden scenes as honouring a feminist community alone is to subject theatrical signs to a restricted meaning, to perform the operation of mystifying language. It is important to note that Caryl Churchill has always been very critical and wary of certain feminist claims and often positions her plays some distance away from the idealised version of a close-knit, united sisterhood that many feminists uphold. For instance, in *Top Girls* (1982), one of Churchill's most often labelled 'feminist' plays, the audience encounters two sisters, Marlene—an ambitious businesswoman—and Joyce, who takes care of Marlene's daughter since birth so that she can concentrate on her career. Marlene epitomises the style of feminism that wants to turn women into new patriarchs, promoting the us-against-them attitude in the relationship between the two genders and even in the relationship between women who submit to this ideology and those who do not.

That is to say, in order to avoid falling into the trap of idealising or mythologising the community and subscribing to the rhetoric of exclusion, we should shift the focus of analysis from identity (elderly women) to the manner in which characters manage to embody the idea of an open community through their interaction. I would argue that what transpires in the garden in Churchill's play invokes the kind of sociability that Roland Barthes terms *idiorrhythmy*. *Escaped Alone*'s idiorrhythmy makes it clear that the possibility of a community-to-come and, by extension, democracy-to-come, depends on a particular approach to language and communication that does not seek to impose the rhythm of power but safeguards *rhuthmos*—the individual 'flexible, free, mobile rhythm'.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁹ Foucault, 'Different Spaces', 182.

⁵²⁰ Barthes, *How to Live Together*, 35.

In the lecture course *Comment vivre ensemble: simulations romanesques de quelques espaces quotidiens* given at the Collège de France from January to May 1977, Roland Barthes develops the notion of idiorrhymy, which purports to be his personal ‘fantasy’: ‘a resurgence of certain desires, certain images that lurk within you, that want to be identified by you, sometimes your whole life, and often only assume concrete form thanks to a particular word’.⁵²¹ ‘Idiorrhymy’ or ‘idiorrhymic’ is the keyword that ‘transmuted the fantasy [the utopia of a socialism of distance] into a field of knowledge’,⁵²² leading from the fantasy to its investigation. Barthes came across this signifier while reading Jacques Lacarrière’s *L’été grec*, published by Plon in 1976. Belonging to the Greek orthodox monastic vocabulary, idiorrhymy, composed of *idios* (particular) and *rhuthmos* (rhythm), ‘refers to any community that respects each individual’s own personal rhythm’.⁵²³ In Barthes’s reimagination, the word can be used to name ‘any attempt to reconcile collective life with individual life, the independence of the subject with the sociability of the group’.⁵²⁴ It is important to mention here that even though *rhuthmos* is roughly translated into rhythm, Barthes draws our attention to the distinction between the two words. While rhythm is associated with power, idiorrhymy is a means of safeguarding *rhuthmos*. Barthes characterises *rhuthmos* as ‘a transitory, fleeting form, but a form nonetheless’; ‘rhythm that allows for approximation, for imperfection, for a supplement, a lack, an *idios*: what doesn’t fit the structure, or would have to be made to fit’;⁵²⁵ or simply a ‘flowing’.⁵²⁶ It is due to *rhuthmos* that idiorrhymy has a negative relationship to power: if ‘the first thing that power imposes is a rhythm (to everything: a rhythm of life, of time, of thought, of speech)’ then ‘the demand for idiorrhymy is always made in opposition to power’.⁵²⁷

In *Escaped Alone*, the audience witnesses the working of *rhuthmos* in the conversation among four characters.

VI	People always want to fly
LENA	fly like a bird
SALLY	that’s always the favourite, what would you like
LENA	invisible
VI	languages, I’d like to be able to speak every
SALLY	but we do fly now

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵²³ Claude Coste, ‘Preface’, in Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together*, xxii.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁵ Barthes, *How to Live Together*, 35.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

MRS J planes isn't the same
 VI go to any country at all and understand
 SALLY and nobody looks out of the window
 LENA watching the screens
 VI I do like getting all those movies I never
 SALLY looking down on clouds⁵²⁸

As in many of her plays, Churchill employs fragmentation and truncated sentences as a formal technique. There is almost no complete sentence, as the characters keep interjecting each other. Each takes up the final word or idea of the previous utterance and develops it according to their own interest. At times, this means that there are different things being discussed at once, which would have been the cause for confusion. Yet, as can be seen in the part quoted above, the conversation still proceeds smoothly, even though Vi is still talking about the ability to speak every language while the others discuss the ability to fly. By the end of this scene, Lena once again affirms, 'I'd rather be invisible myself',⁵²⁹ despite the fact that the group is no longer on the topic of which supernatural ability they would like to have. What emerges from the four women's conversation is a quasi-structure, a collectivity of multiple, equal voices that does not erase individual differences. The incantatory effect of fragmented sentence structure, consequently, does not make their dialogue a harmony but only further highlights their tonal dissonance.

The fact that each woman is able to maintain a personal rhythm while participating in the creation of a shared rhythm is shown most clearly in the moments they retreat to their own psychic space. In the 2016 production at the Royal Court, during these moments, the stage goes dark, and the only stream of light is focused on the speaking character as she reveals her inner rhythm that is closely connected to her personal trauma and suffering: Sally is lost in the circular movement of her cat phobia: '[...]I have to go round the windows again I have to go round the windows again back to the kitchen back to the bedroom back to the kitchen back to the bedroom the bathroom back to the kitchen back to the door [...]';⁵³⁰ Vi haunted by the past, forever stuck in the kitchen where she killed her husband; Mrs Jarrett engulfed by emotion as she repeats the phrase 'terrible rage' twenty-five times in ever-quickenning pace, or Lena immobilised in a decelerated temporality because of her depression.

LENA It was half past three and all this time later it's twenty-five to four.

⁵²⁸ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 23.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

If I think about a place I could be where there's something nice like the sea that would be worse because the sea would be the same as an empty room so it's better to be in the empty room because then there's fewer things to mean nothing at all.
 I'd rather hear something bad than something good. I'd rather hear nothing.
 It's still just the same.
 It's just the same.
 It's the same.⁵³¹

As a result of their unconscious negotiation between individual and collective rhythms, the women's conversation gives rise to a *rhuthmos* that flows, uncontrollably and unexpectedly. It is almost impossible to predict which direction the exchange is going to turn to.

LENA we do shock easier
 VI but you have to have jokes about stupid things someone might do because anyone might, it's funny
 LENA you can't have a class of people
 SALLY you could have yourself
 VI you could have me
 [...]
 LENA So in other countries do they have that?
 VI jokes about being stupid?
 LENA making out it's some neighbour who's
 SALLY you always get people hating their neighbours
 VI yes the closer they are
 SALLY Serbs and Croats, French and English
 LENA there's history through
 SALLY but anyone everyone outside thinks is the same
 VI Catholics and Protestants, Sunni and Shia
 MRS J Arsenal and Tottenham
 SALLY there you are
 LENA Cain and Abel
 VI did Abel make jokes about Cain being stupid and that's why he killed him?
 LENA odd they needed a story about how killing started because
 SALLY chimpanzees
 LENA but you do wonder why of course so you make a story
 VI easily done I found⁵³²

In this scene, the conversation starts with the group arguing about how many noughts there are in a billion, a trillion or a zillion. These names of large numbers suddenly remind Vi of one of the jokes about George W. Bush's linguistic mishaps: 'three Brazilians dead and President Bush said Oh no, remind me how many is a Brazilian'.⁵³³ The key to this joke lies in Bush's confusing the *-lian* ending sound of 'Brazilian' with the *-lion* that usually accompanies large numbers. During his terms, Bush was a subject of constant ridicule and caricature because of his poor syntax and his public speaking gaffes, to the extent that there is a neologism—*Bushism*—to characterise his unconventional statements and malapropisms.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

The comic effect of his slips and mistakes, however, does not emerge from their correlation to Bush's intellectual capacity but from the fact that they unintentionally expose the truth that would have otherwise been gloated over. For instance, when Bush says, 'Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we',⁵³⁴ the fallacy of syntax known as amphiboly momentarily dismantles the good guy-bad guy distinction that informs the whole rhetoric of the war on terrorism. In a sense, it also conveys the truth of how the US government is harming their own people by dragging the country into a meaningless war. Bush's faulty sentence structure, therefore, is 'illuminating and revealing as well as humourous and fatuous'.⁵³⁵ In the like manner, the made-up joke about him mistaking 'Brazilians' for a non-existent word that describes some enormous quantity opens up to many readings, one of which certainly condemns the disastrous outcomes of American policies and military involvement after 9/11.

To return to *Escaped Alone*, the mention of Bush immediately leads the four women to debate about the appropriateness of having jokes about other people's stupidity. One after another, the women remind the audience that jokes, especially those targeting one's neighbours, can be instrumental to fuelling conflicts and violence on the ground of identity, be it nationalism, religion or something as trivial as one's favourite football club. The case of Cain and Abel highlights the tradition that incorporates jokes about the other's stupidity into all kinds of narratives in order to justify the act of killing or violence. For a brief moment, the inconsequential chitchat of the four elderly women suddenly takes on a political turn. What is most remarkable is the fact that these political topics are not planned but naturally and unpredictably emerge from the flow—*rhuthmos*—of their exchange and then naturally subside, giving way once again to some personal concern. The idiorrhymy imagined in *Escaped Alone*, as such, still makes it possible for individuals to engage with collective politics; however, this mode of engagement is characterised by indeterminacy and spontaneity rather than the certainty of purpose and intention associated with revolutionary political actions.

As noted by Patrick Ffrench, '[the] life apart needs the affective support of others; thus, the ideal of the idiorrhymic community, apart from the world, where the distance

⁵³⁴ 'President Signs Defense Bill', *The White House Archives*, 24 November 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031124-2.html>.

⁵³⁵ S. Morris Engel, 'The Many Faces of Amphiboly', *Metaphilosophy* 20, no. 3–4 (July 1989): 347.

between bodies is maintained, but contact and proximity are possible'.⁵³⁶ The extent to which the idea of an idiorhythmic community in *Escaped Alone* is made perceptible on stage, however, can differ from one production to another. In the 2016 production at the Royal Court, the four characters' seats, placed neither too close nor too far away from each other, form a horizontal line that faces the audience. Throughout the garden scenes, despite their active exchange of words, the women almost always remain seated, and there is rarely any physical contact between them. It is precisely because of this skilful negotiation between distance and proximity of bodies that brings into relief the tension between the conflicting desires for togetherness and individuality. Consequently, this dramaturgical decision contributes to a more vivid representation of a mode of sociality that respects individual rhythms, one whose sole commitment is the resistance against totalisation in every aspect of life.⁵³⁷ To make a quick reference to Agamben's conception of the 'coming community', the spacing of four characters in *Escaped Alone* can be seen as an attempt to render visible the unrepresentable space known as 'ease'.

The term 'ease' in fact designates, according to its etymology, the space adjacent (*ad-jacens, adjacentia*), the empty place where each can move freely, in a semantic constellation where spatial proximity borders on opportune time (*ad-agio*, moving at ease) and convenience borders on the correct relation.⁵³⁸

It is with ease that the four characters in the backyard embody 'love as the experience of taking-place in a whatever singularity'⁵³⁹—another way of describing Agamben's 'coming community'.

Throughout this chapter, I have examined several binary oppositions that characterise contemporary relationships, such as those between the human and the nonhuman, the dispossessed human population and the authority behind systemic injustice and violence, as well as the individual's desire for freedom and the collective pressure for conformity. The plays and productions examined, each in its own way, promote a form of nonidentity

⁵³⁶ Patrick Ffrench, 'How to Live with Roland Barthes', *SubStance* 38, no. 3 (2009): 121.

⁵³⁷ The idiorhythmic community portrayed in the 2016 production of *Escaped Alone* embodies what Joanna Latimer terms 'being alongside', as distinguished from 'being with': 'Whereas the latter term insists on some kind of relationship in which each attends to the other to the benefit of the whole, the former term preserves a sense of propinquity wherein [...] the register of concern is more that of preserving division—a conjoining of contingent and different "parts," none of which is simply subsumed into a whole. For example, being alongside can involve cooperating with one another, even working together, but not with the same materials and not necessarily to the same ends.' See Joanna Latimer, 'Being Alongside: Rethinking Relations amongst Different Kinds', *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 7–8 (2013): 79–80.

⁵³⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 24–25.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*

relationality that subverts these binaries in the sense that it preserves the distinction and difference of each agent while still enabling an ethical, nonhierarchical cohabitation. Barthes's notion of idiorrhythmy, together with Jean-Luc Nancy's 'inoperative community', Maurice Blanchot's 'unavowable community', Agamben's 'coming community' and Derrida's 'community to come', among others, are responses to the intense politicisation of the 1960s, in particular, the events of May 1968. Against the common understanding of community as a collective body of shared identity or essence, these communities are characterised by negation, as an absence, in the spirit of Herbert Marcuse's the Great Refusal—'the refusal of all toughness, togetherness, and brutality; disobedience to the tyranny of the majority; profession of fear and weakness';⁵⁴⁰ 'the protest against that which is'.⁵⁴¹ The Great Refusal, according to Marcuse, holds a promise, not of freedom from ideology or the structural violence of language since it is impossible for an individual to fully escape these forms of control and domination, but rather that of a new sensibility, new modes of relationality. This new sensibility serves as 'a medium in which social change becomes an individual need, the mediation between the political practice of 'changing the world' and the drive for personal liberation'.⁵⁴² It is Marcuse's conviction that the cultivation of a new sensibility is crucial for radical change, not only in the relationship among human beings but also in the relationship between humans and their environment. It is in this new sensibility emerging from a commitment to preserve the aporia of community that resides the utopian aspiration of exploring radically different ways of living together and relating to each other.

Speculative theatre, as a medium that constantly experiments with new forms and content, has shown that it has the capability and potential to make meaningful contributions to the development of a politicised aesthetic. In the next chapter, I will examine how various dramaturgical strategies of affects come together to produce a politicised aesthetics through which speculative theatre fulfils its social responsibility and demonstrates its political commitment. Affect, in Deleuze's and Guattari's understanding, is 'transversal', which means that 'it cuts across the usual categories' including those of the subjective and the objective. As a concept that resists binary opposition and fixed definition, affect is the perfect

⁵⁴⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* [1964] (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 247.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁴² Herbert Marcuse, *The Essential Marcuse: Selected Writings of Philosopher and Social Critic Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Andrew Feenberg and William Leiss (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 234.

analytical tool for my investigation of speculative theatre's aporetic expressions, as it can also be characterised as a sophistical aporia.

Bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements. Affect marks a body's belonging to a world of encounters or; a world's belonging to a body of encounters but also, in non-belonging, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities. Always there are ambiguous or 'mixed' encounters that impinge and extrude for worse and for better, but (most usually) *in-between*.⁵⁴³

Arising in the in-between-ness of the capacities to act and be acted upon,⁵⁴⁴ affect is the site of configuration between bodies,⁵⁴⁵ technologies and matter. Even though it is true that affect is about the intensity of feelings, it is not completely devoid of rational thinking. Rather, the kind of thinking associated with affect is one that is already attuned to feeling.

My goal in the next chapter is to examine how contemporary speculative theatre's dramaturgies intensify the audience's experience of uncertainty and transform their encounter into an 'ordeal of the undecidable'. First, I will look into the various strategies used in specific productions of Edward Bond's *The Under Room*, Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur*, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*, Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and *Pastoral*, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* and Stef Smith's *Human Animals*, which aim to evoke the contemporary gothic sensibility through the staging of haunted domestic space and the gothic pastoral. What we witness in these productions is not only an attempt at problematising the distinction between the inside and the outside, the familiar and the unfamiliar but also an emphasis on the urgency of committing to the Derridean absolute hospitality, which is another phenomenon belonging to the impossible. Second, I will analyse the entangled temporal and spatial structures in Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* and *X*, Nick Payne's *Elegy*, Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* and Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, paying particular attention to how these entangled structures are translated to the stage. By revealing the complex interweaving of time and space, these plays unsettle all dominant perspectives associated with linear temporality or the hierarchical relation between fiction and reality; at the same time, they propose another way to approach the question of responsibility to others, another way to go through trauma and loss. Lastly, this openness to different perspectives can also be found in speculative theatre's approach to truth in the context of the increasing

⁵⁴³ Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁴⁵ 'Bodies' here do not refer to 'an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect'. *Ibid.*, 3.

prominence of post-truth politics in the twenty-first century. Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*, Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* and Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* disclose the mechanisms used to form a post-truth mentality that forecloses the possibility of ethical relations or radical political change. In the act of redramatising the way post-truth political discourses have appropriated various dramaturgies of affects for the purpose of division or exclusion, speculative theatre engages the audience in a parrhesiastic game that reinvests in the notion of truth an ethics of care and mutual responsibility. Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*, Alistair McDowall's *X*, Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* and Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*, despite their different settings and plots, all converge in their discussion of the 'implicated subject' (Michael Rothberg) whose present life and actions are inseparable from both the trauma of the past and the perpetuation of injustice and violence in the future. All of these dramaturgical strategies engage the audience in an aporetic experience, which hopefully would evolve into a different sensibility, a different way of thinking and feeling. It is contemporary speculative theatre's utopian impulse to give rise to a community of implicated spectators that characterises it as another form of political theatre.

CHAPTER 4. SPECULATIVE THEATRE AND DRAMATURGIES OF AFFECT

I. PERFORMING A CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC SENSIBILITY

Since its emergence in the second half of the eighteenth century with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Gothic writing has always been associated with the popular. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century witnessed a phenomenon known as 'Gothomania'—'an enthusiasm for decay and frenzied appreciation for the supernatural, the pseudo-medieval, and the morbid'.⁵⁴⁶ Initially coined by Italian artists during the Renaissance to denote a medieval aesthetic deemed barbaric and channelled in architecture,⁵⁴⁷ Gothic has evolved beyond a stylistic descriptor or a literary genre to become a mode of discursivity. Such is an understandable development since, despite provoking negative critical judgments in its early days and well into the twenty-first century, gothic fiction has never been just a distraction that thrives on popular appeals. In its formative decades, which also coincide with the rise of the English novel, the Gothic narrative was already a contested site that

engages issues of beauty, the character of the sublime and the grotesque, the political dynamics of British culture (especially with regard to the kind of social change that comes to be represented by the French Revolution), the quality of being English (including the holding of anti-Catholic religious attitudes), the structure of the economy (especially concerning property in a market economy and gift-exchange), and the place of women in hierarchies of power.⁵⁴⁸

In addition to its political connotations, early Gothic literature also embodies the aesthetic of excess and disorder, which is a response to 'conventions that foster the order and clarity of realistic representations, conventions that embody a cultural insistence on containment'.⁵⁴⁹ However, rather than being a straightforward subversive force, Gothic fiction occupies a rather ambiguous position: on the one hand, it contains many elements that undermine dominant ideologies; on the other hand, it also participates in the perpetuation of conformist

⁵⁴⁶ Frederick Frank, 'Introduction to Percy Bysshe Shelley', in *Zastrozzi: A Romance and St. Irvyne: Or, The Rosicrucian: A Romance*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley (New York: Arno Press, 1977), xi.

⁵⁴⁷ Hephzibah Anderson, 'Why We Are Living in "Gothic Times"', *BBC*, 15 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210311-the-books-that-are-channelling-our-fears>.

⁵⁴⁸ John Paul Riquelme, 'Introduction: Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism: Dark Modernity from Bram Stoker to Samuel Beckett', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 3 (2000): 586.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

narratives, in particular regarding gender stereotypes. The renewed interest in the Gothic in the twenty-first century, while not completely distancing from this ambiguous status, simultaneously formulates a contemporary gothic sensibility that exceeds the cultural fixation on dark narrative. Such is the case of many British speculative plays, including Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*, Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, Edward Bond's *The Under Room* and Stef Smith's *Human Animals*. Several productions of these plays represent a domestic space that is no less unsettling compared to that portrayed in early Gothic novels; nevertheless, their gothic aesthetic lies in bareness, geometrical precision and light rather than disorder and darkness. The scenographic techniques of these productions truthfully reflect the ubiquity of contemporary gothic sensibility, which is associated with 'the subject in a state of deracination, of the self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation'.⁵⁵⁰ The gothic domestic space is no longer limited to mysterious castles or monasteries but can be found in every house. While the classic Gothic motif of the double is featured prominently in these plays, what it invokes is less of a supernatural force but more of another kind of subjectivity that is simultaneously fragmented and accumulative. The uncanny domestic space conjured in contemporary speculative theatre, in blurring the boundaries between the inside and the outside, between different identities, calls for a commitment to the Derridean absolute hospitality that characterises an ethical relationship between an individual and all the 'bodies' with which they interact.

This commitment to absolute hospitality is of paramount importance in the context of imminent and immanent ecological crises. Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* and Stef Smith's *Human Animals*, while bringing back to the stage pastoral images, do not do so to promote the romantic ideal of the pastoral as a way of life in which humans and nature coexist in perfect harmony. On the contrary, the pastoral in these plays portrays nature as menacing, impenetrable and chaotic beyond human control. In order to survive in this gothic pastoral environment, the characters and audience are encouraged to engage with what Timothy Morton terms 'dark ecology'—an ecological awareness that does not seek to master or manage nature.⁵⁵¹ The conventional pastoral narratives appear to question the power hierarchy between humans and nature by

⁵⁵⁰ Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing, 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 3.

⁵⁵¹ This kind of awareness falls in line with the nonidentity relationality that I have examined in the previous chapter.

portraying nature as a generous host that provides and protects; however, a closer look will reveal that they are in fact reaffirming the superiority of humans in their capability to tame and domesticate all the unpredictable elements of nature. Contemporary speculative theatre, in its staging of gothic pastorality, problematises the concept of hospitality in traditional pastoral narrative and simultaneously calls for a commitment to the aporetic experience of absolute hospitality in one's approach to the environment. The new gothic sensibility of speculative plays, while still indicating the pervasive uneasiness of becoming a stranger in one's house or land, also proposes a strategy to refamiliarize oneself with the alterity of nature and, as such, creating a paradoxical space of 'home' within the very condition of homelessness or displacement.

1. *The Uncanny Home*

(*Radiant Vermin—Human Animals—Instructions for Correct Assembly—The Under Room*)

And yet the *oikos* in the Greek tradition (*domus* in the Latin tradition), is not, and I insist on this, the place of safety. The *oikos* is above all the place of tragedy. I recall that one of the conditions of the tragic enumerated by Aristotle is precisely the domestic condition: relationships are tragic because they occur in the family; it is within the family that incest, patricide, and matricide occur.
(Jean-François Lyotard, 'Oikos')

I affirm the impossible, that is, I desire this pure hospitality, even when I cannot afford it. Even when I cannot experience it as such, I say 'yes' to the possibility of the impossible.
(Jacques Derrida, quoted in Danie Goosen, 'The Tragic, the Impossible and Democracy')

Domestic space has always been an important setting for the Gothic trope of confinement, be it physical, psychological or existential entrapment. Dimly lit castles or manors, eerie hallways, secret chambers, underground vaults, obscure recesses of a labyrinthian space, all elements of the Gothic dwelling space are conceived and presented in ways that would intensify the omnipresence of unknown threats, malevolent forces ready to destroy the protagonists. On stage, lighting, sound, and set designs work together to construct a gothic domestic space that engulfs both the characters and the audience in a claustrophobic, anxiety-prone environment. The gothic in contemporary speculative theatre, however, is both

similar to and different from the Gothic drama of the Georgian and Victorian eras in terms of dramaturgy. On the one hand, issues such as the body on display and the creation of an oppressive atmosphere, as well as the theme of human capability—in other words, the question of how far we are willing to go in order to survive—continue to be central concerns in the structure of a ‘Gothic’ play. On the other hand, the contemporary approach to representing these issues tend to steer away from the sensational elements that characterise most early Gothic dramas, such as Horace Walpole’s *Mysterious Mother, A Tragedy* (1768), Mathew Lewis’ *The Castle Spectre* (1797) or Thomas Holcroft’s *A Tale of Mystery* (1801). On April 26, 1798, for instance, the *Bath Chronicle* reported that, during the performance of Lewis’ play at the Theatre Royal on Saturday, April 21, ‘[n]othing, at one period of the play, was to be heard but hysterical affections in the boxes, nothing to be seen but delicate ladies crying and fainting, and nothing to be smelt but *hartshorn* and *thieves vinegar*.’⁵⁵² Such a reaction can hardly be achieved on a modern audience member who, unlike the ‘delicate ladies’ of the late eighteenth century, has been too well acquainted with shocking, violent images. Nor are ‘hysterical affections’ the goal of contemporary gothic aesthetic since its dramaturgical strategies do not seek to elicit fear but anxiety.

If fear or the experience of fear is something comprehensible, identifiable and in turn (possibly) easily removable from or manageable in everyday social and political realities, anxiety, in contrast, suggests the experience of something that is more porous, liquid, unidentifiable, unknown and perhaps even absent.⁵⁵³

In an anxiety-plagued age, it would be ridiculous to ask people to pay for a theatre experience to be made even more uneasy and anxious. What is valuable about such an experience, however, is its ability not only to reflect contemporary socio-political, economic conditions but also to foster a different mode of reaction, one that accommodates the coexistence of thinking and feeling. As I will demonstrate next, certain productions of Philip Ridley’s *Radiant Vermin*, Thomas Eccleshare’s *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, Stef Smith’s *Human Animals* and Edward Bond’s *The Under Room*, in their reconfiguration of the Gothic traditions of uncanny domestic space and the double, reveal the porosity of the private-public distinction and accentuate the exigency of attempting the Derridean absolute hospitality in one’s relationship with the Other.

⁵⁵² *The Bath Chronicle*, Thursday, 26 April 1798, 3 (original emphasis), quoted in Diego Saglia, ‘Staging Gothic Flesh: Material and Spectral Bodies in Romantic-Period Theatre’, in *The Romantic Stage: A Many-Sided Mirror*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Fabio Liberto (New York: Rodopi, 2015), 166.

⁵⁵³ Andreja Zevnik, ‘From Fear to Anxiety: An Exploration into a New Socio-Political Temporality’, *Law and Critique* 28, no. 3 (November 2017): 236.

Despite numerous changes in staging techniques, the motif of darkness and decay/ruin continues to be favoured by theatre practitioners in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as a means to invoke the Gothic atmosphere. This can be seen, for instance, in the critically acclaimed 1992 production of John Boynton Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (1945-46) at the National Theatre, the 2010 production of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) at the Lyric Hammersmith or the 2016 production of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965) at Trafalgar Studios, to name but a few. The three plays mentioned here, written by playwrights with distinct approaches to theatre, arising from very different contexts and addressing diverse issues, can hardly be united under the umbrella of 'Gothic drama'. What they have in common, especially in the three productions examined, is a Gothic aesthetic that relies on darkness and collapse as theatrical devices to discuss death, repressed desire, madness, trauma and monstrosity, to bring into relief the tension between the Symbolic and the inexpressible Other.

In Stephen Daldry's production of *An Inspector Calls*, the Birlings' house appears as a dollhouse teetering on several legs (see Figure 5). Every time a member of the family goes down to be interrogated by inspector Goole, part of the structure is removed and, in the end, the whole house tips forward and collapses—a symbol of the moral bankruptcy of the family. Situated in a dark landscape artificially lit by a sole street lamp against a gradually darkened sky, the Birlings' house is a perfect rendering of a haunted house where victims of unspeakable crimes return as ghosts to seek their vengeance. Together with the sound of smashing crockery and a complex special effect of heavy rain,⁵⁵⁴ Daldry's production effectively transforms what would be a typical drawing-room play into a spectacular stage, permeating Gothic sensibility. In the case of Jamie Lloyd's production of *The Homecoming*, the setting is the living room of a working-class family in North London (see Figure 6). It is characteristic of Harold Pinter to reduce a whole house into a room on stage, and Pinter's rooms, 'parts of mysterious and infinite series, are like cells without a vista. At the opening curtain, these rooms look naturalistic, meaning no more than the eye can contain. But by the end of each play, they become sealed containers, virtual coffins.'⁵⁵⁵ Such is indeed the effect of the living room in *Homecoming*. The oppressive atmosphere is made more perceptible thanks to the lighting designed by Rich Howell. Shifting from a black and white scheme to

⁵⁵⁴ 'Meeting Notes about the Set and Staging of *An Inspector Calls* at the National Theatre, 1992', *The British Library* (The British Library, n.d.), <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/meeting-notes-about-the-set-and-staging-of-an-inspector-calls-at-the-national-theatre-1992>.

⁵⁵⁵ Ruby Cohn, 'The World of Harold Pinter', *The Tulane Drama Review* 6, no. 3 (1962): 56.

darkroom red light, the lighting marks the moments of tension between the male members of the family in their competition for the only female character, Ruth. *The Homecoming*, while exploiting the classical Gothic trope of a beautiful heroine in distress, radically undermines the stereotypical portrayal of women as the weaker sex. It is Ruth who controls all the male characters and in the last scene, after her husband has left, Ruth, sitting relaxed in her chair as if on a throne, becomes the master of her own sexuality and asserts her power over the remaining four men. Lastly, the 2010 production of *Blasted* at the Lyric Hammersmith also heavily relies on the contrast between light and darkness in Act Two to better encompass the sense of dread and horror invoked by the play's graphic violence (see Figure 7). By subjecting Ian's body to unimaginable suffering, *Blasted* sustains the Jacobean and Gothic traditions of putting the body on display and transforming it into a repulsive spectacle. Using the Lyric's full depth and height, Paul Wills' design transforms the hotel room into an inescapable torture chamber swallowed by an abyss.⁵⁵⁶ In these three productions, darkness and ruins are employed as theatrical devices to undermine the romantic ideal of home (an interior dwelling space in the case of *Blasted*) as a private, safe space that can shield one from the monstrosity of the outside world, forcing the audience and the characters to acknowledge the monstrosity that exists within the familiar walls one builds around oneself.

Against this Gothic aesthetic of darkness and destruction that is both spectacular and poetic, several productions of Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*, Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, Stef Smith's *Human Animals* and Edward Bond's *The Under Room* present a completely opposite approach in their emphasis on the stage's brightness and bareness. At first sight, there is nothing uncanny or even slightly Gothic in the setting of these plays. In *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, we have 'The rooms of a neat family home. It could almost be a catalogue'⁵⁵⁷ while *The Under Room* is set in 'A bare cellar. A wooden chair with arms. On the floor a lidded tin box. [...] To the (audience) right a flight of stairs. The treads are some four feet long and broad enough to be sat on. At the top of the stairs a door'.⁵⁵⁸ With *Human Animals* and *Radiant Vermin*, there is no specification of location, but it can be deduced that the two plays are both set in an interior, domestic space.

⁵⁵⁶ For an analysis on *Blasted*'s Gothic characteristic, see Aoise Stratford, 'Reopening Sarah Kane's "Chamber of Horrors": *Blasted* as Gothic Drama', *Modern Drama* 62, no. 1 (2019): 23–44.

⁵⁵⁷ Eccleshare, *Instructions for Correct Assembly*.

⁵⁵⁸ Bond, *The Under Room*, 38.

In performance, the 2015 production at Soho Theatre of *Radiant Vermin* goes for a minimalistic set—a simple white environment that resembles ‘the panel of a comic strip’⁵⁵⁹ (Figure 8). The basic white lighting scheme designed by William Reynolds is ‘accompanied by three overhead fluorescent units that flicker when murder is in the air’, at times with the addition of ‘a hellish orange glow’.⁵⁶⁰ *The Under Room*’s 2012 production at the Lyric Hammersmith, following the stage direction to the letters, has slightly more architectural details, but the stage remains bare (Figure 9). In the 2016 production of *Human Animals* at the Royal Court, Camilla Clarke’s design cleverly evokes an illusion of a hamster cage, with a huge Perspex window demarcating the inside and the outside (Figure 10). The interior space is roughly divided into three equal parts by artificial hedges to represent different locations where the six characters interact. *Instructions for Correct Assembly*’s 2018 production at the Royal Court is perhaps the most complex among the four in terms of scenographic technique, as it stages a house composed of layers that are gradually unveiled as the play progresses (Figure 11). The production also employs a conveyor belt to slide in pieces of furniture in order to create specific locations within the same space (an attic, a kitchen, a hallway, a dining room, a boy’s bedroom, a sitting room, a basement, a garage and garden). These staging techniques give the impression of a machine- or labyrinth-like house that is alive and can move around by itself. The superimposition of rectangular frames also enhances the feeling of infinite containment.

These productions, as can be seen from the images, give rise to a domestic space that is organised and mechanical more than brimming with mysteries, which is the case of the three preceding examples of Gothic aesthetic on stage. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to assume that because of their plain appearance, these brightly lit, colourful, and mass-produced houses exemplify the domestic space of intimacy and safety where one can enjoy daydreaming and being in solitude—the ‘house of memories’ that Gaston Bachelard envisions. It is only possible to think of a house as ‘constitut[ing] a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability’,⁵⁶¹ one capable of ‘maintain[ing] [man] through the storms of the heavens and through those of life’⁵⁶²—a safe haven, in short—if one presumes that there is a clear separation between the inside and the outside, the house and the universe.

⁵⁵⁹ David Barbour, ‘Theatre in Review: *Radiant Vermin*’, *Lighting&Sound America*, 8 June 2016, <http://www.lightingandsoundamerica.com/news/story.asp?ID=O8J2EZ>.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 2014), 38.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, 29.

Despite their opposite expressions, the aesthetic of darkness-ruins and that of light, barrenness and geometrical precision both expose the untenability of the inside-outside, private-public boundaries by generating a gothic atmosphere of pervasive and persistent anxiety for the characters and the audience alike. In *Human Animals* 2016 production at the Royal Court, the audience witnesses blood splashed against the window and a person in a hazard suit lurking on the other side as the crisis escalates. This visual demonstration is accompanied by frequent poetic vignettes that disrupt the flow of conversation.

*Blood dries darker than you think
It's that moment of darkness into deeper darkness
Are those my only options?*

*Congeaed red on the glass
A mouse in your / cereal box
A noise / up ahead
A scratching / between the wall
As they shot them right / through the wing
Are you going to kiss me back?*

*Are you going to?
Scratching.
Are you going?
Scurrying.
Are you?
Screaming.
Are you going to?
Scratching.
Are you going?
Scurrying.
Are you?
Screaming.
Scratching.
Scurrying.
Screaming.
What was that noise?⁵⁶³*

According to the author's note, sections like the one quoted above can be given to any cast member or spoken simultaneously by multiple performers.⁵⁶⁴ The subject who utters these lines, as such, is not any specific character but a spectral figure that can unexpectedly materialise in the form of different individuals. The alliteration—'screaming', 'scratching', 'scurrying'—because of the double consonant 'sc', intensifies the haunting effect of hissing noise. Smith's typographical experimentation here recalls the textual setting in Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. If the play text of *4.48 Psychosis* renders palpable the struggle and pain caused by depression and psychotic breaks, what we see in the presentation of the text in

⁵⁶³ Smith, *Human Animals*, 20.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

Human Animals is the embodiment of the experiential world of instability and disorder. These poetic musings, removed from the realistic temporal and spatial setting of the play's dramatic universe, add another layer to the unsettling atmosphere of the performance. The double glazing may be able to protect the characters from any direct physical harm, but no amount of isolation could shield them from the pervasive anxiety of a world suddenly turned upside down. Each in their own way, the characters are tested both psychologically and physically: Nancy, whose husband recently passed away, becomes increasingly depressed and attempts suicide; Lisa, who works for a chemical company, chooses self-denial but is soon forced to face reality when her house is burnt down and her partner beaten by the authority for having sheltered wild animals; Alex, Nancy's daughter, realises that her ideal of activism turns out to be disappointing and falls short of what she imagined after attending and running away from a protest.

The Under Room's 2012 production takes place in a cellar that is supposed to be a space of safety where the immigrant can hide from the soldiers. However, with a stair that leads nowhere and a door that cannot open out, the set design already foreshadows the potential danger of this seemingly harmless space. As it turns out, the immigrant is stuck with his 'generous' host, and it is only in death that he could regain freedom. In both productions of *Human Animals* and *The Under Room*, it can be seen that the domestic space, far from being immune to the dangers and turbulence of the world, is where all these dangers and turbulence are most truthfully reflected. Consequently, the boundary that divides the inside and the outside, the private and the public, is revealed to be a construct meant to encourage political indifference regarding nonhuman animal genocide in the case of *Human Animals*, brutal violence against immigrants and a totalitarian regime terrorising its citizens in *The Under Room*.

It is interesting to observe how a clear division between the inside and the outside in stage design, as seen in *Human Animals* and *The Under Room*, can sometimes invoke a more perceptible sense of anxiety and menace. The 2018 production of Dawn King's *Foxfinder* at Ambassadors Theatre, in spite of its impressive set design where outdoor and indoor scenes literally blend into each other, fails to achieve the same kind of affect (Figure 12). By replacing a wall of the farmhouse with an image of the wood, the set is without doubt moody but, at the same time, 'almost elegant and painterly' and therefore, 'never quite working as a

constant reminder of the oppressive regime invading [the farmers'] home'.⁵⁶⁵ As remarked by Sally Hales in a review, 'The quaint staging never quite connects with the action and performance to spark the production into life, which feels like a symptom of the overall problem. Despite all the right ingredients, it doesn't seem fully alive.'⁵⁶⁶ That is to say, while the goal of a gothic aesthetic is certainly to generate a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety, making it too obvious may very well betray this goal.

In addition to the enhanced sense of entrapment, what makes the gothic aesthetic of contemporary speculative theatre even more unnerving and unsettling is the fact that atrocity is committed in broad daylight, violence normalised and justified, that darkness itself and all its subversive power are obliterated (or white-washed) by positivist rhetoric of clarity and certainty. The brightening of the stage in *Radiant Vermin* can be interpreted as a symbolic act of 'shedding light' on the process in which consumerist and racist ideologies conceal their monstrous darkness and crimes by exploiting the lightheartedness of entertainment. The vibrant colours of the character's costume, combined with the energetic physical acting of Sean Michael Verey and Gemma Whelan, who play Ollie and Jill but also all the other male and female characters during the birthday party scene, heighten the caricaturesque feeling that emanates from the set's simple white environment. In terms of sound design, instead of melancholic music or screeching noise that is stereotypically associated with a Gothic soundscape, the pre-show playlist includes upbeat pop tunes such as 'Our House' by Madness and 'Material Girl' by Madonna.⁵⁶⁷ All these elements, juxtaposed against a narrative of state-sponsored mass murder targeting the homeless, create a frightening contrast that is all the more haunting. The incongruity between the visual and the aural in *Radiant Vermin* generates a sense of the uncanny, not because the audience encounters something unfamiliar, but because something ought to have remained secret and hidden has come to light because of the seamless merging of the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*.⁵⁶⁸ As a playwright, Philip Ridley has always been interested in the Gothic. His three influential plays that exemplify the in-yer-face sensibility of British theatre in the nineties—*The Pitchfork Disney*

⁵⁶⁵ Sally Hales, 'Review: *Foxfinder* at Ambassadors Theatre', *Exeunt Magazine*, 17 September 2018, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-foxfinder-ambassadors-theatre/>.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁷ Barbour, 'Theatre in Review: *Radiant Vermin*'.

⁵⁶⁸ In his essay on the uncanny, Freud remarks that the word *heimlich* from which the word *unheimlich* (uncanny) derives 'is not ambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other—the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden'. See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), 132.

(1991), *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (1992) and *Ghost from a Perfect Place* (1994)—are unofficially titled ‘East End Gothic Trilogy’. Another of Ridley’s plays included in this research, *Mercury Fur*, also falls in line with the aesthetic of ruins and darkness. The fact that the aesthetic of these plays differs remarkably from that of *Radiant Vermin* does not mean that the former is more ‘Gothic’ compared to the latter but rather points to the heterogeneity of contemporary gothic aesthetics and the affects each dramaturgical strategy seeks to achieve.

With *Instructions for Correct Assembly*’s 2018 production at the Royal Court, Jack Knowles’s lighting corresponds to the colour palette of the play’s setting, which is ‘*The rooms of a neat family home. It could almost be a catalogue.*’ The altering spearmint, peach and red lights of the stage persuasively convey an aesthetic ‘unnervingly close to being clinical’.⁵⁶⁹ In those scenes where Hari and Max are assembling their robot son, we see human body parts strewn across the stage; however, because of this clinical lighting, what we feel is perhaps less of a Gothic visceral and intense reaction that is usually associated with witnessing corporeal afflictions and more on the side of the uncanny.

Lighting, however, is not the only element that contributes to the production of the uncanny in contemporary speculative plays. Another important factor lies in these plays’ commitment to explore the Gothic trope of the double. *Radiant Vermin* and *Instructions for Correct Assembly* dramatise the question of identity and uniqueness through the use of cast doubling. Doubling of the cast is not an unusual phenomenon in theatre; however, it is important to make a distinction between doubling that is a result of practical constraints (budget or space, or instance) and that which is conceptually motivated. It is the latter that enables experimentation to realise the various potentials of the text. In *Radiant Vermin*, the mysterious bureaucrat Ms Dee and the homeless victim called Kay are played by the same actress. Similarly, the birthday party scene requires the two actors who play Jill and Ollie to constantly switch back and forth between their main roles and the roles of the neighbours. The uncanny here operates at the level of intellectual uncertainty, as the audience cannot determine at once which character they are watching. As a result, they are required to pay close attention to what they see and hear so as not to be overwhelmed by confusion.

JILL ‘Meat is murder, Mum.’

⁵⁶⁹ Rosemary Waugh, ‘Review: *Instructions for Correct Assembly* at the Royal Court’, *Exeunt Magazine*, 15 April 2018, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-instructions-correct-assembly-royal-court/>.

OLLIE Murder?!
 JILL 'Yes, murder.'
 OLLIE 'Murder.'
 JILL Ollie. You okay?
 OLLIE What? Yes.
 JILL You're trembling a bit.
 OLLIE I'm not.
 JILL You are, sweetheart.
 OLLIE 'Have you seen how they kill pigs?'
 JILL 'I'm sure it's humane, Tristan.' 'It's not humane at all, Mum.' But... but
 don't they electrocute them first?—Ollie?
 OLLIE Of course they do. 'You think that's painless?'⁵⁷⁰

As mentioned by Jill and Ollie earlier in the play, they would have been content with their almost perfect neighbours, Miriam and Johnny, if it had not been for their children—the fifteen-year-old twins called Tristan and Tina—whose impudent and forthright remarks always trigger the couple's fear of having their secret divulged. When the actors playing Jill and Ollie invoke Tina and Tristan respectively, we have at work an operation of doubling the double (the twins), which adds another layer to the uncanny sensation of the performance. The succession of conflicting statements, tones and gestures deriving from a single body gives the impression that what we witness is a manifestation of demonic possession or, from a less superstitious and more scientific perspective, a case of dissociative personality disorder. It is thanks to this strategy that *Radiant Vermin* conveys in the most tangible manner the idea of how Jill and Ollie eventually become strangers not only in their own house but also in their own bodies.

Instructions for Correct Assembly entrusts the task of performing two characters to one actor but for a rather different effect. In Eccleshare's play, the android Jân and the human son Nick are played by the same actor, thus blurring the distinction between the human and the nonhuman. Since there is no cue to indicate the frequent temporal shifts between the present and the past in the play's non-linear structure, until the character is named, the audience may find it difficult to be sure about which of the two sons they are watching. Consequently, they may find their sympathy for a son struggling under the pressure of his parents' expectation mixes with that for an inorganic being completely deprived of the freedom to think and act. These two identities, thought of as distinct, converge in their suffering of psychological and linguistic violence, and this convergence is effectively embodied in the actor playing the two roles.

⁵⁷⁰ Ridley, *Radiant Vermin*, 93-94.

Likewise, dramatising the instability of identity plays a central part in *The Under Room*'s dramaturgy. Here, doubling takes on a special form, as the immigrant character is split into body and voice, with the latter played by an actor and the former a lifeless dummy. Even though it is true that as members of the audience, we have no trouble locating the apparent source of the voice, the ontological status of the Dummy Actor essentially transforms this tangible, embodied voice into an acousmatic one. The Dummy Actor does not occupy the same theatrical space as Jack, Joan or even the Dummy, nor does he belong to the world of the spectators, even though he is seen and heard by them. The locus of his ontology is a space of in-between-ness that resists definition and representation, which explains why his presence assumes a spectral quality. It also explains why the acousmatic voice associated with the Dummy Actor produces an uncanny, haunting effect on its listener. The uncanny lies not in the superficial resemblance of the dummy figure to man, as in the case of a doll, but in the transformation of a human being to an inert thing and in the extent to which humanness is imbued in a dummy.

As a result of the immigrant character being split into two, the audience's gaze is constantly forced to oscillate between the Dummy, with which the other two characters interact, and the Dummy Actor, whom we realise is but the embodiment of the immigrant's voice but whose physical presence is too substantial to be simply ignored. This dyssynchronisation between the visual and aural faculties retains the audience in a state of confusion and uncertainty, which paradoxically brings them closer to encountering the immigrant. The immigrant is neither the Dummy nor the Dummy Actor, not even the combination of the two. He is simultaneously present and absent, a figure the audience constantly searches for and constantly fails to locate; in short, an emblem of the Other. A Derridean spectre, the immigrant in *The Under Room* is a subversive force that defies knowledge and threatens to undermine any assurance in sensory perception as well as rationality. The use of an unusual artificial device such as a dummy can be said to be Bond's appropriation of the Brechtian defamiliarization or estrangement technique. Presenting the voice as a separate entity that is theatrically embodied, Bond strives to make clear the already existing strangeness and discontinuities in the immigrant character while encouraging the audience to dwell in a state of uncertainty in their encounter with this character, no matter how disorienting and uncomfortable this experience can be.

What I have demonstrated up till this point are, certainly, only some of the most relevant aspects of speculative theatre's gothic aesthetic in its staging of the domestic space.

The theatre experience of the four productions of *Radiant Vermin*, *Human Animals*, *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and *The Under Room* is one that displaces the audience from their mental and physical comfort zone—their ‘home’ in other words—and exposes them to persistent anxiety and vulnerability. I would argue that the goal of this type of dramaturgical strategy is not any sadistic entertainment form but to provide a space where the audience can reflect on the notion of absolute hospitality.

Like the gift, mourning or forgiveness, hospitality is an aporetic figure. The word ‘hospitality’ derives from a Latin word, *Hospitalität*, which ‘carries its own contradiction’ and ‘allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, “hostility”’.⁵⁷¹ As a result, there exists an internal conflict in the concept of hospitality: the guest [*hôte*] can be a welcomed stranger treated like a friend or ally but also an unwelcome stranger treated as an enemy or parasite. For Derrida, the tendency to impose restrictive conditions on hospitality in the name of safety or security is a perversion of the absolute Law of hospitality that characterises ‘laws of hospitality’—laws (plural) that assign the guest’s identity and proceed to adopt a set of treatments that correspond to this identity, be it friend or foe.

Nowadays, a reflection on hospitality presupposes, among other things, the possibility of a rigorous delimitation of thresholds or frontiers: between the familial and the non-familial, between the foreign and the nonforeign, the citizen and the non-citizen, but first of all between the private and the public, private and public law, etc.⁵⁷²

The dualistic approach to hospitality, according to Derrida, is inherent in the classic understanding of the concept. Within this mode of thinking, it goes without saying that in order to practice hospitality, one must be ‘at home’, having the sovereignty over one’s home, but ‘since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence’.⁵⁷³ The laws of hospitality, as such, give rise to and justify injustice, exclusion and violence. As we witness in Edward Bond’s *The Under Room*, it is under these laws of hospitality that Joan treats the immigrant. She is risking her life to conceal him in her house but in exchange, he is expected to acknowledge her authority and behave accordingly. When he refuses Joan’s offer and instead choosing Jack as the one with whom he wants to run away, the immigrant breaks the logic of exchange that underlines the laws of hospitality. This breach provokes Joan’s anger and consequently drives her to murder the immigrant: ‘You broke into my house. I listened to you.

⁵⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Hospitality’, *Angelaki* 5, no. 3 (December 2000): 3.

⁵⁷² Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 47 and 49.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, 55.

Pitied you. Took you in. I grovelled to that disgusting man. I gave up everything. Made myself a criminal. I dont know what will happen to me. I offer to go with you. And you choose that evil filth!’⁵⁷⁴

Unlike laws of hospitality, the Law of hospitality

requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.⁵⁷⁵

Absolute, unconditional hospitality does not impose any identity on the guest, which constitutes an openness in which justice is possible. But another feature of absolute hospitality requires that the space of hospitality is not characterised by sovereignty, that it is not to be an already existing space belonging to the host, must be made or carved out. Derrida makes a counterintuitive statement when he suggests that ‘only starting from the dislocation of the shelterless, the homeless, that the authenticity of hospitality can open up’, that ‘[p]erhaps only the one who endures the experience of being deprived of a home can offer hospitality’.⁵⁷⁶

The gothic sensibility associated with the domestic space—the awareness that one becomes a stranger in one own’s ‘home’, whatever this ‘home’ may signify—in blurring the delimitation between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between the private and the public, undermines the conditions of classic right-based hospitality and suggests the possibility of unconditional hospitality. It is perhaps human instinct to fight against the anxiety and discomfort associated with displacement, but the solution for these problems does not lie in the reestablishment of power and certainty. Rather, by dwelling on these undesirable states, one resists the foreclosure of the possibility of absolute hospitality and opens oneself to an encounter with the Other. The gothic aesthetic in contemporary speculative theatre examined above, in short, can be seen as constructing a rehearsal space for impossible hospitality to come. At the juncture of numerous ongoing and future crises, from the immigration (*The Under Room*) and housing crises (*Radiant Vermin*) to the crisis of identity brought about by technological advancement (*Instructions for Correct Assembly*), absolute hospitality presents itself as a utopian sensibility that generates and sustains ways of relating to each other that

⁵⁷⁴ Bond, *The Under Room*, 69.

⁵⁷⁵ Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 25.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

defy capitalism's logic of exchange. This utopian sensibility emerging from one's commitment to the impossible is particularly pertinent when it comes to the issue of ecological crisis, which I will turn to in the next section.

2. *Staging Gothic Pastoral*

(Escaped Alone—Human Animals—The Children—Pastoral)

Dark ecology undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature. It preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe. Instead of whistling in the dark, insisting that we're part of Gaia, why not stay with the darkness?

(Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*)

If pastoral can be radical, if it has to be so, it is not as a finished model, exhortation or ideology, but as a questioning, as itself a question [...], the political, poetical question of belonging, of the root of human being on this earth.

(Greg Garrard, 'Radical Pastoral?')

The pastoral, as a literary form, emerged in the Hellenistic world of the third century before Christ. As pointed out by Raymond Williams, in the development of classical pastoral and other rural literature, 'there is almost invariably a tension with other kinds of experience: summer with winter; pleasure with loss; harvest with labour; singing with a journey; past or future with the present'.⁵⁷⁷ The Renaissance adaptation of these classical modes, by gradually excising the living tensions until there is nothing countervailing, reduces the pastoral to a set of 'selected images stand as themselves: not in a living but in an enamelled world'.⁵⁷⁸ As a result, the pastoral now comes to be perceived as an idealised, Utopian, simple mode of living in harmony with nature, away from the urbanised world of increasing complexity. This type of pastoral imagination, which sees the countryside as both a metaphorical and actual retreat, dominated the early 50s British stage, in what the theatre critic and writer Kenneth Tynan terms the genre of the 'Loamshire play'.

Except when somebody must sneeze, or be murdered, the sun invariably shines. The inhabitants belong to a social class derived partly from romantic novels and partly from the playwright's vision of the leisured life he will lead after the play is a success—this being the only effort of imagination he is called upon to make. Joys and sorrows are giggles and

⁵⁷⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 18.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

whimpers; the crash of denunciation dwindles into ‘Oh, stuff, Mommy!’ and ‘Oh, really, Daddy!’ And so grim is the continuity of the thing that the foregoing paragraph might have been written at any time during the last thirty years.⁵⁷⁹

This romantic pastoral imagination is not only a misinterpretation of the original pastoral but also an attempt to absorb all social and economic realities into a natural vision of order and stability in a typical process of mythicalisation. It does not come as a surprise that British playwrights belonging to the new wave in the second half of the 50s, with John Osborne and Arnold Wesker being the most frequently cited names, vehemently adopted an anti-pastoral stance. The life of working-class people, which these playwrights seek to present to the public, is intrinsically incompatible with the romantic pastoral imagination of leisure, retreat and effortless harmony. For playwrights who seek to revolutionise what they perceive as a stagnant bourgeois theatre, it is only understandable that they position themselves in opposition to a mode of life regarded as ‘an innocent alternative to ambition, disturbance and war’,⁵⁸⁰ one that precludes the possibility of any social and political change.

It remains true that in the eyes of many playwrights and critics, pastoral has ‘justly been a word of reproach and ridicule, a synonym for insipid creations, unreal in feeling, affected in style’.⁵⁸¹ Pastoral imagery and imagination, however, are also extremely protean, considering how they have re-emerged stronger than ever following British theatre’s active engagement with ecological issues in the last two decades. Even though it is not rare for environmental concerns to be featured in British plays, old and new alike, its use is usually limited to being a background to explore human relations.⁵⁸² Only in recent years that theatres, both established institutions and independent companies, have brought this concern to the forefront by actively commissioning and promoting new plays tackling environmental issues. The proliferation of ‘climate change plays’ on the British stage attests to theatre’s determination to remain a relevant medium in bringing about social and political changes. In addition to traditional performance, new ways of audience engagement are also tested, from immersive, interactive theatre (*3rd Ring Out: Rehearsing the Future* (2010) or *New Atlantis* (2015), for instance) to dramatised lecture (*Ten Billion* (2012) and *2071* (2014)). It is

⁵⁷⁹ Kenneth Tynan, *Curtains; Selections from the Drama Criticism and Related Writings* (London: Atheneum, 1961), 86.

⁵⁸⁰ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 24.

⁵⁸¹ Martha Hale Shackford, ‘A Definition of the Pastoral Idyll’, *PMLA* 19, no.4 (1904): 583.

⁵⁸² In her 1994 essay, Una Chaudhuri is critical of the ways theatre treats the environment as mere scenic background, as well as the tendency of theatre scholarship to perceive nature as symbol or metaphor. See Una Chaudhuri, “‘There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake’”: Toward an Ecological Theater’, *Theater* 25, no. 1 (1994): 23–31.

noticeable, however, that the emphasis on conveying the *facts* of climate change through dramatised lectures risks backfiring due to the didactic tone and the prioritisation of the ethical need to inform over the need to provide the audience with a creative and engaging theatre experience. Likewise, the immersive, interactive form, by creating situations in which participants can immediately visualise the impact of their decisions, present a rather simplified picture of cause and effect based on a linear temporality.

In stark contrast to the apparent absence of the pastoral in these new forms of theatre, speculative plays performed in the more traditional form, including Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, Stef Smith's *Human Animals*, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* and Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral*, make extensive use of pastoral imageries and motifs in their approach to the theme of ecology. It would be inaccurate to assume that the return to the pastoral in the mentioned plays signals a nostalgic longing for a happier past of secluded tranquillity and a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Quite the reverse, the pastoral here is invoked in tandem with a distinctively gothic aesthetic and, as a result, gives rise to anxiety and uncertainty rather than assurance or stability. We should keep in mind that the conception of the pastoral as associated with all that is tranquil, romantic or dreamy—in short, arcadian—is a reconstructed version of Theocritean and Vergilian origins. Consequently, the gothic pastoral seen in contemporary speculative theatre is perhaps an attempt to retrieve and reconfigure the polyphonic and sceptical quality of the classic pastoral. It does not provide the audience with any resolution regarding the problem of ecological crisis, but it is precisely in this refusal that this particular aesthetic fulfils its political and ethical function. By employing the gothic pastoral not as a finished model, exhortation or ideology but as a mode of interrogation, speculative theatre, oscillating between hope and despair, strives to engage the audience in an experience of *ecognosis*—a process of 'becoming accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn't become less strange through acclimation'.⁵⁸³ Its ultimate goal, as such, is to foster what Timothy Morton characterises as 'dark ecology'—an ecological awareness that is dark-depressing, dark-uncanny but strangely dark-sweet.⁵⁸⁴ I would also argue that the notion of unconditional hospitality briefly mentioned in the previous section is instrumental to the practice of dark ecology, as it puts into question the preconceived host-guest status in the relationship between humans and nature. We are reminded that humans are *not* the owner of the earth or

⁵⁸³ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

natural catastrophes the enemies constantly lurking around our ‘home’ waiting for an opportunity to destroy our civilisation. On the contrary, as Michel Serres argues, ‘History hides the fact that man is the universal parasite, that everything and everyone around him is a hospitable space. Plants and animals are always his hosts; man is always necessarily their guest.’⁵⁸⁵ It is only by confronting our status as the parasite or the guest who have always profited from absolute hospitality and aspiring to become a host who provides rather than taking all the time that we are to establish a different kind of relationship with nature, one that does not lead to mutual destruction.

The 2016 productions of Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* and *The Children* at the Royal Court both give a timeless quality to the set and the costume. The back garden in *Escaped Alone* is ‘nostalgically reminiscent of Pastoral England, lost Eden or Arcadia’.⁵⁸⁶ The actresses dress for comfort more than for fashion and, at least in appearance, are completely at home with their surroundings. However, as pointed out by Angel-Perez, all Pastorals bear the germs of their tragic reversibility and Churchill’s pastorality is soon ‘systematically reversed into a dystopian revelation (*apokalupsos*)’.⁵⁸⁷ The continual shift between the cosy garden and the netherworld of darkness where Mrs Jarrett delivers her apocalyptic monologues gradually undermines the sustainability of the former. It is as if this hyper-realistic garden, occupied by hyper-realistic characters, despite its promise of safety and protection, is constantly under the threat of being engulfed by the surreal catastrophes and madness to come. The abrupt scene changes, always in the middle of a conversation, further highlight the instability and vulnerability of the pastoral space.

The switch between the garden scenes and the dark apocalyptic world of Mrs J’s monologues is not the only disruption that takes place in the 2016 production of *Escaped Alone* (Figure 16). In the Royal Court production, during the garden scenes, there are moments when the stage suddenly goes dark, and the sole light stream is focused on one of the four women, opening up another space for internal dialogue. This subjective space coexists with the pastoral setting, yet, what inhabits it is anything but tranquillity or harmony. If Mrs Jarrett’s monologues describe the unimaginable images of global extinction, these

⁵⁸⁵ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 24.

⁵⁸⁶ Elisabeth Angel-Perez, “‘In the heart of each joke hides a little holocaust’ (George Tabori): Horrendhilarious Wit on the British Contemporary Stage,’ *Miranda* 19 (2019).

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

internal dialogues reveal the destruction of the four women's personal universe: cat phobia in the case of Sally, Lena's depression, Mrs Jarrett's 'terrible rage' and Vi's trauma.

VI I can't love kitchen, I can't love a kitchen any more, if you've killed someone in a kitchen you're not going to love that kitchen, I lost that flat, even the kitchen where I am now reminds me of that kitchen, completely different colour, the cooker's on the other wall, and the window, but maybe it's the smell of food cooking, it's meat does it, cooking meat, the blood if it's rare, we don't often have meat, when you've cut somebody and seen the blood you don't feel the same, when he fell down you think oh good oh good and then you think that's a mistake, take that back, the horror happens then, keep that out, the horror is the whole thing is never the same [...] it comes over me sometimes in the kitchen or in the night if I wake up sometimes if it's hot that's worse I can't breath properly it all comes back in the night, but you get up in the morning and that's better put the kettle on but it's always there not there in the kitchen it's always there.⁵⁸⁸

Similar to Sally's cat phobia monologue, Vi's monologue is haunted by the inescapable terror of the kitchen where she killed her husband. It does not matter if her actual kitchen bears little resemblance to that place of traumatic memory since 'it's always there not there in the kitchen it's always there.' As noted by Elaine Aston,

You can lock up the house, go around feverishly closing windows and doors, but never be certain that a cat has not crept in; or you can sit on the bed hoping for a good day only to find that the 'air [is] too thick' to move; or you can 'put the kettle on', feel better, but 'in the kitchen it's always there'. Thus, the home as a place of relative safety is rendered uncanny: a private space that is not immune from the 'horror' that comes from without, however hard one might try to create personal systems of self-immunity.⁵⁸⁹

These disruptive moments of internal dialogue serve as a reminder of the artificiality of the peaceful atmosphere of the garden. This explains why together with the real turf, the fence, the shed and the unmatching chairs, there is also a cyclorama at the back of the stage, which betrays the naturalism of all the other scenic elements and gives the impression that 'this garden is a representation, a fictional place, a platform for exploring the themes of the play.'⁵⁹⁰

Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* adopts a different set of strategies to destabilise the superficial appearance of certainty and unchangeability of the pastoral space. Set in an east coast town devastated by a nuclear meltdown, Kirkwood's post-apocalyptic play is strangely familiar (Figure 15). The cottage where the play takes place can be any coastal cottage, while the interior decoration has a distinct retro, rustic quality that speaks of modesty and

⁵⁸⁸ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 40-41.

⁵⁸⁹ Elaine Aston, 'Enter Stage Left: "Recognition", "Redistribution", and the A-Affect', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 28, no. 3 (2018): 307.

⁵⁹⁰ 'Escaped Alone Resource Pack', *Royal Court*, <https://royalcourttheatre.com/what-else/schools-colleges/education-packs/escaped-alone-resource-pack/>.

simplicity: 'Wild flowers in milk bottles. Candles in wine bottles. Tupperware fruit bowl.'⁵⁹¹ Here, the gothic pastoralism is invoked by a series of almost imperceptible signs of danger and decay. Hazel and Robin, two retired scientists, receive a visit from Rose, an ex-colleague whom they have not seen for thirty-eight years. It is later revealed that the purpose of Rose's sudden appearance is not simply to reminisce about the old days but to recruit a group of people who used to work at the power station to take over from the current crew that is working on the shutdown so that they can let most of the young ones go. Such a dangerous plan is not well received by Hazel, a woman who used to wear sunscreen on a night shift in January, who 'is cautious and doesn't make mistakes', who is still subscribing to a healthy and balanced lifestyle consisting of yoghurt, salad and yoga at the age of sixty-seven. Rose's proposition, a vivid reminder of the ongoing crisis, greatly upsets the bucolic atmosphere that Hazel has done her best to maintain inside the cottage. For Hazel and Robin, the current dwelling situation is already a deteriorated form of their ideal pastoral lifestyle before the nuclear meltdown.

HAZEL [...] When we took early retirement, we started an organic smallholding. We bought up some land near the house. It was a lot of work, to get the accreditation, but you know Robin and me, we really threw ourselves into it. We won prizes for our dairy.⁵⁹²

The couple used to live and work on a farm, raising cattle and enjoying the pleasure of quiet but active country life. After the incident, Robin still goes back to the old farm inside the exclusion zone every day, claiming to feed the cows but, in reality, spending his day digging graves for the dead animals. Such a ghastly image once again renders perceptible the oppressive and pervasive presence of death in the world outside the cottage, a presence that always manages to creep inside. Robin's action is less about paying respect to the cows since it is doubtful that they would care about being properly buried or given service with a poem or a song. Rather, the time he spends on the old farm provides him with an opportunity to mourn for the immense suffering inflicted upon the land and all living beings: 'I dunno, I quite enjoy it [digging graves]. I cry a lot. Sometimes I get to the end of a day and I realise I've been crying for... six or seven hours.'⁵⁹³

Unlike Robin, Hazel's method of coping with the sudden loss of their house, their farm and their old way of life is to carry on as if nothing had happened, to stick with habits and routines that are parts of her life before the crisis. In other words, Hazel refuses to let any

⁵⁹¹ Lucy Kirkwood, *The Children*, ebook (London: Nick Hern, 2016).

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

exterior disruption alter her personal rhythm—an attitude that is quintessentially pastoral from a romantic perspective. Her determination to fight against the decline of old age, her obligation to good health in the aftermath of a nuclear meltdown is, in fact, logical, considering how focusing on the task of maintaining personal health is the only thing that can give her a sense of power and control in a world spiralling toward disintegration, decay and death.

HAZEL How can anybody consciously moving towards death, I mean by their own design, possibly be happy? People of our age have to resist—you have to resist, Rose.
ROSE Hold back the tide.
HAZEL You have a choice, don't you, exactly, at our age which is that you slow down, melt into your slippers, start ordering front-fastening bras out of Sunday supplements, or you make a committed choice to keep moving you know because you have to think: This is not the end of our lives but a new and exciting chapter.
ROSE That's a philosophy I really admire.
HAZEL If you're not going to grow: don't live.
ROSE Exactly.
HAZEL No, I mean, if you're not going to grow, don't live.⁵⁹⁴

Hazel's positivism, epitomised in the motto 'if you're not going to grow, don't live', has its own problematic aspect, as it conflates the determination for self-care with the fulfilment of responsibility. No amount of healthy living would protect her and her loved ones from the detrimental effects of the catastrophe. When her husband, Robin, claims that 'If I wasn't married to Hazel, the walls of my arteries would look like loft insulation. Together Hazel and I are going to live forever. On a diet of yoga and yogurt',⁵⁹⁵ it is in sarcasm that he speaks. By the end of the play, Robin starts to cough out blood—an unambiguous sign that his body has been affected by the trips he made to the farm. In the Royal Court production, the room where all actions take place is slightly tilted, which alludes to the erosion of the land beneath. This tilt is not obvious to the naked eye but only becomes apparent when a spherical object such as an apple is put on the kitchen table, as indicated in the script. Danger, as such, is omnipresent but always shrouded in an air of domestic normalcy. Furthermore, the lighting designed by Peter Mumford at times gives the cottage a liquefaction effect, as if the whole place can collapse and be swallowed by the ocean at any moment. In the same way that the stability of the pastoral dwelling is subtly threatened by the crumbling down of the ground and the dissolution into the sea, Robin's jaunty attitude is but a facade to conceal the invisible decay of his radiation-damaged body.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Escaped Alone and *The Children* exploit the pastoral motif of retirement in a country house and problematise the idealised peace and healing effect of nature usually associated with this mode of living by subjecting it to constant invisible menace that slowly creeps in. This logic of infestation is taken to another level in Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* and Stef Smith's *Human Animals*. Both plays bring to the stage a mixture of the tragic and the comic in their depiction of an urban landscape suddenly teeming with wildlife—an imaginary scenario that completely reverses expert predictions of accelerating extinction risk and loss of biodiversity from climate change.⁵⁹⁶ The fecundity of nature—vegetation in the former case and animals in the latter—far from being celebrated by humans, is perceived as a serious threat to civilised society. The frantic and hostile way some characters and the government respond to nature getting out of hands in these two plays is an extreme manifestation of what Simon Estok characterises as *ecophobia*—‘an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world’.⁵⁹⁷ Considering how ecophobia makes ‘looting and plundering of animal and non-animal resources possible’,⁵⁹⁸ there is no surprise in seeing ‘how our media daily writes nature as a hostile opponent who is responding angrily to our incursions and actions, an opponent to be feared and, with any luck, controlled’.⁵⁹⁹ In *Pastoral* and *Human Animals*, nature is indeed portrayed as uncontrollable and threatening; however, the intention is not to feed into this ecophobic sentiment. Rather, I would argue that the combination of the pastoral and the gothic aesthetic in these two plays encourages the audience to adopt a different attitude in their response to the ecological crisis. This attitude will be motivated by neither fear, paranoia, a desire to establish domination over nature nor an idealised conception of the pastoral but derive from a very basic acknowledgement that our perception of nature as either fearful or nurturing is a product of mythicalisation, an artificial construction. Timothy Morton theorises the mode of engagement that ‘gets over the dilemma of the beautiful soul, not by turning the other into the self, but perversely, by leaving things the way they are’⁶⁰⁰ as ‘dark ecological’. In the book *Dark Ecology*, he argues that the kind of awareness required to

⁵⁹⁶ Gathering data from over 130 studies on the level of risk that climate change poses to species, in 2015, professor Mark Urban at University of Connecticut estimates that ‘if climate changes proceed as expected, one in six species could face extinction’. Regions such as South America, Australia and New Zealand to face the greatest risk. See Mark C. Urban, ‘Accelerating Extinction Risk from Climate Change’, *Science* 348, no. 6234 (1 May 2015): 571-73.

⁵⁹⁷ Simon C. Estok, ‘Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia’, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16, no. 2 (1 March 2009): 208.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶⁰⁰ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 196.

face the contemporary crisis ‘at first has the characteristics of tragic melancholy and negativity, concerning inextricable coexistence with a host of entities that surround and penetrate us’ but, rather than ending in despair, this awareness ‘evolves paradoxically into an anarchic, comedic sense of coexistence’.⁶⁰¹ Such a non-dualistic approach to nature is at once intimate and distancing, yet, it is by dwelling on this dilemma that one can come closer to an ethical and responsible form of relationality.

In Stef Smith’s *Human Animals*, the audience witnesses a transition from ecophobia to ecognosis most prominently in the character Lisa, a thirty-something who works in chemical distribution. Already, her choice of profession serves as an indicator of her indifference to the detrimental impact her actions may have on the environment. At the beginning of the crisis, Lisa held a firm conviction that ‘In a couple of weeks’ time, it will be like this whole thing never fucking happened and all I want to do is bake fucking peanut-butter cookies’.⁶⁰² Her insistence on fulfilling her duty at work, baking for Sweet-Tooth Friday, despite the fact that roads are closed, fear of infection spreads, and foxes and pigeons are killed in great numbers, recalls Hazel’s determination to stick to her yoga routine in the immediate aftermath of a meltdown in *The Children*. This desire to shield oneself from the madness of the outside world, to keep up the appearance of normality, is a very natural reaction, considering how routine habits promise the individual stability and predictability—in short, a consolation in the face of incomprehensible events. To borrow from Deleuze, ‘Habit is the constitutive root of the subject, and the subject, at root, is the synthesis of time—the synthesis of the present and the past in light of the future.’⁶⁰³ At the moment habit is performed, not only that the fleeting present is temporarily grounded and materialised, but the past (previously performed routines) and the future (the expectation of similar routines to come) also briefly come into existence. While being obstructive to political engagement, in the way it seals Lisa in her own bubble, the attachment to habit paradoxically provides the condition for possible change. If Lisa had not been so obsessed with adhering to routine and the rhythm of life before the crisis, she would not have had such a strong motivation for taking a stance against the extreme measures imposed by the authority. Only after her house was burnt, her job threatened and her partner beaten for having sheltered wild animals, in short, after she was refused the possibility of carrying on with her normal life, that Lisa

⁶⁰¹ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 160.

⁶⁰² Smith, *Human Animals*, 61.

⁶⁰³ Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity. An Essay on Hume’s Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 93.

started to rethink her position, went to the park for a protest and joined Jamie in his quest to save the animals by giving out eggs to strangers.

ALEX What do I do with it?

LISA You look after it.

And then you let it go.

And then most importantly—you just let it be.

I've given out half a dozen. Hopefully some will make it.

But you never know... you never really know if what you're doing makes a difference.

We should have never have touched them.

Never have touched those animals in the first place.⁶⁰⁴

Here, we witness a radical change in Lisa's attitude. While admitting that 'you never know... you never really know if what you're doing makes a difference', Lisa is determined to keep on doing it anyway. It is a contrasting image to Jamie's unshakable certainty that his dissent will lead to the creation of a better world. Jamie, in his single-minded quest of an ecological warrior, emerges as a rather dogmatic and patronising figure, saying things like 'We need to change. We need to wake up. My life and your life and the life of everyone around us is at stake'⁶⁰⁵ or 'I'm sorry for you. You were never brave enough to see what was happening. You were never strong enough to resist. You are scared and weak. Your energy was put into all the wrong things'.⁶⁰⁶ Jamie and his dream of building a new world in his garden that is safely shielded from the madness of the outside world embody the romantic pastoral dream of living in harmony with nature by erasing the boundary between the human and the animal (Figure 13). On the contrary, Lisa, in her embracing of the gothic pastoral, becomes 'accustomed to strangeness that doesn't become less strange through acclimation'.⁶⁰⁷ Instead of struggling to gain control over the situation, Lisa has now come to terms with uncertainty. Instead of regarding wild animals as a threat and being complicit in the government's effort to establish human dominance over nature, Lisa has become accustomed to the radical alterity of the animals.

Compared to *Human Animals*, *Pastoral* is much less direct in its engagement with the topic of environmental activism. In fact, there is nothing in the plot to suggest that any character cares to protest the government's attempt to burn down the ravaging trees. The play is set in a small flat inhabited by an old woman called Moll, who is patiently waiting for an Ocado man to deliver her shopping, completely indifferent to the rising panic in the outside

⁶⁰⁴ Smith, *Human Animals*, 93-94.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁰⁷ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5.

world: people taking flight from the city while the army is on the street to combat the mysterious growth of vegetation. Manz and Hardy, two men in their twenties whose connection to Moll is unspecified, are supposed to take care of her and get her to a safe place, but they soon realise that it is too late to leave: ‘The roots have come right through now, grass as high as the bollards. They [the army]’ve cordoned off the entrances.’ The three are joined by a family—Mr and Mrs Plum, together with their eleven-year-old son Arthur. Eventually, Moll and Arthur are left behind in the flat as the others escape to the other side of the wall built by the army to contain the spread of the seed: ‘To get through the checkpoint you have to be decontaminated. But it’s heavy stuff. They won’t do it to anyone they think is... frail.’

At Soho Theatre, Michael Vale’s extraordinary design conveys beautifully the magical vitality of the madly proliferating foliage: during the course of the play, furniture and floors fall apart as an oak tree bursts through; vegetation sprouts from the gaps; flowers attached to darts showered into the stage (Figure 14). David Farrier characterises the imagery invoked in Eccleshare’s play as ‘toxic pastoral’—a version of pastoral in which ‘former pastoral certainties are degraded, permitting an engagement with and celebration of the ambivalence in human interactions with the more-than-human world’.⁶⁰⁸ Indeed, there is something supernatural in the way living things are described as growing unstoppably and exponentially. The little weeds, sprouts, herbs, reeds and wild mushrooms first noticed a few weeks previously soon gave rise to a willow tearing a car park to shreds. In the words of the character Moll, they have been ‘ambushed’ by nature. Not only so, but the character Hardy also notices that it is no longer possible to eat fruit because the inside is filled with worms and maggots. It seems as if animals, from worms and maggots to domestic pets, sensing the vulnerability of humans in this strange situation, start to band together to overthrow these self-proclaimed masters once and for all.

MOLL Winston! There’s more, four of them now. They’re all there, lying outside the door. And another, coming down the stairs. A big tabby. They’re looking at me.
MANZ We can’t let them in, Moll.
MOLL He’s my cat.
HARDY Not any more.⁶⁰⁹

As the vegetation grows denser and transforms the city into forests, Moll’s cat, Winston, starts to behave less like a domesticated animal and more like a free agent. Here, we can see

⁶⁰⁸ David Farrier, ‘Toxic Pastoral: Comic Failure and Ironic Nostalgia in Contemporary British Environmental Theatre’, *Journal of Ecocriticism* 6, no. 2 (July 2014): 4.

⁶⁰⁹ Thomas Eccleshare, *Pastoral*, ebook (London: Oberon, 2013).

some similarities with the unpredictable cats in Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* and the ever more familiar image of a world turned upside down.

The overabundance of life in *Pastoral* is matched by the overabundance of intertextual references, which further contributes to its gothic sensibility, considering how 'Gothic signifies a writing of excess'.⁶¹⁰ The opening scene, for instance, bears a strong resemblance to Beckett's *Happy Day*.

MOLL *takes her handbag and slowly opens it. Out of the handbag flies a fly. MOLL swipes at it and it disappears. She looks around her. From her handbag she removes a compact mirror. She checks herself in the mirror. She replaces the mirror and withdraws from the bag a stick of lipstick, which she applies. Once finished she replaces the lipstick and checks the compact mirror again. She replaces the compact mirror and removes a tube of mascara from the bag, which she applies, carefully to each eye and then, having finished, checks the mirror. She replaces the compact mirror.*⁶¹¹

Moll's movements recall Winnie's morning ritual while being embedded in a mound in the middle of a hellish landscape.

WINNIE [...] Poor Willie—[examines tube, smile off]—running out—[looks for cap]—ah well—[finds cap]—can't be helped—[screws on cap]—just one of those old things—[lay down tube]—another of those old things—[turns towards bag]—just can't be cured—[rummages in bag]—cannot be cured—[brings out small mirror, turns back front]—ah yes—[inspects teeth in mirror]—poor dear Willie—[testing upper front teeth with thumb, indistinctly]—good Lord!—[pulling back upper lip to inspect gums, do.]—good God!—[pulling back corner of mouth, mouth open, do.]—ah well—[other corner, do.]—no worse—[abandons inspection, normal speech]—no better, no worse—[lays down mirror]—no change—[wipes fingers on grass]—no pain [...]⁶¹²

The rapid descent into savage behaviour, including murder and cannibalism, can be seen as a nod to J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise* or William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. When it is combined with a parody of 'nature writing' that characterises Manz's and Hardy's knowledgeable enumeration of different kinds of birds and plants shooting up around the flat (which include woodrush, reedmace, sycamore, ash and oak sapling, bluebell, wood sorrel, brook, pondweed, heron, kingfisher), or the Ocado man's mock-pastoral description of the streets he passed on his delivery journey, the outcome is a gothic pastoral sensibility capable of making one stir in discomfort and laugh at the same time.

OCADO MAN I'd say it was almost pretty. Quite idyllic actually. There's no road anymore, but it's not like this yet. There's little saplings, bushes and reeds. The edge of Copling Street's fallen in and got filled in with rain water. There's all sorts there now, it's like a

⁶¹⁰ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

⁶¹¹ Eccleshare, *Pastoral*.

⁶¹² Samuel Beckett, 'Happy Days', in *The Complete Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett* (Faber & Faber, 2006), 139.

stream, trickling down the hill. Frogs, toads, beavers, fish. Dragonflies as big as my finger. And the birds! Ducks and geese and swans everywhere. Others that I don't know the names of, great big ones overhead, little ones twitching their heads at me. I stopped and had a paddle. That's where I lost my shoes. A little fox came and nicked them when I was paddling.

Soon after this pleasant experience with his new surroundings, the man is viciously attacked by a group of people for his delivery goods. The contrast between the peaceful, idyllic nature and the savagery of human behaviour brings into relief the impossibility of harmonious coexistence in a consumerist society. We get the impression that the toxic pastoral imageries invoked in *Pastoral* mirror the unstoppable, exponential economic growth that destroys everything on its way—an economic process in which all of us participate and therefore share the responsibility for the current ecological crisis. The solution implemented by the government in *Pastoral*—‘a plastic wall as high as a canopy’—echoes both the reality of the plastic waste problem and the popular project in many developed countries for a wall (physical and/or metaphorical) to deter unwanted immigrants. Furthermore, the play also comments on the normalisation of public policies that sacrifice the most vulnerable populations in society in the name of progress and safety—rhetoric that has become more salient and dangerous than ever in the year 2020 as the world faces a pandemic.

Dark ecology, being ‘a politicized version of deconstructive hesitation or aporia’⁶¹³, is also a utopian sensibility that generates ‘not the relaxing ambient sounds of ecomimesis, but the screeching of the emergency brake’⁶¹⁴—a halting that disrupts capitalist definition of progress. The combination of the gothic and the pastoral in speculative theatre, which seems counterintuitive at first sight, has proved to be quite effective in generating an atmosphere of anxiety and nostalgic longing indicative of the contemporary emotional landscape. As examples of dark ecological drama, *Pastoral*, *Human Animals*, *Escaped Alone*, and *The Children* rely on the juxtaposition of the absurd and the serious, the everyday and the epochal to draw the audience's attention to the intermingling nature of seemingly separate social, political and ecological forces. It is not a matter of ‘erasing’ boundaries or denouncing all boundaries as social, artificial constructs but of bringing into relief the fact that boundaries and identities are always porous, malleable. The instability of boundaries, between the inside and the outside, the self and the world, as well as between different identities, creates the condition for absolute hospitality that paradoxically reclaims a space for ‘home’ in the midst of displacement and ‘homelessness’.

⁶¹³ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 186.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

From the gothic aesthetic of light and order seen in several productions of *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, *The Under Room*, *Human Animals*, and *Radiant Vermin*, the logic of infestation underlying the gothic pasteurality in *Human Animals*, *Pastoral*, *Escaped Alone*, and *The Children*, to the more traditional Gothic aesthetic of darkness and ruins in Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* and Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, it is clear that strategies employed to convey the contemporary gothic sensibility are extremely diverse, even within a relatively small corpus of speculative theatre. The different expressions of the gothic aesthetic examined in this section participate in the transformation of the Gothic from a style descriptor or a literary genre to an affective-discursive practice that reflects and scrutinises the pervasiveness of anxiety in contemporary society. It would be inaccurate to claim that the experience with anxiety and uncertainty is something pertaining to the twenty-first century alone. Nevertheless, the normalisation and spectacularisation of crisis, both of which are governed by advanced capitalist ideology, pose unprecedented challenges to the prospect of forging ethical relationships between human individuals as well as those between humans and their environment. The gothic sensibility of contemporary speculative theatre, by inviting the audience to share the character's experience of containment and confusion—a state of 'not-being-at-home', in other words—generates a space where it is no longer impossible to think about the possibility of absolute hospitality.

In the next section, I will continue on my investigation of the dramaturgical strategies employed by contemporary speculative theatre to invoke an aporetic experience best characterised as the 'ordeal of the undecidable'.⁶¹⁵ In particular, I will analyse the entangled temporal and spatial structures of Alistair McDowall's *X* and *Pomona*, Nick Payne's *Elegy*, Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, and Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* to demonstrate how these plays undermine the dominance of linear temporality and the power hierarchy between 'reality' and fiction. What is made perceptible in these productions is the essential role of the ability to think and experience different temporalities in sustaining an ethical engagement with the other's trauma and loss. At the same time, speculative theatre seems to argue that a recognition of the complex interweaving of fiction and reality, the porous nature of 'reality' itself, would prompt us to be more mindful, sceptical and critical in our approach to various political and social narratives. Such an attitude constitutes the first step in acknowledging our status as implicated subjects and implicated spectators, an acknowledgement that promises new ways of thinking about and fulfilling our responsibility.

⁶¹⁵ Derrida, 'Force of Law', 15.

II. FUZZY BOUNDARIES—ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Theatre has always been known as a medium that can accommodate incompatible times and spaces. Contemporary speculative theatre benefits from this capacity to interrogate not only the existence of boundaries between different temporal and spatial settings but also the logic that gives rise to a hierarchical relation between these settings. If boundaries and hierarchies are crucial for the establishment of fixed identity, then speculative theatre's attempt to create an unsettling experience in terms of temporal and spatial perception can be perceived as a subversive act aimed at fostering nonidentity, aporetic forms of subjectivity and relationality that respect the particularity of others' perception and perspective.

Alistair McDowall's *X* and Nick Payne's *Elegy* rely on a dramatic structure constituted by multiple and multi-directional temporalities. The coexistence of linear, reversed linear, circular and stuttering temporalities in the two plays gives the impression of an intellectual game, a sort of puzzle that the audience is to solve to make sense of what they see. While it is true that *X* and *Elegy*, because of their complex and interwoven temporalities, require some effort of deduction, I would argue that the theatre experience created for the audience of these plays has little to do with satisfying intellectual curiosity. Rather, what they aim for is, on the one hand, to provide a critique on the dominance of linear temporality and objective time underlying the capitalist rhetoric of progressive growth and development, which has contributed to irreversible environmental destruction (the loss of the Earth as an inhabitable planet in *X*) and, on the other hand, to let the audience briefly experience for themselves the confusion and emotional turmoil associated with memory loss, both as a patient and a patient's loved one (in the case of *Elegy*). Consequently, the multiple and multi-directional temporalities in *X* and *Elegy* manage to re-enact an affective experience where personal and collective trauma converge. At the same time, as these different temporalities are precisely those involved in working through trauma, acknowledging their coexistence would enable the audience to ethically approach the trauma of their own and of others.

Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* and Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* explore the heterotopic potential of theatre to juxtapose in a single real place several dramatic spaces. By employing the meta-theatrical device of role-playing, these plays not only blur the boundary between fiction and reality but also interrogate the conventional perception and definition of 'reality'. The fact that crimes and violence are committed in a fictional, virtual world does not mean that there are no ramifications in the

‘real’ world and, in return, one cannot evade the problems of the real world by holing up in the space of fiction and games. With *The Nether*, *Pomona* and *Victory Condition*, the audience is encouraged to adopt a meta-theatrical consciousness that problematises fixed identity. As a new sensibility, this meta-theatrical consciousness, characterised by uncertainty, promises to open up new perspectives on the question of responsibility.

1. *Enacting Multiple and Multidirectional Temporalities*

(*X—Elegy*)

In the previous section, I have demonstrated how contemporary speculative theatre enters into a dialogue with the Gothic and the pastoral ‘genres’ in a way that, like its engagement with myth explored in the first chapter, acknowledges and respects the resources of tradition while simultaneously reformulating generic conventions to better adapt to present and future situations. What is immediately discernible in all these different forms of engagement is speculative theatre’s commitment to the openness of time or, to put it differently, commitment to a utopian temporality that does not place its value at the end but in the process of reflection and reinvention. It is precisely because of this constant movement that speculative theatre achieves a fluid identity and serves as a conjunction of various temporal planes and directions. Some speculative plays, such as Alistair McDowall’s *X* and Nick Payne’s *Elegy*, choose to incorporate the question of unstable identity and temporality into their very formal structure, in which the temporal zones of past, present and future remain potentially indistinguishable. The overall display of non-chronological time in these two plays, however, cannot be identified completely in terms of postmodernism’s decisive rejection of linear time, since a specific kind of linearity is still very much present in the way different temporalities are organised to form a comprehensible narrative—in other words, the way the performance is delivered is unavoidably linear. What makes *X* and *Elegy* an impactful theatre experience is that there is no dominant temporality, that the audience finds themselves in the middle of a complex entanglement of linear, cyclical and stuttering temporalities. Such complexity forces us to pay close attention to the performance and invites our interpretation. Nevertheless, I would argue that interpretation or making sense of the plot is not the final goal but an instrumental process through which the audience can momentarily experience the temporality of the other’s trauma—the loss of memory on the individual level and the loss of home due to ecological crisis on the collective level. What *X* and *Elegy* hope to convey through their particular dramatic structure, I believe, is the possibility of living

together and accompanying each other through the most difficult of times by respecting all the different temporalities and striving to negotiate between irreconcilable temporalities rather than imposing one at the cost of others. In this sense, the multiple and multidirectional temporalities of *X* and *Elegy* is another attempt at enacting the idiorrhymy I have discussed previously at the end of Chapter 3.

In the last few years, Alistair McDowall has been considered one of the most exciting and promising voices on the British theatre scene. After winning the Bruntwood Prize for Playwriting in 2011 with *Brilliant Adventures*, McDowall pushes ahead with the critically acclaimed *Pomona* (2014) and the intriguing *X* (2016) commissioned by the Royal Court. His approach to playwriting is based on an open and daring attitude of an artist ready to challenge cultural hierarchy.

I wanted to write a play within the information-rich and hyper-connected culture we've built for ourselves. Where everyone's a fan of something, and the box-set reigns, I think it's a mistake to put up fences between entertainment and art, between high-and lowbrow, between theatre and anything else.⁶¹⁶

It is evident from his plays, which are filled with pop-culture references, that McDowall is consciously working to blur the boundaries between 'low' and 'high' cultures while expanding on the possibility of the theatre medium. *Brilliant Adventures* mixes 'economic socio-naturalism and science fiction',⁶¹⁷ *Pomona* brings together the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) and Lovecraftian gothic elements, while *X* has been characterised as both science fiction and psychological horror.⁶¹⁸

X is set in a post-apocalyptic future with four astronauts stranded in a research base on Pluto, restlessly waiting for the rescue team. Ian Farnell observes that despite its strange premise, the play's first act 'resembles something of a kitchen sink drama',⁶¹⁹ exploring the 'everyday struggle against the degradation of powerlessness, the loss of community, or the

⁶¹⁶ Alistair McDowall, 'Where Are All the Plays about Today's Hyper-Connected World?', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2014, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/nov/06/plays-today-hyper-connected-culture-mr-burns-teh-internet>.

⁶¹⁷ Simon Stephens, 'S1 E7: Alistair McDowall Talks to Simon Stephens', *Playwright's Podcast*, n.d., <https://royalcourttheatre.com/podcast/episode-7-alistair-mcdowall-talks-simon-stephens/>.

⁶¹⁸ McDowall himself states that despite a science fiction premise, 'people would struggle to call [*X*] science fiction after seeing it' and that the play can be better characterised as a character piece in the vein of a psychological horror. He also claims that his interest does not lie in hard science but in 'taking one speculative idea and seeing what that would mean for how we live or how we identify ourselves'. See Mary Halton, 'Interview: Alistair McDowall', *Exeunt Magazine*, 29 March 2016, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/interview-alistair-mcdowall/>.

⁶¹⁹ Ian Farnell, 'Science Fiction and the Theatre of Alistair McDowall', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 29, no. 2 (2019): 130.

deadening influence of suburbia'⁶²⁰ even though here 'suburbia' is replaced by 'deep space'. Towards the end of Act One, however, any resemblance of normality disappears as it is revealed that the main clock of the base, to which all the clocks are linked, has gone wrong, and nobody knows when the problem started. There was a day that lasted at least fifty hours, and the three years that the astronauts thought they had spent on Pluto might have been much longer. The crew, stuck in time and space with no hope of escaping, soon find themselves engulfed in panic, paranoia and despair.⁶²¹

The characters in *X* recall the Beckettian characters doomed to endless repetition, desperately yearning for change in a situation where change is made impossible. McDowall himself confirms: 'The real game of this was how I could get that sensation that just they're there for this really inordinate amount of time. I mean it's not so much the amount of time, it's the fact that nothing changes. They're in this room, and the walls aren't going to change.'⁶²² The claustrophobic, impersonal setting of the play, which 'resembles an airport waiting room' or 'an expanded train carriage',⁶²³ intensifies the feeling of entrapment. There is a large, rectangular window facing the audience, but just like the windows of the bunker in Beckett's *Endgame* that peer into a depressing world of greyness, the opening in *X* 'looks out into blackness',⁶²⁴ 'inducing a state of existential hopelessness, even dread'⁶²⁵ instead of providing any consolation. In the 2016 Royal Court production, the design by Merle Hensel creates an image of infinite repetition and an illusion of depth in which the audience's gaze spirals towards the focal point of the window, as if the frame of this opening marks the event horizon of a black hole from which nothing can escape (Figure 17). Once again, we witness the use of a subtly askew interior previously encountered in Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*, also at the Royal Court, as a scenographic device that conveys a sense of instability and ominous threat. Only that in the case of *X*, it is not so much a threat to the physical existence of the base structure, which is 'designed to last for *decades*' but to the crew's sanity: 'I used

⁶²⁰ Reade Dornan, 'Kitchen Sink Drama', in *Western Drama Through the Ages: Four Great Eras of Western Drama*, ed. Kimball King (Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 452.

⁶²¹ Perhaps to an audience member who has gone through the year 2020 with the confinement(s) brought about by the ongoing pandemic, the emotional and psychological strain that the crew on Pluto experience is no longer something completely alien or unrelatable.

⁶²² Halton, 'Interview: Alistair McDowall'.

⁶²³ Alistair McDowall, *X* (London: Methuen Drama, 2016), 4.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁵ Farnell, 'Science Fiction and the Theatre of Alistair McDowall', 130.

to lie awake worrying about the windows cracking, now I worry about them *not* ever cracking.’⁶²⁶

The tension of the old dramatic principle of waiting without any prospect of ever encountering what is waited for recalls the stagnant temporality in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Like Vladimir and Estragon, the crew in McDowall’s play are confined both spatially and temporally, but their predicament is much less abstract compared to Beckett’s tramps. These are people who desperately want to get home but who are also aware that there is no longer any home planet to return to: ‘There’s nothing left back there. Trees. Birds. Animals. Countries gone. Everyone crammed too close together on what’s left of the land. It’s a shadow.’⁶²⁷ In other words, within the dramatic universe of *X*, these characters are representative of all of earth’s citizens who suffer from extreme loss and displacement due to environmental degradation, whose life is characterised by a shared aporia—an absence of a way out. Corresponding to the spatial entrapment inflicted upon the crew on Pluto as well as on the population that cram too close together on earth is a temporal stagnation that is the product of a post-apocalyptic sensibility. James Berger writes:

Modernity is often said to be preoccupied by a sense of crisis, viewing as imminent, perhaps even longing for, some conclusive catastrophe. This sense of crisis has not disappeared, but in the late twentieth century it exists together with another sense, that the conclusive catastrophe has already occurred, the crisis is over (perhaps we were not aware of exactly when it transpired), and the ceaseless activity of our time—the news with its procession of almost indistinguishable disasters—is only a complex form of stasis.⁶²⁸

Such a stagnant image of a post-apocalyptic world renders temporal progression meaningless, denying the possibility of any ‘conclusive catastrophe’ and, therefore, of radical change or salvation. Compared to neo-apocalyptic literature—literature of pessimism in which the traditional optimistic conclusion and intent to inspire faith disappear and are replaced by imaginative but definitive End scenarios such as human extinction or planet destruction,⁶²⁹ the post-apocalyptic imagination appears to be more hopeful at first because it lets us survive the catastrophe. However, it is hard to see how hope can be sustained in a stand-still world of unchangeability.

⁶²⁶ McDowall, *X*, 45-46.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶²⁸ James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiii.

⁶²⁹ Elizabeth Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation—Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2008), xv.

Stuck in the limbo of the everlasting ‘today’, McDowall’s characters find solace in performing ritual-like routines that sustain the illusion of the passing of time. Ray blows the bird whistle every day, Clark is on his DJs decks three times a day, not only as a distraction or hobby but also to give his day ‘structure.’ Ray treasures the past and does his best to preserve his memories, playing the bird whistle every day to hold on to the distinct sounds of different kinds of bird. Belonging to the generation born before the catastrophe, Ray was old enough to recognise the radical changes that took place and to be aware of the deprivation of human existence: ‘I’m the last generation that lived amongst the living.’⁶³⁰ At the opposite end stood Clark, who insists on identifying himself as a pimp only living in the present, professing no interest in the past or the future because neither exists.

CLARK It’s bullshit. History’s bullshit. You’re always asking everyone about it and it’s *gone*. It doesn’t exist. I don’t waste my time thinking about shit that doesn’t exist.

MATTIE So you never think about the past then.

CLARK No.

MATTIE Not ever.

CLARK No. That’s why I’m way cooler than you.

MATTIE What about the future.

CLARK No. Same thing. Doesn’t exist. Can’t see it. Touch it. There’s just this second, right now, as I’m saying it it’s *dying*, it’s *gone*. There it goes. Pimps like me live in the present.⁶³¹

Interestingly, in his seeming callousness, Clark also touches upon the aporia of the experience of time. His position is exemplary of the sceptic argument for the non-being of time: ‘the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain’.⁶³² Clark was lucky enough to touch one of the last trees on earth when he was a child, ‘something considered by an entire generation to be *mythic*’,⁶³³ but such a privilege does not seem to have any lasting impression on him. In Clark’s point of view, it was ‘just a tree’, an object of perceptible qualities that is to be viewed in the same category with other objects such as rock or paper.

MATTIE What was it *like* though. In, *experience* terms.

Pause.

CLARK I dunno.

 ...

 It’s knobbly.

 Main bit’s all knobbly. Like rocks.

⁶³⁰ McDowall, X, 28.

⁶³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶³² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 7.

⁶³³ McDowall, X, 14.

And the leaves...
They're like paper.
Old paper.
Like how paper used to be.⁶³⁴

Clark's dismissive attitude regarding the past and the future, especially the notion of myth, is understandable since, unlike Ray, he belongs to a post-apocalyptic generation to which the depraved conditions of life are the norms. In order to endure this predicament, the only viable solution would be to replace mythic atemporality with a sense of continual, linear duration in which 'time began to be viewed as moving in only one direction: from a distant past to an unknown future with the present as a continuously vanishing moment in between'.⁶³⁵

Despite their seemingly opposite attitude to the past, however, both Clark and Ray operate on the same basis of a linear, single-directional temporality—the kind of temporality emblemized in the figure of the clock. The clock that is linked to earth time, as such, becomes the guiding tool for all their activities and the anchor of their sanity. Their faith in the man-made timekeeping system of the mechanical/digital clock or, speaking more broadly, in technology, is also the faith capitalism strives to instil in us as a countermeasure or an illusion against the reality of a stagnant post-apocalyptic temporality. Without the linear, single-directional temporality of the mechanical clock time, it is impossible to talk about 'progress' or 'growth'—concepts that have been exploited as justifications for unsustainable activities that led to the destruction of the planet and, ironically, continued to exert its influence in the aftermath.

CLARK Why didn't we notice?
COLE A day here is six and a half Earth days.
 And the sun's barely visible and we're always inside.
 It's one long night.
 That's why they fixed everything to Universal Time on Earth.
 It's supposed to be more reliable.
CLARK But it's *fucked*.⁶³⁶

The fact that the base's computers do not log Plutonian time and rely solely on Universal Time on Earth is another proof of human beings' lack of imagination and preparation when it comes to planning for contingencies. The fate of the crew stranded on Pluto reflects the fate of a planet that can no longer be saved because dangers were perceived and acted upon too late. By making the clock of the base malfunction, McDowall destroys the illusion of mastery,

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶³⁵ David Gross, 'Temporality and the Modern State', *Theory and Society* 14, no. 1 (1985): 56.

⁶³⁶ McDowall, X, 70-71.

certainty and objective precision, laying bare the disjunction between the clock-time of capitalism and the temporality of environmental crises. Governed by clock time, which emphasises on continuity and homogeneity of all moments, humans are incapable of engaging meaningfully with the signs of dangerous changes in our environment, which has resulted in the loss of the earth as a habitable place, a shared home for all living things. As pointed out by Michelle Bastian, in the context of ecological crises, ‘time needs to be more clearly understood, not as a quantitative measurement, but as a powerful social tool for producing, managing, and/or undermining various understandings of who or what is in relation with other things or beings’.⁶³⁷ Consequently, she proposes that a meaningful clock should function as ‘*a device that signals change in order for its users to maintain an awareness of, and thus be able to coordinate themselves with, what is significant to them*’.⁶³⁸ In McDowall’s play, the malfunctioned clock that was supposed to measure empty, linear time points towards the need to come up with different modes of reckoning time, different kinds of ‘clock’ that would enable us to coordinate ourselves effectively to address the urgency of ecological crises if we are to avoid the fate of the citizens in X’s dramatic universe.

In X, the loss of home and of an objective temporal perception is accompanied by the loss of language. After Ray’s suicide and Cole’s death from illness, Clark and Gilda are the only two people left in the base. In their attempt to reconstruct a cohesive, comprehensible narrative of reality, they encounter the fate of the Beckettian characters who desperately try to tell a story but never manage to finish.

– Start again—
 – I’m in
 – She
 – X
 – and
 – all the—
 – X
 – X
 – hear
 – X
 – not
 – Where
 – X
 – Enough to
 – lift
 – X

⁶³⁷ Michelle Bastian, ‘Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises’, *Journal of Environmental Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2012): 25.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31, original emphasis.

- Punch the
- X
- crowd
- X
- X
- X
- X⁶³⁹

Here, we witness an extreme reduction of language, to the extent that words and phrases are gradually substituted by a cryptic X. This treatment of language recalls the operation in Caryl Churchill's *Blue Kettle*, in which the two words 'blue' and 'kettle' seep into dialogues, surreptitiously at first, then growing more and more prominent until, at last, what is left are the two consonants B and K.

MRS PLANT T t have a mother?
 DEREK K.
 MRS PLANT B happened b k?
 DEREK Tle died ket I ket a child.
 MRS PLANT Bl bl ket b b b excuse?
 DEREK Ket b like. Or not.
 MRS PLANT K k no relation. K name k John k k? K k k
 Tommy k k John. K k k dead k k k believe a word. K k Derek.
 DEREK B.
 MRS PLANT Tle hate k later k, k bl bl bl shocked.
 DEREK K, t see bl.
 MRS PLANT T b k k k k l?
 DEREK B. K.
 End.⁶⁴⁰

In *Blue Kettle*, despite the unintelligible appearance, some phrases are still very much understandable thanks to the few words that are preserved. For instance, the first four lines can be read as 'Do you have a mother?' 'No.' 'What happened to her?' 'She died when I was a child'. However, as these reference words start to disappear, it becomes more and more challenging to decipher the utterance until finally, there is nothing left to refer back to. The last two lines, 'T b k k k k l?' and 'B. K.', as such, can no longer be translated into comprehensible language with any certainty. Rather, they enact a kind of mutual understanding between the two characters Derek and Mrs Plant which exceeds words and phrases, a shared loss that cannot be expressed through normal language.⁶⁴¹ Similarly, in

⁶³⁹ McDowall, X, 123-24.

⁶⁴⁰ Caryl Churchill, *Blue Kettle*, in *Blue Heart* (London: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), 69.

⁶⁴¹ Commenting on the ending of *Blue Kettle*, Moira Buffini writes, 'Churchill succeeds in silencing her characters, but their anguish is felt more fully in this desperate inarticulacy. I find these plays deeply affecting—not just because they are powerful drama, but because of what they say about the struggle to write. It's as if the play will be, no matter what the playwright tries to do to it.' See Moira Buffini, 'Caryl Churchill: The Playwright's Finest Hours', *The Guardian*, 29 June 2015, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/29/caryl-churchill-the-playwrights-finest-hours>.

McDowall's play, as the X spreads and, a few lines later, establishing its dominance by filling out four pages of the script, we arrive at a language that defies referentiality. Ian Farnell remarks: 'In other contexts, an X itself has multiple meanings—an algebraic symbol, shorthand for a kiss, a marker on a map—yet here it defies interpretation by presenting nothing but itself.'⁶⁴² In the Royal Court production, the actor and actress playing Clark and Gilda chant 'X, X, X...' at each other while tumbling across the stage 'in a kind of aphasic frenzy'.⁶⁴³ The scene is 'compellingly frightening'⁶⁴⁴ because, despite its meaninglessness, the seemingly endless string of Xs fully conveys the traumatic experience of the two last survivors, completely cut off from society and their home planet but also from any means to measure time. In a sense, these repeated Xs recall the incomprehensible screams that the immigrant lets out in his sleep in Edward Bond's *The Under Room*. In both cases, the audience is invited to embrace this expression of the other's trauma by acknowledging its radical alterity rather than insisting on deciphering what it means.

X is, in all appearance, a play that explores the ruthlessness of time, which makes it tempting to read the traumatic experience of the crew stranded on Pluto as a pessimistic statement about the fragility of the human psyche. However, it is important to be reminded that this very fragility of the mind and the malleability of memory are also mechanisms that make it possible for humans to survive in extreme circumstances. In *X*, these are mechanisms that allow Gilda to both 'act out' and 'work through' loss—the loss of home and the loss of memory, the convergence of historical and personal trauma. The 'acting-out' and 'working-through' mentioned here refer to Dominick LaCapra's conception of two distinct but inseparable ways a subject confronts traumatic experience, which he draws on Freud's distinction between melancholia and mourning.

In acting-out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed. Mourning [or working-through] involves a different inflection of performativity: a relation to the past that involves recognizing its difference from the present—simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others.⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴² Farnell, 'Science Fiction and the Theatre of Alistair McDowall', 134.

⁶⁴³ Sophia McDougall, 'X by Alistair McDowall, Directed by Vicky Featherstone', *Strange Horizons*, 25 April 2016, <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/x-by-alistair-mcdowall-directed-by-vicky-featherstone/>.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁵ Dominick LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 716.

It becomes clear that acting-out and working-through are processes that entail two different temporalities. On the one hand, acting-out, powered by a repetition compulsion that compels the subject to relive the past ‘as if it were fully present’, gives rise to a cyclical temporality. On the other hand, working-through or mourning requires the subject to constantly shift between memories of the past and conditions of the present, demanding them to acknowledge and act upon the responsibilities they have for others while simultaneously honouring the past. Working-through, as such, is accompanied by a stuttering temporality that resists the unidirectional pressure of both linear and cyclical temporalities. It is this stuttering temporality in *X* that rescues the play from succumbing to the paralysing force of the post-apocalyptic timelessness and puts into question the impossibility of change.

In order to get a better idea of the effect of stuttering temporality, I will briefly look at the role of stuttering in an artistic context. According to Deleuze, there are two types of artistic or creative stuttering: stutter in the choice of words and that in the sequence to be established. The poetic and political impact of a stuttering language resides in its ability to make language ‘take flight’, to ‘send it racing along a witch’s line, ceaselessly placing it in a state of disequilibrium, making it bifurcate and vary in each of its terms, following an incessant modulation’.⁶⁴⁶ As language becomes a rhizome instead of a tree,⁶⁴⁷ the stuttering language conjures up ‘petrified visions and vertiginous music’⁶⁴⁸ rather than communicating any particular message. The relationship between creative stuttering and speech is ambiguous: on the one hand, stuttering should be distinguished from speech, for speech ‘never assumes more than one variable position among others, or moves in more than one direction’; on the other hand, in subjecting the system of language to perpetual disequilibrium, the operation of stuttering generates a particular type of speech—‘a poetic speech that actualizes these powers of bifurcation and variation, of heterogenesis and modulation, that are proper to language’.⁶⁴⁹ In other words, stuttering deconstructs normal speech to give rise to another type of speech that is nonetheless inseparable from its former expression.

In the case of *X*, rather than stuttering in the choice of words, we witness a stuttering dramatic structure on the level of both individual scenes and the general form of the play. In Act Two, after Gilda tells Clark and Cole about the appearance of a mysterious girl, her

⁶⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, ‘He Stuttered’, in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London & New York: Verso, 1998), 109.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

sanity is placed under scrutiny for a brief moment. Gilda believes that there is a fifth member (Mattie) who manages life systems, but both Clark and Cole affirm that such a person does not exist. Cole then tries to silence Gilda because she is jeopardising their entire perception of what is real: ‘She is putting our sanity at risk which is putting our *lives* at risk. She is dragging us into her own psychotic world.’⁶⁵⁰ However, it is immediately revealed that the person with a cognitive problem is not Gilda but Cole himself, who keeps forgetting his own illness.

COLE What have you done to me -
 GILDA No one’s done anything to you—
 CLARK You forgot again.
 GILDA You keep forgetting—
 COLE You shut your *cunt* mouth Gilda, you, you tell me—
 CLARK You always tell him better than I do—
 COLE *You* tell me.
 GILDA You have a tumour.
 CLARK It’s cancer.
 GILDA It’s wrapped round the base of your spine. It’s affecting your movement.
 You keep forgetting.
 COLE You don’t *forget*—You don’t *forget* / something like that—
 GILDA It’s a tumour.
 CLARK He forgot again—
 COLE How long did I—
 GILDA We just did the scan.
 CLARK You remember, don’t you mate.
 GILDA It’s cancer—
 CLARK It’s your turn to tell him.
 COLE Tell me *what*?
 GILDA It’s wrapped round your spine.
 COLE You shut your *mouth* -⁶⁵¹

In this scene, the coexistence of linear, cyclical, and stuttering temporalities can be perceived clearly. To Gilda and Clark, time is moving forward; to Cole, time is a circle of endless repetition; and to the audience who witnesses these two temporalities playing out simultaneously, what emerges is a stuttering temporality that accommodates both progression and regression in terms of narrative. Looking at the dramatic structure of *X*, we realise that the whole play enacts this coexistence of multiple and multidirectional temporalities. Act Two of the play is sprinkled with lines previously heard in the first act but now delivered by different characters.⁶⁵² It is presented in Act One that Clark tells Mattie about his experience with the last trees on earth. Later on, however, when Clark, Cole and Gilda are arguing about

⁶⁵⁰ McDowall, *X*, 107.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 112,

⁶⁵² In Act One, Ray tells Gilda ‘I can’t talk to you if you’re going to start blubbing every / time -’, to which Gilda replies ‘I’m not “blubbing”’ (8). The same exchange takes place between Gilda and Clark (132) and later between Mattie and Gilda (151) in Act Two.

the sudden appearance of a girl in a space suit, Clark insists that it was Gilda to whom he told the story years ago.

GILDA [...]. She was *here*. We talked a lot. She liked to hear about the past—
She was the one Ray told about the, the things he was seeing, she told me about Ray's—
CLARK I told you that.
GILDA Stop it!
CLARK Ray told *me* about the girl at the window, *I* told you, *I* told you that.⁶⁵³

The audience finally realises that what they have perceived to be the linear, objective view of events presented in the first act is already mixed up and highly unreliable. This new perspective also renders character identity unstable since we can no longer say with certainty who we listened to. As the characters struggle to make sense of their reality, the audience shares the same predicament, having to constantly adjust their expectation and interpretation as the play unfolds. Reading the play text, one can easily stop to go back to the previous pages as one notices the repetition in dialogue. In the theatre, however, the audience has no other option but to try recalling details from their memory while simultaneously following the progression of the performance and, as such, enacting the multidirectional temporality of the play. It is only near the end when Gilda's old age is alluded to through her grey hair that the purpose of *X*'s entangled temporality is revealed: the whole play can be read as the fabulation of Gilda's demented mind. After years of being trapped in the base, it seems as if Gilda can no longer distinguish between the recollection of the early days she spent with the other crew members and the reality in which she and her grown-up daughter Mattie are the only two survivors. Facing the loss of memory and perhaps her imminent death, Gilda acts out by reliving the past as if it were present, but rather than being imprisoned in the vicious cycle of repetition compulsion, she also establishes a special connection to the past by inserting Mattie into past events and as such, rewriting them in a stuttering temporality. LaCapra remarks:

Acting-out and working-through are in general intimately linked but analytically distinguishable processes, and it may be argued that a basis of desirable practice is to create conditions in which working-through, while never fully transcending the force of acting-out and the repetition compulsion, may nonetheless counteract or at least mitigate it in order to generate different possibilities—a different force field—in thought and life, notably empathic relations of trust not based on quasi-sacrificial processes of victimization and self-victimization.⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁵³ McDowall, *X*, 102.

⁶⁵⁴ LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', 717.

What makes the presence of the multidirectional temporality of stuttering particularly important in *X* is the premise of a post-apocalyptic sensibility in which the progression of time and events becomes void of meaning, in which time is negated and the possibility of change foreclosed. Mattie's impossible presence is proof that the mother-daughter bond, in the extreme circumstance of temporal and spatial isolation, acts as the only constant source of meaning that can give rise to different narratives. The shift in interpretation from quantifiable objective time to Gilda's subjective time, while enabling a mode of solipsistic existence, does not denote a complete separation of the subject from her external environment. The emphasis on the mental passage of time, as opposed to the mechanical clock time, does not mean socio-cultural dynamics are forfeited in exchange for subjective interiority. Rather, it further elucidates the convergence of collective and personal trauma and reaffirms the significance of relating to others in the process of working through loss.

The multidirectional temporality of a stuttering form appears to be one that is particularly pertinent to portraying the struggle with memory loss, as it makes another appearance in Nick Payne's *Elegy*, which premiered at the Donmar Warehouse in London in April 2016, less than a month after *X*'s first performance. Although stuttering temporality is a consequence of dementia in both cases, the incommensurability of the two dramatic universes of *X* and *Elegy* lead to different ways characters react to temporal displacement. In the case of *X*, there is nothing Mattie can do but participate in Gilda's entangled temporality. Such is not the case with *Elegy*, first of all, because the characters are not cut off from civilisation and, secondly, because there exists a definitive solution to dementia. Set in a near future when advances in medical science led to the possibility of curing all mental and neurological diseases, *Elegy* explores the relationship of a couple in their sixties, Lorna and Carrie, in the face of a treatment that would save Lorna's life but would also erase the last twenty or twenty-five years of her memory, which is the entire length of her relationship with Carrie. The play is presented in reverse chronology, starting with Scene Seven, where Lorna, recently discharged from hospital after a brain operation, sees Carrie as a complete stranger and treats her coldly. It then moves backwards in time and ending with Scene One, in which the couple, still very much in love with each other, is in the first stage of discussing whether Lorna would receive the treatment. *Elegy*'s narrative structure recalls Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* (1978), a play also known for its innovative use of reverse chronology. However, it must be noted that the purpose of employing this manipulation of time in *Betrayal* and *Elegy* is simultaneously similar and distinct. On the one hand, both plays exemplify the desire for a

redemptive recovery of time when relationships, for one reason or another, have been damaged beyond repairable. On the other hand, the prominent role of science in *Elegy* requires the decision to employ reverse chronology to be read in relation to the disjunction between the temporality of scientific progress and that of human emotions. Both Pinter and Payne are playwrights with a keen interest in time and, more specifically, in the mental passage of time.⁶⁵⁵ However, in the case of Nick Payne, the interest in subjective time is part of a larger passion for challenging themes including memory, identity, perception, death, and love within the context of ever-promising scientific breakthroughs.

A writer known for his ‘restless intellectualism,’⁶⁵⁶ Nick Payne has consistently incorporated cutting-edge scientific discoveries in quantum physics and neuroscience into his plays. In *Constellations* (2012), Payne gives a twist to the conventional boy-meets-girl tale by situating it within a multiverse of infinite possibilities. The stuttering temporality of *Constellations* resembles that of Caryl Churchill’s *Heart’s Desire* (1997), in which scenes are constantly reset to previous points in the narrative. As a result, the audience of both plays is presented with a rhizomatic dramatic structure of multiple alternatives. What distinguishes Payne’s play from Churchill’s is the explicit reference to string theories and quantum multiverse in the former. This explains why *Constellations* is often referred to as ‘science drama’, which is not the case of *Heart’s Desire*, even though both plays employ the same narrative strategy. However, I would argue that despite this difference in terms of label, the strength of *Constellations* and *Heart’s Desire* lies in the way the innovative manipulation of time is used to elucidate the complexity and unpredictability of human emotions. As pointed out by Sally Hales, ‘There’s no doubt *Blue Heart* [including *Heart’s Desire* and *Blue Kettle*] is a challenge but, unlike other self-consciously intellectual literary efforts, warmth and humanity pervade Churchill’s work, no matter how weird things get.’⁶⁵⁷ In the like manner, Payne’s plays are without doubt self-consciously intellectual literary efforts, but it is ‘the

⁶⁵⁵ Commenting on the role of mental time in Pinter’s plays, Stanley Kaufmann writes, ‘Harold Pinter is in love with time—not the neat unceasing sequence of the clock but the time in our minds, the time in which we live and remember and fantasize, time expansible and contractile, infinitely contrapuntal, time tyrannical, and elusive. It has always seemed to him a prime locus for drama.’ See Stanley Kaufmann, ‘An Imaginary Past—Review of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*’, *New Republic* (September 1981): 22.

⁶⁵⁶ Ben Brantley, ‘Review: In “Incognito,” the Brain Is Dramatic and Mysterious’, *The New York Times*, 25 May 2016, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/25/theater/review-in-incognito-the-brain-is-dramatic-and-mysterious.html>.

⁶⁵⁷ Sally Hales, ‘Review: *Blue Heart* at the Orange Tree Theatre’, *Exeunt Magazine*, 20 October 2016, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-blue-heart-orange-tree-theatre/>.

ability to poignantly meld complicated philosophic and scientific tenets with simpler human struggles⁶⁵⁸ that makes his work appealing and relevant.⁶⁵⁹

To return to *Elegy*, scientific progress is not discussed in a vacuum but in relation to everyday life and relatable people. Occupying the central place in the plot of *Elegy* is an omnipotent procedure capable of constructing an exact working replica of the brain—‘a holistic, real-time simulation which recreates all the electrochemical activity’⁶⁶⁰—that allows scientists to identify the particular patterns, neurons or regions that may have been affected by previously intractable diseases. Thanks to this procedure, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress, addiction, dementia, Parkinson’s, schizophrenia, bipolar, and depression are now all understood, treatable and curable. Throughout the play, a detailed discussion of the procedure is provided by Miriam—Lorna’s doctor and one of the lead scientists behind the development of this cure. Miriam, most of the time, is characterised by a ‘mix of professional detachment and scientific enthusiasm’.⁶⁶¹ However, there are also moments when she betrays her desire for objectivity and neutrality by revealing her personal experience with degenerative disease: ‘My mother died unable to swallow. By and large unable to move. To speak. To call for help. To think. To comprehend her surroundings. To differentiate between time and place and past and present. Unable even to hold my gaze, to clasp my hand.’⁶⁶²

Unlike Miriam, who respected her mother’s wish and did not intervene no matter how frustrating it must have been, Carrie is incapable of bearing witness to Lorna’s decline. Carrie has the power of attorney, which means that she is entrusted to make decisions on her behalf when Lorna is no longer capable of making autonomous choices because of her illness. As pointed out by Deborah Bowman:

It is a legal relationship, but it is often founded on love; and therein lies its power and its limitations. Love may create a strong advocate who will ensure that care reflects what an individual would have chosen. However, love may also mean that the person holding the

⁶⁵⁸ Alexis Soloski, ‘*Incognito* Review—Nick Payne’s Brainteaser Is at the Top of Its Class’, *The Guardian*, 25 May 2016, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/may/24/incognito-review-nick-payne-manhattan-theatre-club>.

⁶⁵⁹ This is not to claim that scientific elements only serve as background of the primary human drama but to emphasise the centrality of science in everyday life and the fact that science and human dramas are inseparable.

⁶⁶⁰ Payne, *Elegy*, 26.

⁶⁶¹ Aleks Sierz, ‘*Elegy*, Donmar Warehouse’, *Aleks Sierz*, 27 April 2016, <https://www.sierz.co.uk/reviews/elegy-donmar-warehouse/>.

⁶⁶² Payne, *Elegy*, 57.

power attorney feels overwhelmed and conflicted by their responsibilities at an already painful time.⁶⁶³

Despite Lorna's request 'Do not alter the fabric of my being',⁶⁶⁴ Carrie is unable to cope with Lorna's deteriorated conditions and eventually goes against her partner's wish to give her the treatment. Carrie's devotion to Lorna, as such, takes the second direction in Bowman's commentary.

LORNA What are you going to do?
CARRIE Keep at it.
LORNA *Can I hear that last little bit again?*
CARRIE *Which bit?*
LORNA *The bit from tip-toe something-something.*
CARRIE
*'and when the trick begins, it's like a toe
tip-toeing on a rope, which is like luck;
and when the luck begins, it's like a wedding,
which is like love, which is like everything.'*
What's the verdict?
Beat.
Lorna. Lorna.
LORNA I'm sorry. I don't know where I am.
CARRIE *is exhausted.*
CARRIE I can't do this. I'm sorry I can't do this...⁶⁶⁵

In the above excerpt and throughout Scene Three, we witness the aberrant spatio-temporal shifts caused by Lorna's dementia. It is clear that Carrie did try her best to adapt to her wife's condition but, in the end, she can no longer keep up with Lorna's stuttering temporality as the latter snaps back and forth between the past and the present. Every time Lorna is pulled back from her reminiscence, she experiences both spatial and temporal disorientation and is overwhelmed by fear, which, in turn, puts a toll on Carrie. Here, we can briefly see how dementia in particular and neurodegenerative conditions in general are especially destructive. These diseases not only affect the patient but also put enormous pressure on their family and close friends. In the case of Carrie, this pressure is all the more unbearable, as she is forced to make the impossible decision. To honour Lorna's wish of no intervention would mean that both parties have to go on suffering, but to give her the treatment would mean betraying her trust and committing an act of murder, figuratively and literally speaking. In *Elegy*, the treatment that cures Lorna's disease is a *pharmakon*—a cure and a poison. As pointed out by Miriam, 'Without this procedure, the disease would have taken her life from her. It would

⁶⁶³ Deborah Bowman, 'Living through Change', in *Elegy*, by Nick Payne (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 62.

⁶⁶⁴ Payne, *Elegy*, 46.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

have robbed her, unequivocally, of the, it would have taken who she is, or was, it would have taken that from her. Slowly and painfully and without remorse.’⁶⁶⁶ However, *with* the procedure, the Lorna that emerges after the operation is not the same Lorna either. We understand Carrie’s frustration when facing the aloofness of post-op Lorna: ‘In some ways, the irony of all this, is that if you had died—Because it’s as if you are dead, because you look at me as if I’m a ghost. But there you are, it’s you, in front of me.’⁶⁶⁷ Carrie finds herself in an impossible position that prompts her to grieve for the loss of a loved one but is simultaneously unable to do so because that person’s body is still very much alive.

CARRIE You used to make jokes like that all the -

LORNA I’m not that person.

CARRIE Well, you look pretty fucking similar to me.

Beat.

You’re the person you are when I met you. No? You’re that person. Because that’s where they set you back to. No?

LORNA I don’t know.⁶⁶⁸

In this conversation, it is clear that Carrie hopes that Lorna was simply ‘set back’ to twenty-five or thirty years ago, which means that the two of them would still fall in love and start their relationship all over again. In other words, the Lorna that Carrie loves is not completely lost, only that it may take time to get back to where they were before the operation. This expectation, however, is not received well by Lorna since she is neither the version before the operation nor the one thirty years ago. The human drama at the heart of a scientific breakthrough in *Elegy* raises questions about identity and memory but also about love—about how we may construct an ethical relationship with loved ones who suffer from memory loss. These questions are not hypothetical, since statistically speaking, there is a high probability for each of us to have a personal experience with dementia. It is estimated that in 2015, over 850,00 people were living with dementia in the UK. By 2025, this figure would be a million, and by 2051, two million. In addition, among the estimated 36 million people affected by dementia worldwide, approximately 28 million are undiagnosed.⁶⁶⁹ Advances in medical science may succeed in prolonging life and preserving the physical body; however, they do not tell us how to live with or witness the other’s suffering and, more importantly, how to cope with our own sense of loss.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁶⁹ Bowman, ‘Living through Change’, 59-60.

Carrie's desperate attempt to establish a 'normal' relationship with Lorna after the operation by talking about the poems they used to love or imitating the old Lorna's dark humour can be seen as an example of her acting out, reliving the past as if it were present. Based on Lorna's reaction, this approach only pushes the two women further away from each other. While she was recovering in hospital, Lorna has requested, through Miriam, that Carrie ceases visitations, and upon being discharged, she suggested they should consider getting a divorce. The reverse chronology of *Elegy* reinforces the idea that despite Carrie's wish, her relationship with Lorna is beyond repairable. Nevertheless, I believe that the play's commitment to multiple and multidirectional temporalities suggests the possibility of a different outcome.

The first sign of this possibility comes from one of the poems recited by Lorna and Carrie during the former's flashbacks, including Alice Oswald's 'Wedding' (1996), Douglas Dunn's 'Anniversaries' from the collection *Elegies* (1985), and Christopher Reid's 'A Scattering' (2009). 'Anniversaries' and 'A Scattering', both written in memory of the poet's wife, are aptly cited, considering how they address the loss of a loved one and the bereavement process that entails. It is with 'Wedding', however, that the link between love and transformation is brought into relief. 'Wedding' is a sonnet that begins with a conventional line of iambic pentameter, 'From time to time our love is like a sail'. However, the simile 'our love is like a sail' is not further pursued or examined in detail. Rather, the poem offers comparison after comparison: the sail becomes a swallowtail, a coat, a tear, a mouth, a trumpeter, a trick, a toe, luck. The final couplet 'and when the luck begins, it's like a wedding / which is like love, which is like everything' returns the definition of love to love itself, which suggests the cyclical nature of human emotions and experience. The poem does not stop there but makes an important extension by comparing love to 'everything'. In a sense, this last comparison between love and everything is the summary of all the previous comparisons and, as such, presents a second loop in the structure of the poem. This loop is paradoxical, for it appears to be closed and open at the same time due to the non-exhaustiveness and indeterminacy of the indicator 'everything'.

In the 2016 production at the Donmar Warehouse, *Elegy* ends with a rerun of part of the first scene.⁶⁷⁰

CARRIE I can tell you how we met if you like.

⁶⁷⁰ This rerun does not feature in the published script of *Elegy*.

LORNA If it's useful.
 CARRIE Is it useful for you, you tell me.
 LORNA I meant if it's useful for you. To, I don't know, to talk about it. [...] ⁶⁷¹

This rerun functions in the same way the final comparison between love and everything does in 'Wedding', as I have briefly discussed. On the one hand, it makes the performance into a circle by bringing the end and the beginning together. On the other hand, the repetition gives rise to differences, as it is performed 'with a softer glow, chair side by side' ⁶⁷², as opposed to the demanding and hostile tone and body language of the two characters in the first run. It is safe to assume that in the rerun, Carrie approaches Lorna without the intention of 'retrieving' her lost wife but with a genuine interest in creating a new relationship with the present Lorna. Instead of acting out, living the past as if it were present, here, Carrie is working through her loss by treasuring her memories with the past Lorna but simultaneously engaging with the present version of the person she loves. Instead of bombarding her interlocutor with preconceived expectations and assigning her a fixed identity, Carrie simply accepts who Lorna *is*. This, as pointed out by Deborah Bowman, qualifies as a 'transformative act of care'.

What then might the ethical response be to someone who has impaired or lost memory? It is, I suggest, to do something that is simultaneously simple and difficult: to accept the person as he or she is now with compassion, empathy and acceptance. No matter how developed medical science becomes or how thoroughly we develop our understanding of disease, to attend to another person as he or she *is*, not as one would *wish* them to be, will always be a transformative act of care. ⁶⁷³

In *Elegy*, the transformative act of care takes place after Lorna's operation. However, it is also possible to think of such an ethical response 'earlier' in the play, as Carrie struggles to keep up with Lorna's stuttering temporality caused by her deteriorated condition. This is not to criticise Carrie for having gone against Lorna's wish to give her the treatment. Rather, it is a matter of emphasising the importance of fostering an ethical engagement with dementia patients in a context of paramount constraints and impossible decisions by acknowledging, accepting their aberrant subjective temporalities and, by extension, their unstable identities. In other words, the ethical value judgment here, if it must be drawn, does not lie in which decision is made concerning the treatment but the manner one attends to another person who suffers from loss, seeing them as they are, not as one would wish them to be.

⁶⁷¹ Payne, *Elegy*, 5.

⁶⁷² Simon Jenner, 'Elegy', *FringeReview*, 10 June 2016, <http://fringereview.co.uk/review/fringereview-uk/2016/elegy/>.

⁶⁷³ Bowman, 'Living through Change', 63.

To make a brief conclusion for this part, I would say that the existence of multiple and multidirectional temporalities in Alistair McDowall's *X* and Nick Payne's *Elegy* demonstrates another aspect in which contemporary speculative theatre expresses its utopian aspiration of living together. Both plays take dementia as a starting point for thinking about the significance of respecting the other's temporal perception and refusing to subscribe to a single dominant temporality, be it the unidirectional, linear temporality of capitalism or the cyclical temporality of trauma and nostalgia. The new sensibility exemplified in the formal structure of these plays applies not only to the case of dementia but can also be extended to all interpersonal relationships in which fixed identity/identification hinders the establishment of meaningful relations. In the following part, I will further pursue the ethical implication of approaching identity through multiple perspectives in speculative theatre's treatment of space.

2. *Interwoven Worlds*

(The Nether—Victory Condition—Pomona)

In his lecture note 'On Different Spaces', Michel Foucault specifically mentions theatre as an example of heterotopia, which has 'the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves'.⁶⁷⁴ In theatre, an alternative chronotope—that of the dramatic universe on stage—coexists with the spatiotemporal structure of the 'real' world in which the audience's body is situated. While traditional theatre is often characterised by a clear distinction between the fictional world of the play and the reality that encloses the stage, experimental theatre forms such as immersive, improvising, autobiographical or verbatim theatres strive to blur this boundary and provide the audience/participants with a theatre experience rather than a spectacle. In this section, I will analyse the strategies employed by three contemporary speculative plays—Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* and Alistair McDowall's *Pomona*—to create an active theatre experience despite their seemingly conventional mode of performance. All three plays employ the metatheatrical device known as role-playing to create overlapping dramatic universes. What differentiates their approach to traditional metatheatrical practices and adds another layer to the unsettling experience is the impossibility of identifying which dramatic reality occupies the first level and which is the meta-level. As a result of this

⁶⁷⁴ Foucault, 'Different Spaces', 181.

ontological uncertainty, these interwoven worlds re-enact a meta-theatrical consciousness and draw us into an exploration of relationality that defies the logic of fixed identity.

Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* was first staged in March 2013 at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, Los Angeles and received its UK premiere in July 2014 at the Royal Court Theatre, in a co-production with Headlong and later transferred to the West End in 2015.⁶⁷⁵ The play is set in a near-future in which the Internet has evolved into the Nether. Like its predecessor, the Nether provides its users with an infinite number of realms where one can work, get an education, or live out one's fantasies—from killing a wild boar to having sex with an elf. What is different, however, is its advanced technology of embodiment in a virtual environment. The Nether has gone as far as asserting its role as a 'contextual framework for being', where '[e]ighty per cent of the population work in office realms, children attend school in educational realms'.⁶⁷⁶ A police procedural play, *The Nether* stages an investigation on the Hideaway—'the most advanced realm there is when it comes to the art of sensation'⁶⁷⁷ reserved for individuals with a paedophilic proclivity to engage in consensual acts of violence. The existence of the Hideaway comes as no surprise, for it has been widely known that the digital environment is one that generously accommodates practices socially and conventionally defined as inadmissible. Sharp and Earle note that

The Internet makes possible the existence of 'virtual communities' of deviants; cyberworlds characterised by sub- or countercultures, in which discreditable practices are accepted as the norm and are entirely without stigma, and in which one may participate without threat to one's 'normal identity'.⁶⁷⁸

Sims, the Hideaway's creator and administrator, is a citizen with an unblemished record, while Doyle, a Hideaway's employee behind the avatar of a little girl named Iris, is a middle-aged science teacher who won a Distinguished Teaching Award in Science. These 'normal identities' are protected thanks to anonymity since interactions in the Hideaway take place through avatars chosen by each member from a specific set of looks in preparation for their experience. Furthermore, one of the most rigorous rules applied to all participants is not to mention anything about their real lives. In fact, what is perceived as stigma in the Hideaway

⁶⁷⁵ In addition, *The Nether* has received productions all around the world, in Turkey, Germany, Spain, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia, etc... It has also been translated into French and was broadcast in a France Culture adaptation in 2016. The play's popularity is accompanied by critical acclaim, most notably the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize.

⁶⁷⁶ Jennifer Haley, *The Nether*, ebook (London & New York: Faber & Faber, 2014).

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁸ Keith Sharp and Sarah Earle, 'Cyberpunters and Cyberwhores: Prostitution on the Internet', in *Dot.Cons: Crime, Deviance and Identity on the Internet*, ed. Yvonne Jewkes (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 39.

is not the participants' sexual deviance but the use of in-world vocabulary that does not conform to the Victorian setting of this fantasy world. Thus, like Sharp and Earle remark, a sort of revision and reversion of moral and social norms is currently at play in this cyberspace known as the Hideaway. From the very beginning of the play, the audience is informed that Sims, as well as the realm's participants, employees and guests alike, are being investigated for solicitation, rape, sodomy and murder. The repetitive nature of these offences and the revelation that their victims are (virtual) children only heighten the feeling of indignation and repulsion directed towards the accused. However, as the play progresses, the audience is urged to re-evaluate their judgment and find themselves increasingly unsettled by the dilemma of virtual and real identities.

In terms of context, Haley's play, which 'delves into ethics in virtual reality and the impact of technology on our human relationships, identity, and desire',⁶⁷⁹ sits comfortably with other contemporary narratives that address the opportunities and challenges accompanying the evolution of virtuality, such as the online role-playing game *Second Life* (2003), Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One* (2011) or the British series *Black Mirror* (2011—present), among others.⁶⁸⁰ Like these narratives, the plot of *The Nether* points towards a paradigm shift in our conception of virtual reality and suggests the need for new terminology to reflect more accurately the nature of digitally constructed worlds as well as their relationship to the material reality. What sets *The Nether* apart from those examples, however, is its medium, which underscores the importance of embodiment in thinking about the ethics of virtual reality and ultimately reaffirms the relevance of theatre in the discussion on technology and on the ethics of role-playing.

At first sight, *The Nether* seems to make it clear enough that the primary dramatic universe is the one in which detective Morris interrogates Sims and Doyle for their paedophilic activities in the Hideaway, while what transpires in the virtual realm constitutes the meta-level characterised by role-playing. However, soon enough, this hierarchy is put into question. The Hideaway turns out to be a site where people with sexual deviance like Sims can be their true selves (without causing harm to real children), while the selves they display to the real world are but a performance, a falsifying scheme constructed and maintained to conform to social conventions and moral standards.

⁶⁷⁹ 'Biography—Jennifer Haley', *Jennifer Haley*, n.d., <https://jenniferhaley.com/bio>.

⁶⁸⁰ It is worth mentioning that *The Nether* is not Haley's first attempt in writing about virtual worlds for the stage. In 2008, she also wrote *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom*, a play deals with the dangers of video games.

SIMS Look, Detective, I am sick. I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure. No amount of cognitive behavioural therapy or relapse deterrent or even chemical castration will sway me from my urges toward children. I am sick and no matter how much I love him or her I would make my own child sick and I see this, I see this—not all of us see this—but I have been cursed with both compulsion and insight. I have taken responsibility for my sickness. I am protecting my neighbour’s children and my brother’s children and the children I won’t allow myself to have, and the only way I can do this is because *I’ve created a place where I can be my fucking self!*⁶⁸¹

Consequently, identities in the Hideaway are no less real than the ‘normal identities’ that function in the physical world. Furthermore, since the participants value the experience and relationships in the virtual world more than those that take place in the non-virtual society, the ‘realness’ of virtuality can no longer be discarded or considered secondary. All three characters and their respective avatars have demonstrated the extent to which role-playing engages their affective capacities: Sims (Papa) cares for Doyle (Iris) more than for his real wife; Doyle’s relationship with his real-world daughter is cold and distant while his attachment to the Hideaway and the avatars there motivates him to crossover permanently; Morris (Woodnut) finds herself more emotionally invested than she wanted to when going undercover to investigate the Hideaway.

In the 2015 Duke of York’s Theatre production of *The Nether*, the superimposition of real and virtual worlds, bodies and identities is made visually perceptible on stage (See Figure 18). Es Devlin’s set consists of two levels: the ‘real’ world interactions between detective Morris, Sims, and Doyle take place at the ground level, in what looks like a bare interrogation room, while interactions in the Hideaway among their respective avatars—Woodnut, Papa and Iris—are performed on an elevated platform in the same space. It is revealed during the course of the play that grass has become a luxury, and trees no longer exist in the real world, probably a result of some ecological catastrophe. The audience gets a glimpse of this reality through the cold, barely furnished interrogation room, an emblem of a world now reduced to a barren environment. Compared to this reality, it is not exaggerating to claim that the Hideaway is an Eden-like creation, according to detective Morris’s observation when she goes undercover under the name Woodnut.

The first thing I experience is the trees. The flickering light and soft sound as they sway in the sun and wind is almost overwhelming. They surround a beautifully rendered 1880s Gothic Revival with a squeak in the top porch step. I ring the doorbell. I can actually feel my hand sweat, clutching my carpetbag.⁶⁸²

⁶⁸¹ Haley, *The Nether*, emphasis mine.

⁶⁸² Haley, *The Nether*.

Devlin's set, aided by video projection, accentuates the stark contrast between the two dramatic universes: the real world appears as a shadow of its former self while cyberspace emerges as a hyper-reality, a simulacrum that threatens the integrity and the existence of its model. In the design of the Hideaway, we witness once again the gothic aesthetic of brightness that romanticises all unmentionable acts of violence marketed to individuals with deviant desires. At one point, detective Morris reveals that as the technologies supporting crossing over are being perfect, they are at the edge of what could become a mass migration into the Nether. However, rather than lamenting in the Baudrillardian fashion the threats posed by cyberspace or refusing to acknowledge the breach in the social fabrics that has been enhanced by computer technologies, it will be a more fruitful approach to start thinking about virtual and material realities not as two separate entities but as two modes of existence both grounded in the human body.

It appears that the term 'virtual reality' is no longer adequate to describe the Hideaway if by 'virtual' we mean digital representations that exist solely in a computer-generated environment. Judging from recent technological developments, it is just a matter of time before something like the Hideaway comes into existence.⁶⁸³ As Claire Larssonneur aptly puts it, 'The entertainment industries and everyday gadgets no longer focus on producing digital representations but rather on the design of digital environments where real and digital bodies are superimposed.'⁶⁸⁴ It is, therefore, of crucial importance to come up with new terminology in order to better describe this paradigm shift. Artist and theorist Monika Fleischmann has been working with the concept of 'mixed-reality', first coined by Paul Milgram and Fumio Kishino in 1994,⁶⁸⁵ as an alternative for 'virtual reality'. According to Fleischmann, mixed-reality facilitates 'a more accurate understanding of our relation to cyber technologies, in which material bodies, their virtual representations, the human imagination, and computer hardware and software all interact to produce a reality that has both "material"

⁶⁸³ In a 2018 article published on Variety that compares today's VR technology to that in the movie *Ready Player One* (based on Cline's 2011 novel of the same name), it is revealed that the movie's far-out technology is actually closer than we may think. From wireless VR headset (HTC Vive and Oculus Rift, Samsung's Gear VR), tactile gloves and bodysuits (HaptX Gloves), to VR communities (Second Life, Sansar, Microsoft's Altspace VR), the industry is heading toward increasing believable immersion in terms of sensory experience.

⁶⁸⁴ Claire Larssonneur, 'When Bodies Go Digital', *Angles. New Perspectives on the Anglophone World*, no. 2 (1 April 2016).

⁶⁸⁵ Paul Milgram and Fumio Kishino, 'A Taxonomy of Mixed Reality Visual Displays', *IEICE Trans. Information Systems* E77-D, no. 12 (1994): 1321–29.

and “virtual” elements’.⁶⁸⁶ Identifying worlds as interwoven in a mixed-reality, thus, gives us a way to escape from the authenticity-simulacrum dichotomy that has plagued discourse concerning cyberspace ever since, while also signalling a new direction in thinking about the role of the body in the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of digital and material identities.

Unlike the real world, in which changes in identity in most cases require immeasurable effort and administrative work, not to mention that some changes are impossible, the Hideaway allows people to create new identities, new selves in simple steps. There is no restraint on who one can become, regarding gender, age, race or physique. Morris, a young female detective, chooses to represent herself as a man, Woodnut. In the Royal Court and Duke of York’s Theatre productions, Morris is a Caucasian female and Woodnut, her avatar, is a black man in his forties. Similarly, Doyle, a middle-aged science teacher, becomes Iris, an eight-year-old girl. Even though the guests are supposed to choose from a set of prescribed looks, it can be surmised that the number of these looks is extensive enough in order to satisfy the needs of individuals with vastly different preferences. The use of avatars is meant to protect the participants’ real identities while simultaneously extending their sense of being through the multiplicity of selves. The digital subjects forged in the Hideaway, at first sight, appear to be detached from the flesh as well as all the external forces that shape and constrain the physical body. A second look at these subjects, however, reveals that they are far from being fleshless on two counts. First, the avatar, despite its capacity to be transformed with more ease, is still created with all the fundamental elements of a physical body, including age, gender, and precisely defined body parts. David Velleman argues that ‘an avatar under one’s direct control serves as a proxy for one’s entire body: it is one’s embodiment in the virtual world’.⁶⁸⁷ Lieve Gies gives further explication on this point as she writes:

It is true to say that even in extreme cyber fantasies the body still matters in such projections as something to be reconfigured so as to allow for an intensification of its pleasures and the disappearance of its many discomforts. What superficially appears to be a desire for disembodiment is often a desire for re-embodiment and the elimination of the physical burden of the material body.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁶ Monika Fleischmann, quoted in Ella Briens, ‘The “Virtual” Body and the Strange Persistence of the Flesh: Deleuze, Cyberspace, and the Posthuman’, in *Deleuze and the Body*, ed. Laura Guillaume and Joe Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 125.

⁶⁸⁷ James David Velleman, *Foundations for Moral Relativism* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2013), 14.

⁶⁸⁸ Lieve Gies, ‘How Material Are Cyberbodies? Broadband Internet and Embodied Subjectivity’, *Crime, Media, Culture* 4, no. 3 (2008): 320.

This leads to the second reason for claiming that a digital subject must be grounded in embodiment. In *The Nether*, an avatar does not exist in a vacuum but is necessarily linked to a living body, even in the extreme case of the ‘shade’—a person who has decided to cross over to the virtual world full time and has to be hooked up to life support. The ability to experience vivid sensations in the Hideaway as avatars, thus, is not the proof of successful ontological separation of body and mind. Quite the contrary, it accentuates the persistent emphasis on the body through a process of disembodiment and re-embodiment. It is true that the digital body is the one interacting in the virtual world to create sensory experience, but in the end, the material body remains the final destination of such experience.

According to Ella Briens, there have been two main trends in encountering the problems associated with virtual bodies: ‘One eagerly anticipates technology that will allow us to escape the confines and limitations of the human body. The other argues for carefully and creatively thinking through our embodied relationship to technology.’⁶⁸⁹ In *The Nether*, while Doyle evidently belongs to the former group, consistently manifesting his desire to ‘become pure spirit’, it is much more challenging to pin down Sims’ stance. It is true that he himself devotes all of his waking time to the Nether, yet, he is far from being enthusiastic with the idea of letting members crossover permanently. Sims, acting as Papa in his realm, does everything in his capability to prevent people from ‘getting too close’. Speaking differently, somewhere in his rational mind, he still believes that people should make a clear distinction between their two subjectivities, that they should maintain *both* lives, *both* identities—the one they have in the Hideaway and the one they have in the real world. In this respect, Sims can be regarded as someone who creatively thinks through the embodied relationship to technology rather than a fleshless posthumanist like Doyle.

The Hideaway, while providing its members with a space of alternative identity, should not be seen as a replacement for the material reality. The case of Doyle testifies to the danger of fixating on a single identity. Having prepared everything to cross over to become Iris in the unchanging world of the Hideaway where he invested all his hope for love and everlasting happiness, Doyle falls into despair and kills himself as he fails to get a confirmation of Papa’s (Sims’) love. On the contrary, detective Morris, despite being badly shaken by her encounter with the unknown side of herself in the Hideaway, manages to live on. In one of the most disturbing scenes of the play, Woodnut (Morris), pressured by Papa

⁶⁸⁹ Briens, ‘The “Virtual” Body and the Strange Persistence of the Flesh’, 118.

(Sims), uses an axe to slaughter Iris (Doyle) to prove that he is not getting too close—in other words, that he has not invested too much emotion into the relationship. In his frantic attempt to make sense of his action, Woodnut raises the axe to kill Iris again and again, only for her to reappear every time, unharmed. Faced with the incomprehensibility of the event, he is overwhelmed by a series of existential and ontological questions.

What have I done, have I done something, have I done nothing, is this all nothing, is everything nothing? [...] But if there has been no consequence, there has been no meaning—no meaning between her and myself, between myself and myself—and if there has been meaning, then I am a monster.⁶⁹⁰

What sets Doyle and Morris apart in the aftermath of their catastrophic experience in the Hideaway is the fact that while Doyle has abandoned all his real-world identities and relationships, Morris has other selves, other I's, to fall back on—the self of an in-world representative of an investigative unit, for instance. In short, Morris can survive thanks to the continuation of the superimposition of her physical and virtual bodies, from which a palimpsest of identities emerges—a chimerical creature that bears the traits of both the in-world and the virtual selves. The staging of *The Nether* at the Royal Court and the Duke of York's, by representing both dramatic universes as equally grounded in embodiment, brings into relief the need to attend to and maintain the 'mixed' aspect of reality rather than prioritising one at the cost of the other.

With Alistair McDowall's *Pomona*, the entanglement of the real and the fictional is pushed to the extreme, which makes it inevitable that the two dramatic universes are to be approached as a whole. *Pomona* has seven named characters and one Figure wearing a Cthulhu mask, who does not have any line. Ollie comes to Pomona looking for her twin sister and is initially helped by Zeppo, who owns the island. Charlie and Moe work as security guards, Fay is a sex worker under the management of Gale, and in turn, Gale works for Keaton, who runs a facility that harvests human organs and babies. Fay used to work with Ollie's sister, but when the latter suddenly disappears, she discovers the other shady businesses in Pomona, including human organ harvesting. She threatens to expose the secret, which gives Gale no choice but to order Charlie and Moe to make her disappear. Unable to comply with this order but equally terrified by what Keaton may do to them, the two guards stab each other to make it look like they did try their best. Unfortunately, Charlie's wound is more severe than intended, and he does not survive. Such is one part of the plot in

⁶⁹⁰ Haley, *The Nether*.

chronological order, even though in reality, what the audience experiences are completely different. What makes *Pomona* an impressive *tour de force* in storytelling is not only its fragmented and disordered temporality but also the fact that the whole crime story above is presented as part of a role-playing game that Charlie and Keaton play together, with Ollie being Keaton's in-game avatar. In the final scene, the two worlds collapse into one another: Keaton encounters Ollie and advises her to seek help from Zeppo, which effectively leads us back to the beginning of the play.

Pomona's structure brings to mind Escher's *Drawing Hands* (1948), in which two hands draw each other into existence. The two dramatic levels comprise Ollie's quest for her lost sister and Charlie's self-invented Dungeon & Dragon called 'Cthulhu Awakens', which draws inspiration from Lovecraft's stories.

CHARLIE The 'Great Old Ones' are the beasts that ruled the earth before we did. 'Cept they've been asleep now for aeons. That's basically like a long, long time. They're actually sort of a metaphor for the universe's apathy for us and the meaningless nature of life, but that's not important for the game.

That's just context.

Throughout the game, you'll come into contact with a cult who are trying to awake Cthulhu, to begin a new dark reign of chaos (don't worry, that's not a spoiler), and your task is to prevent this from happening.

[...] it's a cooperative game in the sense that I tell the story and present you with options, and you decide which options to take. Whether you succeed or not is decided by rolling dice, like in a normal game, 'cept these dice have a lot more sides, see? Do you get it?⁶⁹¹

McDowall admits that he is interested in D&D because it has a similar mechanism to theatre: 'It's the same collective imagining on the part of someone who crafts the story and people who engage with the story.'⁶⁹² However, his use of this device is particularly innovative since he does not situate the role-playing game at the level of metatheatre but interweaves the two dramatic levels into a mixed reality in which it is impossible to distinguish fiction from reality. Even though the play has a direct story running through it, it is to be presented in a way in which 'everything seems muddied with the clutter of contemporary life' to convey the impression that 'there are a whole host of things attacking the characters from all sides'.⁶⁹³ Dan Rebellato notes that the play 'was written as the audience sees it' since McDowall did not write an ordered play and then scramble it, but in the order they appear. As a result, both

⁶⁹¹ McDowall, *Pomona*, 41.

⁶⁹² Alistair McDowall, quoted in Andrew Haydon, 'Alistair McDowall: "I Spend a Lot of Time on the Internet."', *Exeunt Magazine*, 26 October 2015, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/alistair-mcdowall-i-spend-a-lot-of-time-on-the-internet/>.

⁶⁹³ Tom Powell, 'Feature: Alistair McDowall—"Pomona Is an Odd Beast"', *A Younger Theatre*, 19 November 2014, <https://www.ayoungerteaatre.com/feature-alistair-mcdowall-pomona-is-an-odd-beast/>.

the playwright and the audience watching the play are on a journey to figure out what is happening. The fragmented structure of *Pomona* is precisely that which ‘takes us into the darkness of [its] world, rather than keeping it at an analytical arm’s length’.⁶⁹⁴

It is McDowall’s desire that the form of his play accurately reflects and re-enacts the landscape of city life characterised by fuzzy boundaries and constant transactions that somehow fold back into each other. We notice this interweaving of spaces not only in the overall dramatic structure of *Pomona* but also in the setting and naming of characters.

ZEPPO It’s an island.
Concrete island.
Here.
Right in the middle of town.
Strip of land with the canal on both sides.
Tram tracks and train tracks and roads all surrounding it.
There’s one road in and out and it’s gated at both ends.
Nothing there but cracked asphalt and weeds.
All overgrown.
Street lights don’t work.
It’s a hole.
A hole in the middle of a city.
Looks like what the world’ll be in a few thousand years.⁶⁹⁵

Pomona, the ghostly island where the play is set, is also a real place in Manchester. During the industrial revolution, it was home to botanical gardens and the Royal Pomona Palace (completed in 1875). Its time as the centre of entertainment came to an end in 1887 when an explosion at a nearby chemicals factory left the Royal Pomona Palace badly damaged. Afterwards, the island was transformed into dockland, but in the 1970s, the docks were closed and, being left desolate, Pomona became an overgrown wasteland.⁶⁹⁶ What makes the reference to the actual Pomona particularly relevant to our experience of McDowall’s play is the dark side of entertainment at Pomona during its heyday. In addition to being a place for drinking, dancing or hosting rallies, the Royal Pomona Palace, a 216-foot long and 220-foot wide building with a clock tower 100 feet high, also hosted numerous ‘anthropological exhibitions’ of human ‘souvenirs’ brought back by people returning from their travels to exotic lands. At times, whole ‘tribes’ were exhibited.⁶⁹⁷ The shocking activities taking place

⁶⁹⁴ Dan Rebellato and Alistair McDowall, *Pomona*, ebook (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

⁶⁹⁵ Alistair McDowall, *Pomona* (London & New York: Methuen Drama, 2015), 19.

⁶⁹⁶ Dominic Smithers, ‘The Fascinating History behind Pomona—Greater Manchester’s “Forgotten Island”’, *Manchester Evening News*, 17 July 2017, <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/nostalgia/fascinating-history-behind-pomona-greater-13340688>.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

in *Pomona*, from prostitution, snuff film shooting to human organs harvesting and babies farming, as such, are but a continuation of the dehumanisation that has always existed. However, it must also be noted that despite its reference to the real Pomona, the setting of McDowall's play is not limited to this precise location but occupies the in-between-ness of fiction and reality. Similarly, the decision to name characters after silent film stars Charlie (Chaplin), Ollie (Oliver Hardy), (Buster) Keaton, Zeppo (Marx), Fay (Tincher), Gale (Henry) and Moe (Howard, of the Three Stooges) 'creates a strange unreality that again detaches the characters from strict naturalism'.⁶⁹⁸ The interweaving of facts and fiction creates an estrangement effect that unsettles the audience and forces them to rethink the space they themselves occupy in relation to the horrendous crimes that are committed around them. Even though some critics have described *Pomona* as a dystopia, McDowall insists that it is not, since the play depicts not an imagined world where everything is as bad as can be but a *real* world where everything is as bad as can be.⁶⁹⁹

In the 2014 production at the Orange Tree, the sunken pit designed by Georgia Lowe serves as the material realisation of the strange loop of the play's structure (See Figure 19). In an interview, McDowall remarks that the setting was in the round from the beginning even though it is not written in the published script. The goal of having people on top and on all sides of the hole known as Pomona is, he explains, to generate an energy of a community coming together.⁷⁰⁰ The pit, at times a city centre, the M60 ring road, other times a subterranean hospital or a dice-filled game board, is the epitome of theatre's heterotopic potentiality. For McDowall, merging fiction and reality is not only a matter of artistic experiment but also a way to explore the question of responsibility through the juxtaposition of determinism and free will. Actions in *Pomona* may be dictated by the outcome of a roll of a dice, but it does not mean that the characters are completely powerless. Commenting on *Pomona*, McDowall claims that it is 'a play where the characters are striving—though usually failing—to improve things in some way—even if only selfishly at first'.⁷⁰¹ If there is a message from *Pomona*, it is perhaps the urgent need to engage ethically and politically with

⁶⁹⁸ Rebellato and McDowall, *Pomona*.

⁶⁹⁹ Commenting on the world of Pomona, Rebellato further explains: 'It is a recognizable world of ring roads, urban sprawl, sex work and Dungeons & Dragons. Although the final revelations about organ harvesting and baby farming sound extreme, it was estimated in 2007 that 5 per cent of the world's organ transplants were the result of an illegal trade in organs, while baby farming, enforced pregnancy, and 'slave breeding' have been features of cultures across history. The events in the play are not dystopian: they're not imaginary.' *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁰ McDowall, quoted in Haydon, 'Alistair McDowall: "I Spend a Lot of Time on the Internet."'

⁷⁰¹ McDowall, quoted in Powell, 'Feature: Alistair McDowall—"Pomona Is an Odd Beast"'.

social issues that are presented to us via the media as if they are pieces of fiction, completely detached from our own reality but which are, in fact, deeply entangled with our life.

Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition* presents another interesting case of experimenting with dramatic form. In an interview, the playwright reveals the goal he aims for and the strategy adopted to realise this goal: 'The structure of the experience of the play is that there are multiple things going on at once. There is a disjunction between the things that you see done and the things that are being said.'⁷⁰² By exploiting the disparity between visual and aural presentation, *Victory Condition* manages to bring to the stage multiple interwoven worlds. The two characters named Man and Woman enter their modern apartment filled with mass-produced furniture after a vacation trip and proceed to unpack, enjoy a take-out dinner, play games and go to sleep (Figure 20). These unremarkable activities, however, are performed while the couple take turns to deliver their monologues, in which Man is a sniper falling in love with his target—a freedom fighter—and Woman gains access to a system that can reboot the simulation of reality. It has been remarked that the task of paying attention to the fantastic worlds invoked by the monologues is challenging, not only because of the monotone in which they are delivered but also because of the distraction of occasional chimes from mobile phones that momentarily takes the aural dimension back to the world of the couple's daily, trivial routine.⁷⁰³ Adding to the complexity of this theatre experience is the multiple dramatic universes, multiple levels at which the notion of role-playing is invoked: we have an actor and an actress playing Man and Woman playing somebody else or perhaps themselves in another timeline. The situation is complicated by the introduction of the simulation theory by the Woman character, which makes us wonder about the relation between the dramatic universe of the apartment and those of the monologues. Holly Williams proposes a theory concerning this matter.

In the final moments, after a blue flash, for a second the actors turn to each other and seem to connect. A theory (and it could be well, well wide of the mark): Woman did reboot the system, and in doing so changed both their lives. That what we'd been watching was the

⁷⁰² Chris Thorpe, quoted in Daisy Bowie-Sell, 'Chris Thorpe: "Would I Describe Victory Condition as a Play? I Don't Care"', *WhatsOnStage*, 4 October 2017, https://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/chris-thorpe-victory-condition-interview-royal-court_44792.html.

⁷⁰³ Brendan MacDonald, 'Review: *Victory Condition* at the Royal Court', *Exeunt Magazine*, 12 October 2017, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-victory-condition-royal-court/>.

movements of their parallel, less-dramatic, more content (perhaps) selves—another simultaneous reality they snapped into at the end.⁷⁰⁴

Here, I will not dwell on proving whether the Woman rebooted the simulation to achieve a less dramatic, more comfortable reality of life in the apartment. Rather, my interest lies in exploring the political and ethical implications of *Victory Condition* in representing entangled worlds. In order to do this, I will go back to the moment before the simulation theory is introduced, when the Woman suddenly finds herself capable of perceiving everything that happens everywhere simultaneously.

All these impulses, conscious and unconscious, faster than thought, some of them, all these impulses frozen around the world in a single simultaneous moment of. Somewhere a knife is carefully slicing a girl to keep her pure, and somewhere an egg is being fertilized and a huge eagle that is not a metaphor but simply an eagle is beating away gravity to lift a silver fish from the broken-mirror surface of a lake high in a mountain range and a missile is inexpertly locked and the first chemical trace of a love affair has been triggered by the peripheral vision, by the way a man moves a finger to attract a waiter in Vienna, and a thousand people are taking a sip of coffee within the city limits of Johannesburg, each unaware of the other doing it, each one necessarily thinking they are the only one. And a barely-noticed accident in an Indian ship-breaking yard rips off a boy's finger and the link of chain the finger is trapped in is barely a millimetre along its path to the pulley and the wound hasn't yet had time to bleed nor the boy who has lost the finger had time to appreciate that this is the first moment in a life with far less opportunity in it now and a series of numbers is frozen in the act of exceeding a set value on a server in China which will spark an economic inevitability played out over the next fifty years and a neurochemical change somewhere in the brain of a teenager in Mexico City is the start of an idea that might lead a long way down a long road to our species travelling faster than light, if we survive. But that road is such a long one. And not everyone will be allowed to travel it.⁷⁰⁵

The Woman's vision is saturated with images. The lack of punctuation and the overuse of the conjunction 'and' to connect all these images generate overflowing sentences that convey an accurate impression of contemporary life's paradoxes: overloaded with information but simultaneously superficial, interrelated but fragmentary, restless but frozen. One can also read this description as an even more condensed kaleidoscopic vision of what Caryl Churchill evokes in *Love and Information* (2012), in which more than a hundred nameless characters try to make sense of what they know. In *Victory Condition*, it is the Woman who acts as an omniscient narrator, continuously jumping from one issue to another, both trivial and serious, in quick succession, from female genital mutilation, missile launching, the first indicator of an economic recession, to a boy that lost a finger or the first trace of a love affair. Such an act of indiscriminate enumeration illustrates a consuming desire to construct a total picture of

⁷⁰⁴ Holly Williams, 'Victory Condition, Royal Court, London, Review: A Fairly Chilly Theatrical Encounter', *The Independent*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/victory-condition-royal-court-review-a7995206.html>.

⁷⁰⁵ Thorpe, *Victory Condition*.

reality, even though this would result in depthless engagement with each of these events. At the same time, what can be perceived from the Woman's way of seeing is a profound sense of powerlessness: faced with the innumerable challenges of the world, it seems as if a mere individual can only be an impassive witness, incapable of making any significant change or impact.

There is, however, a solution to the limit in the Woman's multiple perspectives: a message appearing on her computer screen, revealing the truth that reality, as it is perceived, is but a simulation and can be rebooted in one simple click.

And the text says.

This is an experiment which has not yet concluded. However, the current data-set can be extrapolated to suggest that a new experiment, with significantly modified parameters, might reach a definite conclusion in less time than it will take the current one to run its course.

Yes/No.

A single command-prompt.

The dogs eat everything here.

My finger hovers.

A dialogue box. A force-quit. A re-boot. A solitary click.

There's no way of telling. If I did that or not.⁷⁰⁶

The Woman here is no longer a helpless individual being bombarded with information and irresolvable problems but a god-like figure who has the fate of the whole world literally in her hand. The simulation hypothesis 'argues that what we experience as reality is actually a giant computer simulation created by a more sophisticated intelligence',⁷⁰⁷ to put a highly complex matter simply. Rather than being a Utopian or science-fiction scenario, Chris Thorpe's appropriation of the theory embodies the basic human aspiration to make sense and to take control, not only of our individual lives but also of the reality of which we are part. The danger of this kind of personal mythology, however, lies in the false sense of power it may instil in an individual. Consequently, it resituates the myth-maker in the space of powerlessness by forestalling any practical, meaningful engagement with existing problems. The simplicity of the solution, as reflected in the length of the descriptive sentences, is a stark contrast to the multiplicity and complexity of the Woman's perception of the world presented previously. The single command-prompt Yes/No, as such, is emblematic of the extent to which mythical speech reduces, simplifies and empties out reality.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁷ Olivia Solon, 'Is Our World a Simulation? Why Some Scientists Say It's More Likely than Not', *The Guardian*, 11 October 2016, sec. Technology, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/oct/11/simulated-world-elon-musk-the-matrix>.

However, it would be inaccurate to characterise *Victory Condition* as a deterministic play that ‘offers no hint as to how, through political action, we might change a universe bent on self-destruction’.⁷⁰⁸ Towards the end of *Victory Condition*, we see the manifestation of a classical metatheatrical device, as the actor and actress playing Man and Woman show their awareness that they are performing as characters of a play and converse directly with the audience.

WOMAN [...] *The following story can be altered to reflect the location of the production.*

When I leave the theatre tonight, there’s a woman sitting outside Sloane Square tube station. By the bins. She’s homeless, and she’s begging. But she’s not sitting there, just with a, like a cardboard cup or whatever. She’s shouting. Please help me. Won’t anyone help me. Like she’s reached the end of her fucking rope. And of course it could just be a tactic. Of course it could. Or it could be the desperation caused by oncoming drug withdrawal. Of course it could be those things. It could be a lot of things. As many things have happened to her as have happened to me.

...

So I walk up to her—

*In the audience, someone’s mobile phone goes off, loudly. The WOMAN looks towards the sound. The phone keeps ringing. Blackout.*⁷⁰⁹

What the Woman would do when she reaches the homeless woman can no longer be shown on stage, understandably, as her subsequent action belongs to the real world outside the theatre. The sound of a mobile phone going off marks the moment the hypothetical space of fiction is penetrated by the urgent need for action. If, as Alek Sierz observes, the staging of *Victory Condition* in the 2017 production at the Royal Court underlines the idea of ordinary individuals—the Man and Woman being the Mr and Mrs Normal in whom the audience can see glimpses of themselves,⁷¹⁰ then, the uncertainty and openness that characterise the Woman’s unfinished last line can be interpreted as an invitation extended towards the audience to complete their own story. One can never be sure what kind of a person the homeless woman is—a victim of circumstances, a scammer, a drug addict, all or none of those things. The ‘victory condition’ that marks the title of the play, as such, refers not only to a crucial moment in a video game when one can lose or win⁷¹¹ but also to the moment of suspension right before a person decides which role they choose to play and by extension, how to construct their personal narrative through their action. The ending of *Victory*

⁷⁰⁸ Billington, ‘*Victory Condition* Review—Pizza and the Apocalypse in Baffling Two-hander’.

⁷⁰⁹ Thorpe, *Victory Condition*.

⁷¹⁰ Aleks Sierz, ‘*Victory Condition*, Royal Court, Review—Ballardian Vision of the Contemporary’, *The Arts Desk*, 10 October 2017, <https://theartsdesk.com/theatre/victory-condition-royal-court-review-ballardian-vision-contemporary>.

⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*

Condition serves as a reminder that choice and responsibility are imminent in every interaction and not just limited to perceivable moments of crisis.

Victory Condition does not lay out the ways in which you win, or even articulate the precise mechanics of its world. Instead it evokes a devastatingly rich system whose structure is not readily conceivable. Chloe Lamford's set—a concrete IKEA apartment surrounded by scaffolding—is akin to a diorama. It models a scene made for the viewer to look in on, to observe and to critique. Yet it feels like there could be more concrete apartments in this scaffolded structure, that this scene is a particular but not exhaustive sample of a wider world.⁷¹²

As I have demonstrated in this part, the use of role-playing as a metatheatrical device in *The Nether*, *Pomona* and *Victory Condition* does not facilitate direct audience engagement since it does not strive to create a directly immersive, participatory environment. If anything, these plays still very much rely on the voyeurism associated with traditional theatre representation. On the other hand, by erasing the hierarchy of different dramatic universes presented on stage and problematising the 'meta' of metatheatre, these plays place the audience in a position in which they must constantly negotiate between overlapping identities and worlds to make sense of what they are experiencing. This process of navigating through confusion and uncertainty, of oscillating between seriousness and playfulness, active and passive, I believe, is an affective experience that aims to foster the audience's capacity to perceive new structures of reality, among which is the structure of relationality and responsibility that is composed not only of conventionally known categories such as victim, perpetrator and witness but with the additional figure of the 'implicated subject' theorised by Michael Rothberg.

In the following pages, I will further examine contemporary speculative theatre's indirect political commitment through its engagement with the notion of implication. Alistair McDowall's *X* and *Pomona*, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* and Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* present the audience with a wide range of implicated subjects, from the 'inheritors' that do not take part in whatever act of injustice or violence but who cannot be removed from the aftermath of this act, to those, despite being aware of their involvement to a certain extent, choose willful ignorance instead of pursuing the truth. These plays suggest that acknowledging our status as implicated subjects would lead to another notion of responsibility that transcends the temporal, spatial and legal boundaries associated with the traditional understanding of responsibility. As a rehearsal for the new sensibility of the implicated subject, Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, Philip Ridley's

⁷¹² MacDonald, 'Review: *Victory Condition* at the Royal Court'.

Radiant Vermin and Stef Smith's *Human Animals* construct a space for the implicated spectator by engaging the audience in a *parrhesiastic* game (Michel Foucault). On the one hand, this truth-telling game serves as a critique of post-truth discourses that instrumentalise the blurring boundary between fiction and reality to advance divisive ideologies. On the other hand, by undermining the binary way of thinking about truth—either as singular and unique Truth or multiple and relative truths—speculative theatre promotes an aporetic and utopian perception of truth that is grounded in the ethics of care.

III. TOWARDS ANOTHER POLITICAL THEATRE

In the previous section, we have seen how contemporary speculative theatre, in its attempt to create an experience of nonidentity relations, unsettles the temporal and spatial boundaries of its dramatic universes. It must be noted, however, that this operation is not the same as erasing all boundaries and identities, which would also mean annexing all differences into one single indistinguishable unity. If anything, speculative theatre's emphasis lies in the urgency of distinction and preservation of difference while still striving to maintain proximity to the alterity of the Other. The kind of solidarity or community envisioned by this kind of theatre, as such, is one that emerges from dis-identification and can be better characterised as quasi-community because of its aporetic nature.

Within this context, the introduction of the category known as 'implicated subject' (theorised by Michael Rothberg) appears to be inconsistent with my argument. Nevertheless, since the implicated subject, rather than being just another fixed identity, is 'a figure to think with and through',⁷¹³ it does not contradict the general direction of speculative theatre—that is, the move toward a nonidentity form of relating to others. Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* and *X*, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* and Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* all have characters who are situated in the 'realm of implication'—'a realm where people are entangled in injustices that fall outside the purview of the law and where the categories into which we like to sort the innocent and the guilty become troubled'.⁷¹⁴ Through these characters, speculative theatre prods the question of intergenerational responsibility and forces the audience to face the detrimental, unforeseeable consequences of willful ignorance—consequences that may not take long to manifest themselves.

Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* and Stef Smith's *Human Animals* further explore the link between willful ignorance and the expansion of post-truth rhetoric in the twenty-first century. These plays reveal the various mechanisms used in the formation of a post-truth mentality, which exploit the multiplicity of truth to deny the necessity of pursuing objective truth altogether. The audience, finding themselves in the position of an implicated spectator in speculative theatre's parrhesiastic game, is not completely helpless in the face of various social, political and moral

⁷¹³ Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 199.

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

determinants. Rather, they are encouraged to transfigure their implication to foster a new sensibility in which rationality is already attuned to affects—in other words, a utopian sensibility characterised by commitment to the aporia/impossible of responsibility and truth. The cultivation of this new sensibility underlines speculative theatre’s drive toward a transformative, ethical micropolitics that targets individual perception and disrupts the binary logic that governs much of contemporary discourses.

1. *The Implicated Subject—The (Im)Possibility of Infinite Responsibility*

(*X—Pomona—The Children—Pastoral*)

The concept of the ‘implicated subject’ is theorised by Michael Rothberg in the context of racist violence in the United States, but as the author explains, it can also be used to address questions of ‘exploitation, colonialism, ecological destruction, and more’.⁷¹⁵ This is what happens in Alistair McDowall’s *X* and *Pomona*, Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children* and Thomas Eccleshare’s *Pastoral*. Through the figure of the implicated subject, these plays explore the question of responsibility in relation to social exploitation and ecological destruction—the kind that can lead to immediate consequences but can also transcend the temporal and spatial boundaries conventionally associated with responsibility. I would argue that the encounter with the implicated subject in contemporary speculative theatre creates the condition of possibility for the Derridean infinite responsibility—‘a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from which one may invent the only *possible invention, the impossible invention*’.⁷¹⁶

According to Rothberg, the implicated subject, rather than being ‘an ontological identity that freezes us forever in proximity to power and privilege’, is ‘a position that we occupy in particular, dynamic, and at times clashing structures and histories of power’.⁷¹⁷ He prefers ‘implication’ to the proximate but not identical term ‘complicity’ because the former ‘draws attention to how we are “folded into” (im-plied in) events that at first seem beyond

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 41, original emphasis.

⁷¹⁷ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 8.

our agency as individual subjects'.⁷¹⁸ The status of the implicated subject is characterised by uncertainty because implication itself is ambiguous—it 'consists precisely of those discomfiting forms of belonging to a context of injustice that cannot be grasped immediately or directly because they seem to involve spatial, temporal, or social distances or complex causal mechanisms'.⁷¹⁹ This explains why most of the time, an implicated subject is either unaware of their entanglement in injustice or denying their involvement to avoid the discomfort associated with acknowledgement. If the characters Zeppo and Charlie in Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* belong to the latter group and cultivate willful ignorance to shield themselves from the question of responsibility, the characters in Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral*, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* and Alistair McDowall's *X* show that implication should be considered not only in relation to past or existing injustices but also to possible ramifications in the future. It is from this kind of 'vicarious responsibility' that a truly ethical community is to emerge. Perhaps such a community is the 'only possible invention, the impossible invention' that Derrida and many others have envisioned.

This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community.⁷²⁰

Compared to *Pastoral* and *X*, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* can be said to be the most explicit in discussing the question of intergenerational responsibility. In an interview, Kirkwood reveals the reason behind her approach to climate change through an individualised narrative, which I take the liberty to quote at length here.

I had been trying to find a form for a long time to write about climate change in a way that was emotionally rather than intellectually driven. What is important and theatrical to me is not the facts of climate change—we all know the facts now, and most of the average left leaning theatre audience will believe in them too. What is interesting is this: if we know the facts, why are we failing so catastrophically to change our behaviours? Well, for one thing, it's because those changes are enormous and frightening and demand that we give up things we have all come to feel we are entitled to. The scale of such a change can only feel like a death of sorts, and as Hazel says [in *The Children*], who would consciously want to move towards their own death? Capitalism has instilled a set of desires in us that are very difficult to de-program. I wanted to write something that didn't harangue or nag an audience, but was generous, honest and unsentimental about how difficult it will be to make the changes that we

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷²⁰ Hannah Arendt, 'Collective Responsibility', in *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. J. W. Bernauer (Martinus Nijhoff, 2012), 47.

need to, about how overwhelming that might feel—an awakening perhaps, but a terrifying one.⁷²¹

It is clear that *The Children* is meant to appeal to the audience's emotion without being sentimental, and consequently, Kirkwood employs an affective dramaturgy that blurs the boundary between fact and fiction to situate the audience in the fictive space of in-between-ness. The catastrophe in *The Children* recalls the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster triggered by the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. Not only so, but Rose's plan to gather retired physicists who used to work at the station to replace the young ones is also inspired by a real event: a group of Japanese retired volunteers known as the Skilled Veteran Corps offering their help to manage the nuclear meltdown. In a reading from the age studies perspective, Marco de Ambrogi contends that the 'transcendent' gesture that Rose offers to Robin and Hazel entails putting an end to their own late-life and, at the moment Rose reveals the reason for her visit, 'cultural readings of old age imbued with the narrative of decline gradually supersede different interpretations of ageing that have emerged in the play'.⁷²² Rather than condoning the narrative of decline or endorsing the sacrifice of the old generation, I would argue that what *The Children* aims for is bringing into relief the necessity of acknowledging one's status as an implicated subject and facing the question of responsibility, especially inter-generational responsibility. In other words, it does not urge the audience to celebrate or take for granted Rose's solution but serves as a starting point to think about changes in our current approach to the environmental crisis so that there will be no need for martyr or sacrifice in the future.

ROSE We built a nuclear reactor next to the sea then put the emergency generators in the basement! We left them with a shit-show waiting to happen and no evacuation procedure! And then they were the ones standing in the dark, trying to fix something we could have predicted, we should have predicted, opening valves by hand, even though it was already too late!

Rose's argument here reflects the words of Kazuko Sasaki, co-founder of the Skilled Veteran Corps: "My generation, the old generation, promoted the nuclear plants. If we don't take responsibility, who will?"⁷²³ It is not a matter of feeling guilty for something one directly did

⁷²¹ Lucy Kirkwood, quoted in Sarah Corridon, 'Playwright Lucy Kirkwood on *The Children*', *Melbourne Theatre Company*, 28 August 2017, <https://www.mtc.com.au/discover-more/mtc-now/playwright-lucy-kirkwood-on-the-children/>.

⁷²² Núria Casado-Gual, 'Staging the "Crisis of Aging": Old Age as the New Apocalypse in *The Children* and *Escaped Alone*', in *Understanding the Discourse of Aging: A Multifaceted Perspective*, ed. Vicent Salvador and Agnese Sampietro (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 244.

⁷²³ Quoted in Marco De Ambrogi, 'Sense and Responsibility', *The Lancet* 388, no. 10062 (10 December 2016): 2862.

but assuming responsibility for one's implication. Hazel argues that she has done her bit by helping remove the top soil from the playground and economise power, that she and Robin have been 'compromised' as well. Hazel may be dealing responsibly with the aftermath of the catastrophe, but it cannot be said that she has assumed responsibility for her implication in making such a catastrophe possible in the first place. As pointed out by Rose, they could have and should have predicted the problem with building a nuclear reactor next to the sea and putting the emergency generators in the basement. Even though Rose, Hazel and Robin may not have been directly involved in making this decision, they are without doubt implicated subjects because they went along with what had been decided by people in power.

Implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles.⁷²⁴

In his review, Michael Billington remarks that Kirkwood has written 'a genuinely disturbing play: one not simply about nuclear power but about the heavy price we may pay in the future for the profligacy of the present. Whether you are a parent or not, the play leaves you an abundance of ideas on which to ruminate.'⁷²⁵ The audience encounters similar ideas from attending Alistair McDowall's *X*, a play set in a research base in Pluto. In *X*, space exploration has become a necessity for survival since the planet earth was no longer fit for human habitation: 'There is nothing left back there. Trees. Birds. Animals. Countries gone. Everyone crammed too close together on what's left of the land. It's a shadow.'⁷²⁶ Mattie, the daughter of Gilda and Clark, was born and raised in the research base. Everything she knows about the earth and nature is from stories Gilda tells her. Gilda admits that she was selfish for having Mattie because she did not want to be alone, but now that she is near her end, her daughter cannot escape the fate of being the only and last survivor in a base on a dwarf planet at the edge of the solar system, where the sun is about a thousand times dimmer than it is on earth. If we are to identify the subjects implicated in the production of Mattie's predicament, they would include not only Gilda (the direct agent that brought Mattie into existence while being fully aware of the unbearable living conditions she will have to face) or the people who

⁷²⁴ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 1.

⁷²⁵ Michael Billington, 'The Children Review—Kirkwood's Slow-Burning Drama Asks Profound Questions', *The Guardian*, 25 November 2016, sec. Stage, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/25/children-review-lucy-kirkwood-royal-court>.

⁷²⁶ McDowall, *X*, 35.

sent Gilda and her colleagues to Pluto as a ‘tax write-off’ and left them there, but also the generations that have contributed to the destruction of the Earth.

RAY There’s a reason no one’s been here before, it’s that no one in their right mind would ever *want* to come here.
They know there’s nothing useful here.
It’s a financial work-around. It’s a tax write-off.
This is where they send the new, the underqualified, the old.
And most of all the British. Mars is full of blond Americans.
It’s like they’re building the master race out there.⁷²⁷

In both *X* and *The Children*, we see an undeniable link between the ecological crisis and the advanced capitalist ideology that values ‘growth’ above all else, even though most of the time, this ‘growth’ should be better understood as the accumulation of political and financial power among the very few of the ruling class. Lucy Kirkwood confesses that *The Children* is

an attempt to look at a crisis of desire on a political level—Hazel’s line, ‘I don’t know how to want less’ is perhaps the most crucial line in the play. Capitalism depends on growth. Our entire economic system depends on us wanting more and more, on boundless desire—and if we continue to pursue those desires they will destroy us.⁷²⁸

McDowall’s *X* pursues this crisis of desire to its literal end, where there is nothing left on earth, no more possibility of ‘growth’ and ‘all that’ll happen next is the rich’ll start shipping themselves out to their own private tin cans like this one, on whichever planet they can afford’.⁷²⁹ In fact, the scenario in *X* is by no means imaginary since displacement caused by environmental change, also known as climate migration, has already started. By 2018, more than eight million people have moved from South Asia to the Middle East, Europe and North America. In the African Sahel, millions have been streaming from rural areas to the coasts and the cities amid drought and widespread crop failures.⁷³⁰ Without any change in policy and behaviour, it would not take long for reality to catch up with the fictional, post-apocalyptic world envisioned in *X*.⁷³¹ The implicated subjects of the injustice and suffering of Mattie’s generation, as such, include the audience members and their contemporaries, who are inevitably members of a globalised society of capitalism and consumerism.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷²⁸ Lucy Kirkwood, quoted in Corridon, ‘Playwright Lucy Kirkwood on *The Children*’.

⁷²⁹ McDowall, *X*, 79.

⁷³⁰ Abrahm Lustgarten, ‘The Great Climate Migration Has Begun’, *The New York Times*, 23 July 2020, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/23/magazine/climate-migration.html>.

⁷³¹ It is estimated that by 2070, ‘the kind of extremely hot zones, like in the Sahara, that now cover less than 1 percent of the earth’s land surface could cover nearly a fifth of the land, potentially placing one of every three people alive outside the climate niche where humans have thrived for thousands of years.’. See Lustgarten, ‘The Great Climate Migration Has Begun’.

If *The Children* tends toward the blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality by staging a situation that recalls a real event and *X* moves a little further away from realism through its setting on another planet, Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* retains very little of what can be said to be a realist tale of ecocrisis. In *Pastoral*, London is transformed into forests in a matter of days as infrastructure and the economy collapse. Stuck in a flat of an old woman, Moll, a family of three—Mr and Mrs Plum and their son Arthur—together with two of Moll's caretakers, struggle to stay alive. One of the men ventures out hunting, but all he can manage is a tiny hedgehog. When it seems like there is no longer any hope, an Ocado man makes his long-awaited arrival, yet, the group faces disappointment once again because the delivery man was attacked on his way and lost everything except for a microwave chicken jalfrezi. The small portion could not assuage the group's hunger, and they decided that the Ocado man himself would be an alternative source of food. The attempts to kill the man give rise to a dark comic moment, as the adults continuously fail to make any significant injury, and with every failed attempt, the poor victim complains, asking them to stop while staggering away. In the end, it is the eleven-year-old Arthur that puts an end to this ridiculous and ghastly situation.

ARTHUR stands up. He is holding HARDY's gun. He picks up a large branch from the would-be fire and approaches the OCADO MAN from behind. He uses the branch to swipe the OCADO MAN's legs from beneath him. The OCADO MAN collapses and ARTHUR shoots him in the head three times.

Pause.

ARTHUR There.

MRS PLUM Well done darling. Well done.

Silence.

In contrast to the adults' sloppy manoeuvre, Arthur's actions are intentional and well-executed. Not only that he makes the man fall on the ground in order to reduce the range of his movement and, by extension, the chance of missing, but Arthur also shoots three times instead of once to ensure that the target is completely neutralised. His 'There' after completing the deed, as such, can be read as an ironic comment on the adults' incompetence. Legally speaking, they are innocent in the death of the Ocado man: they are neither the killer nor the manager who pushed the man to fulfil his job duty even as the world is on the edge of destruction.

OCADO MAN [...] I got told, Mr. Sanderson told me, another complaint from a customer, another missed order, and I was liable to get the sack. To get fired. He said he'd hook me if it

happened again. I didn't want to risk it. It's the whole company that's at stake, that's what Sanderson says. I'm a representative of the whole company, so I'm not to let them down.⁷³²

However, the adults in Moll's flat are undoubtedly implicated subjects of a capitalist and consumerist society in which intense competition has forced people like the Ocado man to literally risk their lives to keep their underpaid jobs. Neither victims nor perpetrators, they are participants 'in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator'. Their incompetence and lack of survival skills impose on the younger generation—Arthur in this case—the responsibility to provide for the group, even when fulfilling this responsibility would mean committing hideous crimes such as murder. Later on, despite what he did for them, Arthur's parents do not hesitate to abandon their son in their flight to safety behind a plastic wall built by the military. The adults in *Pastoral*, in accepting without questioning the kind of crisis policy that targets the young, the old, the most vulnerable in society as the first to be left behind, also accept their status as implicated subjects without any desire to take responsibility for their implication.

If implication in *Pastoral* 'derives from one form of acting in concert: the kind we undertake without being conscious of our actions' impact',⁷³³ what we see in Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* is the engagement with a more active form of disavowal known as willful ignorance. At the beginning of the play, Zeppo explains to Ollie why he never gets involved in other people's business despite being the owner of an island where all kinds of criminal activities are being performed.

ZEPPO [...] So I don't *get* involved. I'm *neutral*. I'm a very neutral person. I rent my land and my buildings out to *everyone*. To *anyone*. I don't pick favourites. I don't ask questions, like you said. You know what the most important ethos is for today's turbulent times?

OLLIE I—What?

ZEPPO Selective education.

[...] You gotta pick and choose what you *give* a shit about.

Now it's so fucking easy to look everything up, we get to see what's holding the walls up, you know? But this is not a good idea because inevitably? *Invariably*? Every part of our lives and culture and diet and health and the clothes we wear and the music we like and the films we watch and the friends we have and all of this—you go deep enough, you'll find all this *stuff*, the detritus of our lives, it's all built on this foundation of pain and shit and suffering. It's like it's impossible to be a good person now. You can't *be* a good person any more. There's no such thing. There's just people who are *aware* of the pain they're causing, and people who *aren't* aware.

That's why I don't get involved with who rents my buildings. I don't know what happens in them. I don't *want* to know.

⁷³² Eccleshare, *Pastoral*.

⁷³³ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 200.

Knowledge is a *responsibility*.⁷³⁴

What Zeppo calls ‘selective education’ or, in other words, picking and choosing ‘what you give a shit about’, starts with something as trivial as refraining from looking up the ingredients of chicken nuggets, for fear that once we know how they are produced, we would no longer want to eat them. Among the symptoms of affected or willful ignorance, there are indifference—‘not asking questions about A’s permissibility despite the availability of answers’, arrogance—‘thinking that one’s take on A’s permissibility is infallible in the face of its fallibility’, denial—‘telling oneself that doing A is permissible in the face of A being wrong’, trivialisation—‘telling oneself that A is morally unimportant in the face of A being morally important’ and rationalisation—‘making up non-sense reasons for A in the face of good reasons being available against A’.⁷³⁵ Zeppo’s attitude to truth and knowledge contains all the above symptoms. He trivialises the crimes committed in the island Pomona, ranging from human trafficking, prostitution, pornography making to human organ harvesting and baby farming, by drawing a parallel between them and nugget ingredients. He does not want to know what happens in his buildings, the same way that he does not want to know how they make chicken into nuggets. By not knowing, he is also free from any responsibility for all the horrible things happening on his properties. The justification Zeppo gives for his indifference (what he perceives as ‘neutrality’) towards truth and others’ suffering is his own safety: his father got involved and, as a result, he was nailed to a brick wall with a steel rod through his face.⁷³⁶ Zeppo’s claim that ‘selective education’ is ‘the most important ethos for today’s turbulent times’ also reveals his arrogance for being in possession of an irrefutable piece of wisdom. It is important to note that while his contemplation on the impossibility of being a good person is not without significance, the simplistic conclusion he draws from it is far from being acceptable.

If Zeppo manages to evade responsibility through willful ignorance, Charlie, one of the two guards of the island, is eventually forced to face the truth of his ‘involvement’.

CHARLIE I’m good at my job—
MOE Your job is standing with me on an empty plot of land.
CHARLIE We have to, to, stop people coming in, and wave the vans in –
MOE What’s in the vans?
Beat.
What’s in them? What are you guarding?

⁷³⁴ McDowall, *Pomona*, 13-15.

⁷³⁵ Jan Willem Wieland, ‘Willful Ignorance’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20, no. 1 (2017): 112.

⁷³⁶ McDowall, *Pomona*, 13.

What is your job?
 CHARLIE Security—
 MOE Security for what?
 CHARLIE Just like—Stolen goods or something.
 MOE That’s what you think?
 CHARLIE That’s what I sort of, *tell* myself. Or like counterfeit, counterfeit –
 MOE That’s what they’re driving in and taking underground.
 CHARLIE Yeah.
 MOE They need to keep fake jeans underground.
 CHARLIE Maybe—
 MOE That’s what you tell people.⁷³⁷

Charlie keeps telling himself and other people that he works in security, dwelling in self-deception and willful ignorance when it comes to the question ‘security for what’. This deception is maintained up to the point when he and Moe receive an order to ‘take care’ of a problematic girl. This gives the two guards a glimpse of the horrendous nature of the business in the island Pomona and the content of the vans that they have seen passing in front of their eyes, day after day. What distinguishes Charlie from Zeppo, however, is the action taken by the former to transfigure his implication.

CHARLIE I don’t want to do this anymore...
 I can’t do this job...
 I can’t pretend anymore.
 I can’t just put my fingers in my ears—
 We’re not security guards. We’re *not*.
 I can’t make myself believe that anymore—
 MOE Calm down.
 CHARLIE I can’t do this now.
 I’m a good person.
 I try to be –
 I think I am—
 I’m trying –
 I *try* to be a good person.
 But this isn’t—
 MOE Stop.
 CHARLIE I keep thinking that everything will get better but it doesn’t, it just get worse, it’s always got worse, and if I do this then it’ll be even worse than that.⁷³⁸

Instead of hurting the girl, Charlie asks Moe to stab him to make it look like they did try their best but the girl somehow overpowered them. Previously, Charlie was stuck in the self-contained identity of an innocent security guard; however, the moment he commits to transfiguring his implication, he ‘opens the self to others—and to one’s own otherness, prosthetic agency, and unacknowledged capacity to wound’.⁷³⁹ He is now able to

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*, 100-01.

⁷³⁹ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 202.

acknowledge that they are not security guards and the fact that things would get worse if they follow the order to become perpetrators.

It must be noted that Charlie's case of assuming responsibility is pushed to the extreme in order to make immediately perceptible the proportion between the severity of the injustice in which one is implicated and the price one has to pay when being forced out of the relatively save space of implication. The audience, therefore, should not subscribe to Zeppo's rhetoric and being discouraged from encountering their willful ignorance for fear of their own safety. If anything, the extremity of Charlie's case serves as a reminder for the urgency to transfigure implication: the longer one dwells in denial or ignorance, the higher the price will be. In reality, the transfiguration of implication is interminable and, most of the time involves a series of small changes in behaviour rather than a one-time life-or-death decision. The kind of responsibility that is associated with the acknowledgement of one's status as an implicated subject is better characterised as the Derridean infinite responsibility, which is, like grief, impossible to be fulfilled but must be attempted nonetheless.

For Derrida, a responsibility completely fulfilled or assumed is a responsibility done in good conscience. This more straightforward understanding of responsibility is contrasted by Derrida with his more extreme notion of radical or infinite responsibility, which in characterising responsibilities as aporetic and contradictory, prevents the full assumption or completion of any responsibility.⁷⁴⁰

The infinite responsibility that emerges from transfiguring implication, because of the impossibility to fully assume or complete any responsibility, avoids the closure associated with good conscience. The implicated subjects, constantly encouraged to interrogate and rethink the dynamics of violence and injustice, constitute a sort of quasi-community 'premised in difference rather than logics of sameness and identification'.⁷⁴¹ In the next section, I will turn to the way speculative plays such as Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* and Stef Smith's *Human Animals* create an experience for the implicated spectator to explore the aporia of truth within the context of the increasingly prominent post-truth politics. By fostering another sensibility of truth, like the other sensibility of responsibility that I have explored in this section, contemporary speculative theatre points toward a utopian form of relationality and subjectivity deriving from the commitment to aporia.

⁷⁴⁰ Matthew Calarco, 'Derrida on Identity and Difference: A Radical Democratic Reading of *The Other Heading*', *Critical Horizons* 1, no. 1 (2000): 60.

⁷⁴¹ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 12.

2. *The Implicated Spectator—Speculative Theatre as a Mode of Truth-telling*

(*Far Away—Foxfinder—Radiant Vermin—Human Animals*)

Truthiness: Things that a person claims to know intuitively or ‘from the gut’ without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.
(Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*)

The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed the proliferation of a particular type of political discourse known as *post-truth* or *truthiness*, which is characterised by a disregard for evidence, logic, intellectual examination and, simultaneously, an emphasis on emotions and performativity. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *post-truth* is defined as relating to or denoting ‘circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.⁷⁴² Even though the term ‘post-truth’ only gained currency since 2016 during the period around the United States presidential election and the Brexit referendum, many of its underlying characteristics, such as appeal to emotions, anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism, attack on critical thinking, manipulation and misinterpretation or policing political language,⁷⁴³ are far from being unheard of. Colin Wight argues that what makes post-truth new and particular is not the *production* of misinformation or outright lies, since these have always been parts of politics, but in the *reception* of lies, dissembling, spinning, propaganda.⁷⁴⁴ While agreeing with Wight on the need to focus more on the reception side when investigating the post-truth phenomenon, I would say that we should not overlook the production side either, since the unprecedented scope of the production and diffusion of lies, misinformation and obfuscation in twenty-first-century politics, made possible by new forms of communication and technologies (such as social media or predictive algorithms), accompanied by ‘a shift in *awareness* of emotion as a determining factor’,⁷⁴⁵ undoubtedly contribute to the pervasiveness of post-truth narratives. It will be more fruitful to examine post-truth as a reaction against the authority of the ‘truth’ regime of the liberal state and experts, which does

⁷⁴² Oxford English Dictionary Online. ‘Post-truth’ is also chosen as the Oxford word of the year 2016.

⁷⁴³ Kathrin Braun, ‘Unpacking Post-Truth’, *Critical Policy Studies* 13, no. 4 (2019): 432–36.

⁷⁴⁴ Colin Wight, ‘Post-Truth, Postmodernism and Alternative Facts’, *New Perspectives* 26, no. 3 (2018): 22.

⁷⁴⁵ Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis, ‘The Affective Politics of the “Post-Truth” Era: Feeling Rules and Networked Subjectivity’, *Emotion, Space and Society* 27 (May 2018): 75.

not take into consideration the emotional needs of certain segments of the population. In other words, what I suggest here is the possibility of considering the susceptibility to the post-truth narrative as a ‘structure of feeling’ that reacts against the exclusivity and rigidity of a hegemonic regime of truth that prioritises rationality over emotions. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, however, this structure of feeling has been ‘formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations’⁷⁴⁶ and, as such, on the way to establish itself as another hegemony. Within this context, what speculative theatre represents is an attempt to counter the affective infrastructures of post-truth without invoking moralisation or indoctrination. Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away*, Dawn King’s *Foxfinder*, Stef Smith’s *Human Animals* and Philip Ridley’s *Radiant Vermin*, while not explicitly proclaiming their intention to tackle problems associated with the post-truth phenomenon,⁷⁴⁷ manage to construct a rehearsal space in which the audience can practice unpacking the affective force and consequences of post-truth rhetoric. These speculative plays lay bare the formation process of a post-truth mentality, the manner in which post-truth narratives exert their power by attending to people’s emotional needs and the perversion of confession as a means to evade accountability. But speculative theatre does not stop short at these operations. After all, despite their fictive context, these are all familiar aspects of contemporary life, and they can hardly surprise any well-informed audience member. What constitutes the ethico-political dimension of speculative theatre’s revelation, I would argue, is its *parrhesiastic* aspect—the way it engages the audience in a *parrhesiastic* game and brings into relief their status of an implicated spectator. As a result of this parrhesiastic game, the notion of truth is rescued from both the rigidity of the insistence on provable, objective truth and the attempt to trivialise all truths through absolute relativism. What emerges instead is an emphasis on a relationship of care in one’s encounter with political and cultural narratives.

Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* elucidates the formative process of a post-truth mentality as it moves through three different stages in the life of the character Joan. The play opens with a young Joan having trouble sleeping after her first introduction to violence and brutality. Her attempt to make sense of what she saw is met with a series of lies from her aunt.

HARPER [...] I’m going to tell you what’s going on. Your uncle is helping these people. He’s helping them escape. He’s giving them shelter. Some of them were still in the lorry, that’s why they were crying. Your uncle’s going to take them all into the shed and then they’ll be all right.

⁷⁴⁶ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132.

⁷⁴⁷ All these plays were written prior to the popularisation of the term ‘post-truth’.

JOAN They had blood on their face.
HARPER That's from before. That's because they were attacked by the people your
uncle's saving them from.
JOAN There was blood on the ground.
HARPER One of them was injured very badly but your uncle bandaged him up.
JOAN He's helping them.
HARPER That's right.
JOAN There wasn't a dog. There wasn't a party.
HARPER No, I'm trusting you with the truth now. You must never talk about it or
you'll put your uncle's life in danger and mine and even your own. You won't even say
anything to your parents.
[...]
JOAN Why was uncle hitting them?
HARPER Hitting who?
JOAN He was hitting a man with a stick. I think the stick was metal. He hit one of
the children.
HARPER One of the people in the lorry was a traitor. He wasn't really one of them, he
was pretending, he was going to betray them, they found out and told your uncle. Then he
attacked your uncle, he attacked the other people, your uncle had to fight him.
JOAN That's why there was so much blood.
HARPER Yes, it had to be done to save the others.
JOAN He hit one of the children.
HARPER That would have been the child of the traitor. Or sometimes you get bad
children who even betray their parents.⁷⁴⁸

Each of Joan's observations is fenced off by Harper's deceit. What makes the scene both amusing and distressing is that since Joan does not reveal all the details at once, Harper has to struggle to improvise along the way. As a result, there seems to be a strange dynamic of power between the two characters. Harper's narrative and, by extension, her superior position in the relationship are constantly threatened by each innocent remark made by Joan. As soon as she is certain that her niece has been persuaded, Harper is ambushed by another question that forces her to elaborate on an already strenuous account of her husband's deed. Harper has recourse to two affective strategies—scare tactic and appeals to morality—to ensure not only that her narrative is the only one accessible to Joan but also that it is completely assimilated and accepted by her niece. The girl is prevented from discussing what she saw with anybody since this would endanger her family and herself. At the same time, she is encouraged to take pride in her complicity: 'You're part of a big movement now to make things better. You can be proud of that. You can look at the stars and think here we are in our little bit of space, and I'm on the side of the people who are putting things right, and your soul will expand right into the sky.'⁷⁴⁹ What renders this scene truly terrifying is perhaps the audience's recognition that they are indeed familiar with Harper's strategies of manipulation when facing difficult or embarrassing questions from the children they know.

⁷⁴⁸ Churchill, *Far Away*, 18-20.

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

Elin Diamond remarks that ‘what interests Caryl Churchill is [...] the indirect atmospherics of terror, the way it leeches into the psyches of ordinary citizens and ordinary lives. Ordinary lives are always dialectical for Churchill, individually marked yet ensnared, obscurely or directly, in political and historical force fields.’⁷⁵⁰ In Act Two of *Far Away*, which takes place several years after the incident at the farmhouse, Churchill pursues this interest by demonstrating how terror leeches into the psyches of ordinary people, how an upbringing exposed to both domestic and public manipulation eventually deprives an individual of their critical thinking capability. Joan, now working in a hat factory, takes pride in her profession and her artistic creations despite being fully aware that these hats are worn by political prisoners on their way to the incinerator—a spectacle performed regularly enough for there is to be a hat industry. Similarly, in Act Three, as the world descends into chaos, the more mature Joan blindly follows orders and kills according to the narratives imposed upon her, unbothered by the fact that these narratives constantly alter or contradict each other. The formation of a post-truth mentality, which starts on the night the young Joan witnessed her uncle torturing people, has achieved its ultimate goal of giving rise to a subject incapable of interrogating their own social, political, ethical conditions.

Set in a dystopian society, Dawn King’s *Foxfinder* examines another process related to post-truth narratives, one in which they obtain sustenance through the appeal to negative emotions. Initially, the farmer Samuel does not believe in the fox myth, but as soon as it is suggested by the foxfinder William that the sly animal might be responsible for the death of Samuel’s son, his approach to the narrative abruptly shifts. The fact that Samuel and Judith may lose their farm because of suspicion of infestation only makes the farmer more susceptible to hatred towards the fox. It becomes clear that Samuel subscribes to the myth not because he is incapable of distinguishing between fact and fiction, truth and lie, but because he has finally found an outlet for his emotional need for revenge. Unlike William, who was taught and conditioned to believe in the fox from childhood, Samuel chooses to embrace the myth at a specific moment, not out of newly found patriotism but driven by personal interest, which makes his ‘faith’ all the more intense. Objective truth does not matter as long as the narrative promises ontological security and provides meaning in a situation where loss and suffering have rendered life unbearable.

⁷⁵⁰ Elin Diamond, ‘On Churchill and Terror’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, ed. Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 126.

SAMUEL For tonight. I'm going to find them, and I'm going to kill them. The ones who killed our son.
 JUDITH It was an accident!
 SAMUEL I'd like to use dogs. More painful. But a bullet will do it. I'll bring back the heads, so you can spit on them.
 JUDITH Don't go back out there.
 SAMUEL It's you I'm doing this for.
 JUDITH No it's not!
Furious, JUDITH slams her hands down on the table.
 I want you to forget about foxes and stay with me tonight! Please, Sam. I need you to be strong now.
 SAMUEL When the foxes are gone, things'll get better. Us. The farm. The future. Like you said. Wish me good hunting.⁷⁵¹

Through the character Samuel, *Foxfinder* suggests an important point in understanding post-truth politics and its implications, which is 'not simply to realize that emotions matter, but rather to examine precisely how emotions matter in constructing certain truths that reproduce social and political evils such as racism, sexism and xenophobia'.⁷⁵² By revealing the process a post-truth narrative comes to be embraced by a normal citizen who cares little about politics or ideology, the play gives us insight into both the individual character's situation and the hegemonic power relations of the post-truth regime that produces that situation.

It is impossible to persuade Samuel to give up his obsession because the thought of revenge is the only means to sustain hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. His is not only a hope for survival but also for a happy future—in short, the prerequisite condition to realise Samuel's personal utopia. This explains why his perception of reality is altered to accommodate the narrative and why he is determined to eliminate any possibility of disagreement with his worldview.

SAMUEL Tha's sheep's wool. Caught on the wire.
 WILLIAM There aren't any sheep on your farm.
 SAMUEL Abraham Box used this field to graze his flock a few months back, when his was too wet. Look. There's a pattern.
 WILLIAM Is there?
 SAMUEL Dot, dot, dot. Dash, dash, dash. Dot, dot, dot. Tha's Morse code. S—O—S. It's a sign. A warning.
 WILLIAM *peers at the fence.*
 WILLIAM No, Samuel. That's just... wool.
 SAMUEL That rabbit skull you found. That looked just like a skull. But it wasn't. It was a sign. That's what you said.
 WILLIAM Uh. Yes.
 SAMUEL I'm telling you. That right there, that's a sign.
Confused, WILLIAM looks again.

⁷⁵¹ King, *Foxfinder*, 68.

⁷⁵² Michalinos Zembylas, 'The Affective Grounding of Post-Truth: Pedagogical Risks and Transformative Possibilities in Countering Post-Truth Claims', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (2020): 81.

WILLIAM Ah, yes. I think I see the pattern now. You're right.⁷⁵³

Here, we can observe a defining feature of the post-truth mentality. It is not enough for Samuel to have his point of view acknowledged and validated, but it is essential that others must see things the same way he does. Any conflicting opinion is perceived as an existential threat and must be either eliminated or assimilated. This antagonism characterises Samuel's interaction with William. In the beginning, it is William who claims that the rabbit skull they come across is a sign warning about the presence of foxes on the farm. When Samuel makes a similar statement about the pattern of the wool stuck in a fence, William eventually concurs because it is still possible for him to strain his imagination. However, later, as the foxfinder confesses that he could not see the fox despite Samuel's insistence that it is right in front of their eyes, he marks himself as a target for elimination. It does not matter if the fox were present or visible. What matters in Samuel's mind is the fact that William's account contradicts his perception of reality.

Samuel's attitude to 'truth' resembles that of Harper in Act Three of *Far Away*, as she interrogates Todd about the deer.

HARPER So you'd say the deer are vicious?
TODD We've been over that.
HARPER If a hungry deer came into the yard you wouldn't feed it?
TODD Of course not.
HARPER I don't understand that because the deer are with us. They have been for three weeks.
TODD I didn't know. You said yourself.
HARPER Their natural goodness has come through. You can see it in their soft brown eyes.
TODD That's good news.
HARPER You hate the deer. You admire the crocodiles.
TODD I've lost touch because I'm tired.⁷⁵⁴

Harper misleads Todd into proclaiming his hostility towards the deer only to reveal in the end that the deer has been on their side for three weeks. Todd's confession, 'I've lost touch because I'm tired', reveals not only his weariness of having to keep up with the constant shifts in political affiliation but also of continuing a conversation manipulated for the purpose of denouncing and incriminating. Harper, being the ideal subject of totalitarian rule, is 'not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist' but someone 'for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and

⁷⁵³ King, *Foxfinder*, 65.

⁷⁵⁴ Churchill, *Far Away*, 41-42.

false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exists.’⁷⁵⁵ Not only so, in her interaction with other people, Harper overwhelms them with lies and misinformation, converting them into this mindless subject who gives up on the idea of facts and truth altogether because such an idea poses a threat to their sense of security.

The mindless subject who is incapable of thinking for themselves is perhaps the product of the post-truth rhetoric, but they are far from being the only actor participating in the sustenance of post-truth narratives. Paradoxically, those who are most determined to unveil the deception and distortion of post-truth discourse, in their act of denouncing, contribute to the consolidation of belief in those who subscribe to these narratives. In Stef Smith’s *Human Animals*, the audience encounters both groups and the manner in which their engagement with the post-truth phenomenon further widens the rift between them. Smith’s play is strangely topical when read in the context of the global pandemic of the past two years. However, apart from the sudden risk of infection that leads to a quarantine being imposed, the situation in *Human Animals* differs significantly from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unsure whether there is any real infection from nonhuman animals, to begin with—there seems to be no scientific basis for the authority’s claim, nor do they care to make up a detailed explanation. Facing this monopoly of truth, people generally react in two ways. On the one hand, we have characters like Si—a businessman in chemical distribution, Lisa—Si’s employee, and Nancy—a middle-aged woman who has just lost her husband and is struggling with depression. These are people who ventriloquise everything they read or hear without reflection. On the other hand, there are Alex—Nancy’s daughter and Jamie—Lisa’s partner, who are highly critical of the official narrative events. Si recalls Aunt Harper in Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away*, in the sense that he is not interested in the distinction between fact and fiction—all he cares about is how the current situation would advance his interest.

SI [...] I work in chemical distribution.

We’ve done three hundred and twenty-four per cent more business than usual.

JOHN That’s alarmingly precise.

So that’s why you’ve got smug written across your face. Is it actually killing whatever this thing is?

SI All I know is that it makes people feel safe.⁷⁵⁶

⁷⁵⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 474.

⁷⁵⁶ Smith, *Human Animals*, 46.

At the same time, like Harper, Si demands people to accept his words unquestionably, the same way he does not question the narrative provided by the government and, as such, forecloses any possibility of meaningful exchange.

SI Could you cover your mouth please. They said it's airborne now.

LISA Did they? How do you know that?

SI Can you stop it. Lisa. Stop it with the questions. I'm in charge here. Not every statement I make needs to be followed up with a series of questions. I'm tired of being questioned. Could it be that I'm simply doing the right thing, that I simply know what I'm doing.

Just take my fucking statement as fact.⁷⁵⁷

Compared to Si, Alex and Jamie appear to have a completely opposite attitude to truth. They suspect that the whole story about infection from animals is just the government's attempt to spread fear and create a state of exception that would allow them to commit acts of violence not tolerated in normal circumstances. When the parks are burnt to destroy animal habitat, Alex argues that protecting children who play in the park is just an excuse to conceal the real economic interest: 'The newspapers are fear-mongering. You know they've wanted that park gone for years. It's valuable land. Land where they can build shopping malls and flats. It's just an excuse. They're spreading fear to get what they want. It's what they always do.'⁷⁵⁸ Similarly, Jamie believes that the escalating measures enforced by the government—from exterminating wild animals and pets to burning down parks and persecuting dissidents—are parts of an experiment to see 'what they can get away with'.

JAMIE If you ask me I think they're seeing what they can get away with. Testing our limits. First they kill the birds, then the foxes and next it will be us. They'll kill the poor first when we run out of food. They'll kill the poor for the rest of us to eat. After all people just love to eat meat... And no one will notice or care, just like no one cared about the birds.⁷⁵⁹

While it is true that Alex and Jamie may be right in their assessment of the situation, they are not much different from Si in their monologic approach and their inability to attend to the emotional needs of those around them. In the case of Jamie, he quits his job at a call centre to become an environment warrior, rescuing and sheltering wild animals in the backyard. When Lisa insists on baking for Sweet-Tooth Friday at her work, Jamie criticises her without making any attempt to understand why his partner would do such a trivial thing in the midst of a sanitary crisis.

JAMIE It won't go back to normal.

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

LISA How the hell do you know?
 Try as you might you can't predict the future. And I just got this promotion, Jamie. I've been waiting to be made manager for six years. Six years I worked my way up. I'm the first person in my family to have a full-time job since my granddad and he was essentially a professional drunk. So this stuff—this stuff—you are so quick to dismiss—is important to me.

JAMIE I know it is.

LISA Plus the only reason you can continue on your little crusade is because I'm paying the rent. I go to the shop. I change the sheets. So I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I am not as radical as you are—but I need to keep my shit together.⁷⁶⁰

Not only that Lisa's work and her recent promotion have special meanings to her but they are also the reason Jamie can pursue his ethical quest. Lisa is perhaps not as mindless as she appears to be but, with Jamie out of work, she becomes the only source of income and is forced to put aside her opinion and keep working. Jamie, while fulfilling his responsibility to the environment, neglects his personal responsibility to his loved one. The same thing happens to Alex: she is more eager to protest in a park than staying with her mother who is struggling with depression and who would later attempt suicide. This is not to say that Jamie and Alex should abandon their radical position but simply to show how the prioritisation of rationality over emotions and mutual understanding in their approach to truth further damages their relationships and antagonises those who embrace post-truth narratives as a way to assuage their anxiety. Alex's and Jamie's attitude is problematic not because it values objective, provable truths but because it fails to attend to people's emotional needs in a time of crisis, which leaves open a dangerous void for post-truth rhetoric to thrive on, especially because such rhetoric promises emotional support to those vulnerable.

Radiant Vermin presents yet another strategy with which post-truth narratives are disseminated: the perversion of the Christian obligation to tell the truth about oneself. The whole play is set up as a confession performed by a young couple, Jill and Ollie, who commit serial murders to acquire their dream home. The couple speaks with unfiltered honesty as they take turns to recount and re-enact their journey. Towards the end of the play, they themselves acknowledge the confessional nature of their performance and appeal for the audience's understanding.

OLLIE But all came down to one thing.
 JILL Confession.
 OLLIE You see, most people's idea of confession—
 JILL The box. The priest.
 OLLIE That's not how it started. It *used* to be standing in front of your community and *explaining* what you'd done.
 JILL It wasn't about *forgiveness* as such.

⁷⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

OLLIE It's was about making everyone *understand*—
 JILL And if everyone—the community—could *understand*—
 OLLIE Then... that was okay.⁷⁶¹

The kind of confession Jill and Ollie refer to here is most likely the penitential rite (also known as *exomologesis*) which, together with the organised confession in monastic communities (*exagoreusis*), constitutes two forms of confession in the first centuries of Christianity before confession as we know it today became a common practice. While it is true that *exomologesis* is performed by a person who has committed one or several serious sins, in front of their community, to obtain their reintegration, Jill's and Ollie's claim of their role as penitents turns out to be misleading.

First, despite its theatricality, penance is not a one-time act but a status, a way of life. As such, it is a long-term affair characterised by a commitment to the punishment of oneself.

This status affects most aspects of [the penitent's] life—fasting obligations, rules about clothing, interdictions on sexual relations—and the individual is marked to such an extent by this status that even after his reconciliation, after his reintegration in the community, he will still suffer from a certain number of prohibitions (for instance, he will not be able to become a priest). So penance is not an act corresponding to a sin; it is a status, a general status in the existence.⁷⁶²

As Michel Foucault points out, the voluntary expression of a penitent is necessarily bound to various prohibitions that last for years even after their reintegration into the community. Such is definitely not the case for Jill and Ollie. What they seek through their confession is not forgiveness or redemption but validation for the idea that it is acceptable to kill the homeless in exchange for a dream house—a validation that would allow them to go on killing without guilt.

JILL We're not going to take a vote.
 OLLIE We'll know what you're thinking—
 JILL By the looks on your faces
 OLLIE Go on.
 JILL Ponder...
Pause.
 They agree!
 OLLIE Oh, thank you, everyone.
 JILL Thank you.
 OLLIE I feel so relieved.
 JILL Me too.
 OLLIE We can carry on as normal.

⁷⁶¹ Ridley, *Radiant Vermin*, 107-08.

⁷⁶² Michel Foucault, 'About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth', *Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (1993): 212-13.

JILL No guilt.⁷⁶³

Jill and Ollie take on the first part of the penitential rite or the act of ‘publishing oneself’, which is the voluntary exposition of their sin, while conveniently omitting the second and most important part, the punishment they have to go through in exchange for their reintegration to society. They give the impression that the audience is to be the judge, but in fact, it does not matter what kind of response the couple would receive since they already convinced themselves in advance that their actions were permissible. Their confession is just a parody of a confession, which is free from any moral or legal consequences. In a sense, this parody can be seen as a commentary on the vacuity of content in contemporary political discourses and the danger of the proliferating truth games that extend biopower into psychopower. Instead of a regime of truth, what we have here is a regime of post-truth that captures attention to mobilise political subjects ‘to create a *managed spectacle* of claiming, sharing, liking, debunking, and refuting “issues” that are ultimately designed to block the emergence of more inclusive social justice agendas or even the reorganization of the plane of political agency itself.’⁷⁶⁴

Second, *exomologesis*, being ‘a dramatic expression by the penitent of his status of sinner’, ‘a kind of public manifestation’,⁷⁶⁵ does not necessarily require verbalising the penitent’s sin. Explaining themselves the way Jill and Ollie do is more closely associated with another type known as confession in monastic institutions (*exagoreusis*), in which verbalisation ‘constitutes a way of sorting out thoughts which present themselves’, of testing the value of these thoughts ‘according to whether they resist verbalization or not’.⁷⁶⁶ In other words, if these thoughts are met with embarrassment, hesitation or a desire to be concealed the moment they are about to be verbalised, it is the proof that ‘those thoughts are not good as they may appear’ and that ‘evil inhabits them’.⁷⁶⁷ To illustrate the monastic confession, Michel Foucault gives an example of a young monk who, after listening to a sermon on the necessity of being truthful, confesses that he has been stealing bread, being incapable of enduring the obligatory fast. The decisive element of this anecdote, according to Foucault, is not that the master knows the truth, not even that the young monk reveals his act and restores the object of his theft, but the verbal act of confession, which is the proof and the

⁷⁶³ Ridley, *Radiant Vermin*, 109-10.

⁷⁶⁴ Jayson Harsin, ‘Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies’, *Communication, Culture & Critique* 8, no. 2 (June 2015): 332, emphasis mine.

⁷⁶⁵ Foucault, ‘About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self’, 221.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁷⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

manifestation of truth.⁷⁶⁸ To return to Jill and Ollie, it seems that in confessing their crime in front of an audience, the couple performs the same act of telling the truth about themselves. However, once again, it is a superficial resemblance since verbalisation in monastic confession is not a retrospection about past acts but a permanent activity.

What emerges from these two observations is the fact that Jill and Ollie are subjects of a highly developed post-truth mentality who do not necessarily produce lies but selecting certain aspects of truth that support their belief. They have done enough research to be aware of the difference between early Christian and modern confession. However, they not only merge two different forms of ancient confession but also obfuscate the crucial condition of self-sacrifice that is closely connected with telling the truth about oneself. As Foucault reminds us, *exomologesis* is supposed to be ‘a way for the sinner to express his will to get free from this world, to get rid of his own body, to destroy his own flesh, and get access to a new spiritual life’.⁷⁶⁹ In the case of Jill and Ollie, the will that manifests itself most clearly through their ‘confession’ is the will to be free from all moral constraints in their pursuit of material wealth. Their partial and misleading knowledge of the early forms of Christian confession, as such, should not be interpreted as proof of their limited intellectual capability but a manifestation of the attitude characteristic of a post-truth mode of communication: the omission of facts to advance one’s ideology and better appeal to people’s sympathy.

By staging the way post-truth narratives rely on a monologic approach and oppressive power relations between the locutor and the interlocutor, speculative theatre shifts the focus from the content of truth to the manner in which certain truths are communicated and, as such, places emphasis on the necessity to link the quest for truth with the quest for an ethical form of relating to each other. Plays such as *Radiant Vermin* engage the audience in a specific mode of truth-telling—a parrhesiastic game that requires active participation and a high degree of openness from both parties. Together with prophecy, wisdom and teaching, *parrhesia* (which means ‘to say everything’) constitutes Foucault’s four modalities of truth-telling or veridiction. Corresponding to these four modes are four figures or personages who practice truth-telling: the prophet, the sage, the technician and the *parrhesiastes*. Foucault is particularly interested in the *parrhesiastes*, taking time to elucidate the particularities of this figure in comparison to the other three. The prophet does not speak for himself but serves as a mouthpiece of a voice speaking from elsewhere and, being situated between the present and

⁷⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

the future, he reveals what time conceals from humans through obscure statements: ‘Even when the prophet says what is to be done, one still has to ask oneself whether one has really understood, whether one may not still be blind; one still has to question, hesitate, and interpret.’⁷⁷⁰ The *parrhesiastes*, in contrast, speaks for himself and leaves nothing to interpretation. Rather, ‘he leaves the person he addresses with the tough task of having the courage to accept this truth, to recognize it, and to make it a principle of conduct.’⁷⁷¹ If the sage is someone ‘who basically remains silent, only speaks when he really wants to, and [only] in riddles’ about *what is*,⁷⁷² the *parrhesiastes*’s truth-telling ‘is always applied, questions, and is directed to individuals and situations’, not to reveal what is to his interlocutor but to help them recognise *what they are*, ‘to tell individuals the truth of themselves hidden from their own eyes, to reveal to them their present situation, their character, failings, the value of their conduct, and the possible consequences of their decisions’.⁷⁷³ Lastly, while the technician does not have to face any risk in passing on knowledge (*tekhnē*), the *parrhesiastes* risks provoking anger, vengeance and punishment in his truth-telling.

Even though in his lectures at the Collège de France and those at the University of California at Berkeley, Foucault uses the four corresponding personages to compare and contrast the four modalities, it does not mean that truth-telling can only be thought of in relation to individual humans. In fact, it can be associated with a wide range of practices and institutions,⁷⁷⁴ which makes it possible to consider speculative theatre—understood as a medium, a mode of thinking, an artistic practice—parrhesiastic or ethical. Nevertheless, since Foucault’s discussions have always focused on the figure *parrhesiastes*, to discuss speculative theatre in the light of Foucault’s characterisation of truth-telling without appropriating his words for the convenience of the argument, I will limit my analysis to ‘parrhesiastic practice’ and ‘parrhesiastic game’—two notions that invoke the questions of form and relationality rather than of any particular individual.⁷⁷⁵

⁷⁷⁰ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 15.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁷² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁷⁵ Theatre is a collective practice and, in a sense, each individual who participates in the realisation of a performance, as playwright, director, stage/light/sound designer, actor, ect... can be considered as indirectly performing the role of a *parrhesiastes*. This indirect and shared aspect of theatre’s parrhesiastic practice does not imply that the responsibility associated with the act of truth-telling is diminished.

Radiant Vermin turns the theatre experience into a Cynic parrhesiastic game that is played at the very limits of the contract between theatre and the audience. The Cynic parrhesiastic practice consists of three main types: critical preaching, scandalous behaviour, and ‘provocative dialogue’. Unlike the preaching we encounter today, Cynic preaching does not contain positive doctrines, and there is no direct affirmation of the good or bad.⁷⁷⁶ The scandalous behaviour is referred to in Bakhtin’s theorisation of the ‘carnavalesque sense of the world’, which includes inversion of roles, disposing or transposing rules, and bringing together two contradicting or remote rules of behaviour. The last aspect, ‘provocative dialogue’, derives from the Socratic tradition, but if the Socratic dialogue plays with the interlocutor’s ignorance, the Cynic parrhesiastic game attacks the interlocutor’s pride. In the last scene of *Radiant Vermin*, Miss Dee turns to the audience to tell them that they are in the theatre not by their own free will or mere chance—seeing a flyer for a play or following a friend’s invitation—but ‘You’re here because I summoned you. Why? Because I have a bagful of new contracts....’⁷⁷⁷ The manner in which the play explicitly places the audience in the same position as Jill and Ollie, probably counting on their shared struggle in the housing crisis, underlines the question of their readiness to commit murders. As such, the direct address from the actors on stage situates the audience in an uncomfortable situation in which they are forced to reflect on their implication in a consumerist culture, existing injustice and violence. Established between the performance and the audience is a parrhesiastic struggle of affect, whose main goal ‘is not to bring the interlocutor to a new truth, or to a new level of self-awareness’ but ‘to lead the interlocutor to internalize this parrhesiastic struggle—to fight within himself against his own faults’.⁷⁷⁸ In other words, the Cynic parrhesiastic game we see between *Radiant Vermin* and the audience does not strive to persuade the latter to sympathise with the young couple or to understand their motives but to convince them that they must take care of themselves and others through concrete changes.⁷⁷⁹ The first step would be to develop an understanding of truth as aporetic, in the sense that it negotiates the two seemingly incompatible definitions of truth—one that perceives truth as single, objective, unchangeable and the other multiple, more subjective and dependant on the specific context. Such a perception of truth, grounded in a kind of rationality already attuned to affects, would enable a mode of communication that focuses on fostering a relationship of care rather than a hierarchical power relation.

⁷⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Zone Books, 2001), 120.

⁷⁷⁷ Ridley, *Radiant Vermin*, 115.

⁷⁷⁸ Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 133.

⁷⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

While my analysis on the parrhesiastic game focuses on the specific case of *Radiant Vermin*, this particular mode of truth-telling can also be said to characterise speculative theatre on the whole. At the heart of a parrhesiastic game is a pact between the person who takes the risk of telling the truth and the person who agrees to listen to it, who demonstrates their greatness of soul by accepting being told the truth.⁷⁸⁰ The truth that speculative theatre takes the risk to communicate urges us to reflect upon our inevitable implication in current crises, something many are probably already aware of but, instead of acting upon this knowledge, we may have chosen the more convenient option of willful ignorance. Commenting on political theatre of the twenty-first century, Vicky Angelaki argues that audience participation is possible even though a play does not include any activity instantly recognised as participatory.

Plot and events might be written and therefore predetermined but the form of these texts makes it clear that we are in a space of exchange where we are called to think, question, judge and be moved rather than consume a politically gratifying message that may reaffirm any given spectator's ideological or intellectual superiority in a way that might, in turn, generate complacency. These are plays that confuse, distract, disturb and imagine so that they might disrupt: first our expectations, then the dominant social and political narratives of neoliberalism and governmentality.⁷⁸¹

In the like manner, contemporary speculative theatre fulfils its political function through a parrhesiastic practice that disrupts the uncritical, singular perspective to which we may commit in the hope of preserving our current way of life. This emphasis on the audience's ethos and the aspect of care is what distinguishes speculative theatre from post-truth narratives, despite the superficial resemblance in the way both make extensive use of dramaturgies of affect. The primary goals of post-truth narratives are deadening the ability to think critically, encouraging passive acceptance of the status quo and erecting new boundaries. These cannot be further away from what speculative theatre aims for when it employs various dramaturgical strategies to invoke anxiety and uncertainty as well as to maintain the openness of discourse.

It is essential at this point to have a few words about the charges brought against postmodernist and, more particularly, deconstructionist theories as paving the way for the emergence of post-truth politics by encouraging relativism. In his book entitled *Post-truth*, Lee McIntyre contends that the first thesis of postmodernism is 'there is no such thing as

⁷⁸⁰ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 12-13.

⁷⁸¹ Vicky Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (London & New York: Methuen Drama, 2017), 3.

objective truth'⁷⁸² and holds postmodernism partially responsible for giving right-wingers the theoretical framework necessary to advance their divisive politics: 'This is not to say that postmodernists are completely at fault for how their ideas have been misused, even while they must accept some responsibility for undermining the idea that facts matter in the assessment of reality, and not foreseeing the damage this could cause.'⁷⁸³ McIntyre includes Derrida's theory of 'deconstructing' literature among the postmodernist theories that are misused to justify post-truth narratives.

Ironically, these accusations are formulated along the same reductive, simplified lines of many post-truth discourses. First, it is impossible for any theorist or thinker to foresee all possible ways their ideas are going to be used, misused, reinterpreted, or appropriated, let alone the ramifications of these usages. Second, post-truth narratives give the impression of blurring all boundaries while, in fact, what they strive to achieve is either reinstating old or erecting new boundaries and perpetuating the injustice these boundaries generate. Deconstruction, on the other hand, 'does not entail a homogenizing reprocessing of all texts and phenomena or the blurring of all distinctions' but 'the recognition that the problem of distinctions becomes more—not less—pressing in light of the unavailability or dubiousness of binary oppositions'.⁷⁸⁴ More importantly, deconstructionist 'theories', to my knowledge, *never* claim that there is no such thing as objective truth, nor do they undermine the idea that facts matter in the assessment of reality. If by 'objective' we are referring to 'something beyond any and all doubt' or absolute truth, then deconstruction indeed resists this kind of objective truth. However, another way of characterising 'objective' is to consider it as emerging from an attempt 'to maintain an unbiased stance in making judgment'.⁷⁸⁵ That is to say, the version of 'objective' that deconstruction upholds requires facts and information to reach a decision as unbiased as possible. Preceding these decisions, as such, is a moment of undecidability. Derrida's notion of the 'undecidable', particularly in relation to the concept of decision itself, troubles and challenges the conventional dualistic way of thinking.

However careful one is in the theoretical preparation of a decision, the instant of the decision, if there is to be a decision, must be heterogeneous to the accumulation of knowledge. Otherwise, there is no responsibility. In this sense not only must the person taking the

⁷⁸² Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 2018), 126.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷⁸⁴ LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', 715.

⁷⁸⁵ Wight, 'Post-Truth, Postmodernism and Alternative Facts', 20.

decision not know everything... the decision, if there is to be one, must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated⁷⁸⁶.

It must be noted that Derrida's 'undecidable' does not encourage inactivity, as sometimes inaccurately interpreted. If anything, the madness inherent in taking a decision not knowing everything conveys a sense of urgency and an imperative to act.

Rather than blaming deconstruction for enabling post-truth politics, I would argue that it can serve as a mode of thinking-feeling to counter the consolidation of the affective structure of post-truth into a hegemonic ideology. Such is also the effect of the deconstructionist and aporetic aspects of contemporary speculative theatre that I have endeavoured to demonstrate. The new sensibilities to truth and responsibility that emerge from contemporary speculative theatre's exploration of implication can be said to open up other dimensions for thought and subjectivity in the one-dimensional society of advanced capitalism and consumerism about which Herbert Marcuse discusses in 1964 book *One Dimensional Man* and which is still very much alive, albeit more mature, in the twenty-first century.

⁷⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, quoted in Richard Beardsworth, 'Nietzsche and the Machine: Interview with Jacques Derrida', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 7 (1994): 37.

CONCLUSION

[Hope] is the opposite of security. It is the opposite of naïve optimism. The category of danger is always within it. This hope is not confidence...

(Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*)

This thesis examines various aporetic expressions in contemporary British speculative theatre, divided mainly into two categories: negotiation of binary oppositions and engagement with the Derridean impossible. Together, they represent a structure of feeling—a mode of utopian thinking characterised by uncertainty and undecidability. This ‘aporia turn’ in utopianism signalled by speculative theatre engenders an indirect form of political commitment grounded in the cultivation of a utopian subjectivity that takes responsibility for its implication in past, present and future injustice.

In the preliminary chapter for theories and background information, I trace the evolution of the concept of ‘speculative fiction’ from being a subgenre, a genre, to the most recent characterisation of an encompassing category in which speculative theatre is to be situated. The fact that ‘speculative fiction’ and ‘speculative theatre’ are resistant to being moulded into a fixed definition attests to their determination to remain a structure of feeling whose becoming, emergent and subversive nature makes it possible to accommodate diverse genres, subgenres and cultural approaches. Despite their differences, these genres, subgenres and approaches share the same non-mimetic impulse—that is, ‘the broadly conceived *departure from verisimilitude to consensus reality*’.⁷⁸⁷ This emphasis on opposition against hegemonic ideologies explains why, even though speculative elements (myth, utopia, dystopia, fantasy, science-fiction, to name but a few) are already present in the works of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Shadwell, it is only from the early twentieth century with George Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* (1921) that the notion of speculation as expounded in this thesis started to gain currency in British theatre. Specifically, it is the kind of speculation that closely resembles the sophistic practice, understood as an anti-dogmatic, self-undermining operation that ‘promotes antithetical reasoning’, ‘denies the possibility of absolute judgments’ and attacks the ‘arrogance of single-minded interpretations

⁷⁸⁷ Oziewicz, ‘Speculative Fiction’.

of the world'.⁷⁸⁸ In other words, the speculating act performed in contemporary theatre, by generating an experience of hermeneutic indeterminacy, leaves open a space for the interrogation of the binary logic that justifies injustice and enables violence. This openness, however, should not be equated to unlimited textual play, language games or rejection of objective truth altogether. The utopian quality invested in speculative theatre in the twenty-first century is similar to the utopian drive that underlines the Derridean aporia—the impossible—in the sense that it is infused with urgency and accompanied by an imperative to act. The impossible, according to Derrida, is not simply the negative aspect of the possible but the very condition for possibility.⁷⁸⁹ Contemporary theatre's speculation, through its engagement with various examples of the impossible such as gift-giving, hospitality and mourning, to borrow from Ernst Bloch, 'operates in the field of hope' that is by no means abstract or unworldly but 'much more centrally turned towards the world' in the way it overtakes the natural course of events.

The anticipatory thus operates in the field of hope; so this hope is not taken *only as emotion*, as the opposite of fear (because fear too can of course anticipate), but *more essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind* (and here the opposite is then not fear, but memory). The imagination and the thoughts of future intention described in this way are utopian, this again not in a narrow sense of the word which only defines what is bad (emotively reckless picturing, playful form of an abstract kind), but rather in fact in the newly tenable sense of the forward dream, of anticipation in general. And so the category of the Utopian, beside the usual, justifiably pejorative sense, possesses the other, in no way necessarily abstract or unworldly sense, much more centrally turned towards the world: of overtaking the natural course of events.⁷⁹⁰

It is perhaps in contemporary speculative theatre's mythopoeia that we observe most clearly this operation of overtaking the natural course of events if we agree with Roland Barthes that 'myth transforms history into nature'.⁷⁹¹ In an era instilled with a sense of perpetual crisis, the proliferation of myth, both specific narratives and the general form of mythical speech, occurs as a natural reaction that reflects the desire to make sense of an increasingly incomprehensible world and find one's place in it. Being fully aware of this very human need, contemporary speculative theatre does not only play the role of the mythologist who undoes and unmask the signification of myth but ventures further by creating a third-order semiological system that undermines the binary logic of myth. Whether toward the myth of the apocalypse (Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur*,

⁷⁸⁸ Pullman, 'Reconsidering Sophistic Rhetoric in Light of Skeptical Epistemology', 66.

⁷⁸⁹ Derrida, quoted in Danie Goosen, 'The Tragic, the Impossible and Democracy', 247.

⁷⁹⁰ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, vol. 1 (Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 1995), 12

⁷⁹¹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 128.

Chris Thorpe's *Victory Condition*), the modern political myths of the general strike (Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door*) and absolute equality (Edward Bond's *Have I None and Chair*), the perfect happiness and Social Darwinism myths at the heart of neoliberal capitalism (Thomas Eccleshare's *Instructions for Correct Assembly* and Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*) or mythical speech materialised in the form of objects (Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*) and the hero figure, speculative theatre is committed to the task of denaturalising myth so as to repoliticise it. In their reconfiguration of myth, the plays included in this research liberate meanings from being frozen in mythical speech either by rendering them unstable and indeterminable or by generating a constellation of alternative meanings. Together, these strategies generate a sort of utopian surplus that facilitates nonidentity thinking.

This ability to think and relate in terms of nonidentity is crucial for the formation of a different kind of ethical community. Against the conventional understanding of community as *communitas*, an identity-based and exclusive form of union, the utopian community proposed by speculative theatre is one characterised by free associations of movement, more akin to chorus than harmony. Such a community has been envisioned by different thinkers under different names: 'idiorrhymy' by Roland Barthes, 'community of singularities' by Giorgio Agamben, 'community to come' by Jacques Derrida, 'inoperative community' by Jean-Luc Nancy or 'unavowable community' by Maurice Blanchot. What these notions have in common is the aspiration to preserve the *proximity* accommodating a form of living-together that does not entail assimilation or erasure of differences. It must be stressed that the emphasis on maintaining individual particularities should not be interpreted as an affirmation of autonomous subjectivity or celebration of the condition of the isolated self. The twenty-first century, despite unprecedented advances in transportation and communication technologies, strangely enough, is increasingly threatened by a 'crisis of connection'.⁷⁹² Further aggravating this crisis is far from being the goal of the new conception of community mentioned here; rather, what it promotes is a radically different, non-hierarchical form of relationality. It is in speculative theatre that we get a glimpse of how such relationality would be possible. In denouncing the monologic approach to language, the logic of sacrifice and the economy of exchange, many speculative plays invoke visions of a community in which nonhuman beings (both animals and artificial intelligence) and those humans labelled as the

⁷⁹² David E. Kirkland, *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, and Solutions* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

surplus population (such as the homeless and the elderly) can regain their agency and liberate themselves from deterministic power relations (Stef Smith's *Human Animals*, Tamsin Oglesby's *Really Old, Like Forty Five*).

This utopian community, impossible as it is, is not an abstract idea. After World War Two, Antonin Artaud repeatedly pointed out the impossibility of a community-building theatre that could have a therapeutic and cathartic effect and instead turned to the theatricality of radiophonic work. The fact that his choice makes sense, considering how 'the voices appeal directly to the individual subject's imaginary relationship to the body and thereby displace cruelty with a physical attack that puts to the test the relationship of the individual to language',⁷⁹³ however, does not affirm that it is impossible to have a community-building theatre on the whole, as it depends largely on the question of what kind of community is envisioned. Rather than aiming to provide the audience with a therapeutic and cathartic effect, speculative theatre strives to foster a utopian subjectivity by engaging the audience in an aporetic experience and a parrhesiastic game of truth-telling.

Certain productions of Edward Bond's *The Under Room*, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* and Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral*, through their contemporary gothic aesthetics of the domestic space and pastorality, envelop the audience in an atmosphere of anxiety that is both familiar and alienating. These are attempts of speculative theatre to invite us to contemplate the possibility of absolute hospitality in a world where escalating social and ecological crises have rendered it impossible but simultaneously imperative. Alistair McDowall's *X* and *Pomona*, Nick Payne's *Elegy*, Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, in their exploration of entangled temporalities and realities, create a disorienting theatre experience in which the audience can practise how to approach others and gain a better understanding of their struggle and trauma while still preserving the *proximity* necessary for an ethical encounter. In the like manner, Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* and Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* set up situations where we can rehearse unpacking the affective force of the post-truth rhetoric. In general, contemporary speculative theatre engages the audience in a parrhesiastic game of truth-telling that encourages them to acknowledge their status as an implicated subject and extend their reflection beyond the theatre encounter.

To sum up, this thesis argues that the utopian impulse of speculative theatre resides in its commitment to and its demand for a way of thinking and relating derived from constant

⁷⁹³ Finter and Griffin, 'Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre', 17.

engagement with aporia, either in the form of interrogating binary oppositions or contemplating the impossible. This thinking of utopia as processual has been gaining much support in recent years, both within and without the field of utopian studies. Feminist theorist Angelika Bammer, for instance, aims to ‘replace the idea of “a utopia” as something fixed, a form to be fleshed out, with the idea of “the utopian” as an *approach toward*, a movement beyond set limits into the realm of the not-yet-set’, to ‘counter the notion of the utopian as unreal with the proposition that the utopian is powerfully real in the sense that hope and desire (and even fantasies) are real, never “merely” fantasy’.⁷⁹⁴ Ruth Levitas, a prominent scholar in utopian studies, also writes: ‘A definition of utopia in terms of desire is analytic rather than descriptive. It generates a method which is primarily hermeneutic but which repeatedly returns us from existential and aesthetic concerns to the social and structural domain.’⁷⁹⁵ Likewise, the idea of becoming utopian has been formulated recently by another preeminent utopian studies scholar, Tom Moylan.

Simply put, the growth of a collective utopian movement is located in each person who comprises it; but for that person effectively to contribute to the movement, she or he must *become* utopia, and indeed *continue* to become utopian. This becoming requires the individual to break from the ideological formation (or *habitus* as Pierre Bourdieu puts it) within which she or he has been constructed and to tear through its sutured confines so as to be able to acknowledge that the existing world order is no longer sufficient, to see that something is missing and that something better can be achieved for all.⁷⁹⁶

While the conception of utopia expounded in this thesis falls in line with this ‘processual turn’, I would argue that what makes the utopian aspiration of contemporary British speculative theatre particularly political is the way it is thoroughly informed by aporia. Writing on utopia in performance, Jill Dolan comes up with the notion of ‘utopian performatives’ to describe ‘small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense’.⁷⁹⁷ Such an experience is distinct from the aporetic experience of speculative theatre, which can be said to be thought-provoking or disconcerting but can hardly be characterised as purely uplifting or optimistic. The kind of hope that emerges from contemporary British speculative theatre is

⁷⁹⁴ Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 7.

⁷⁹⁵ Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xiii.

⁷⁹⁶ Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 5.

⁷⁹⁷ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

itself aporetic—a hope that is sceptical, ‘not confidence’,⁷⁹⁸ yet demands to be sustained nonetheless. It is perhaps with this very same hope that I would associate the future of research on speculative theatre.

⁷⁹⁸ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 1988), 16.

Résumé en Français

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, on constate un intérêt croissant pour le spéculatif dans le théâtre britannique, comme le montrent le grand nombre de productions originales et d'articles académiques traitant de divers éléments spéculatifs tels que le mythe, la dystopie, la science-fiction, l'horreur, le gothique, l'apocalypse, ou encore l'histoire alternative. Cependant, à ma connaissance, il n'y a pas encore eu d'étude qui tente d'unifier ces aspects sous la catégorie inclusive de « théâtre spéculatif ». Par conséquent, cette thèse est rédigée dans l'espoir d'enrichir et de corroborer les travaux critiques existants tout en suggérant des directions futures pour les études du « théâtre spéculatif ». Le corpus contient dix-neuf pièces présentées en Grande-Bretagne depuis 2000 et écrites par des dramaturges occupant des statuts très différents dans le théâtre britannique. Par conséquent, bien qu'il n'y ait pas de tentative collective consciente de créer un mouvement connu sous le nom de « théâtre spéculatif », les pièces sélectionnées convergent toutes vers certains points majeurs permettant ainsi de les considérer comme une catégorie évolutive dont les caractéristiques de « devenir », d'émergence et de subversion correspondent à la notion de « structure of feeling » de Raymond Williams.⁷⁹⁹ En reliant les trois concepts d'aporie, de spéculation et d'utopie, cette thèse examine comment le théâtre spéculatif britannique du XXI^e siècle reconfigure l'utopisme en se tournant vers l'aporie ; simultanément, elle s'efforce d'élucider les implications de ce changement de paradigme dans la théorie et la pratique utopiques sur la question de l'engagement social et politique du théâtre.

Le corps de cette thèse est organisé en quatre chapitres. Le chapitre 1 sert d'introduction longue qui contient des informations contextuelles et théoriques plus détaillées sur les trois concepts principaux. Le chapitre 2 explore la manière dont la mythopoeïa du théâtre spéculatif contemporain conteste la logique binaire des mythes et du langage mythique. Le chapitre 3, quant à lui, se concentre sur la représentation de l'aporie du vivre ensemble et de l'(im)possibilité d'une quasi-communauté utopique de singularités. Enfin, le chapitre 4 examine les stratégies dramaturgiques employées par le théâtre spéculatif pour générer « l'expérience de l'impossible » ou « l'épreuve de l'indécidable »,⁸⁰⁰ à travers lesquelles se formerait une subjectivité utopique.

⁷⁹⁹ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.

⁸⁰⁰ Derrida, 'Force of Law', 15.

CHAPITRE 1. CONTEXTE ET THÉORIES

I. Contextualiser le théâtre spéculatif

Pour commencer, je retrace l'évolution du terme « fiction spéculative », du sous-genre au genre, puis à la manifestation d'une « structure of feeling ». Je suis convaincue que le théâtre spéculatif ne peut être situé de manière pertinente à partir du moment où il est évident qu'il reflète la « structure of feeling » utopique qui caractérise la fiction spéculative contemporaine de divers médias. En 1947, Robert Heinlein a popularisé le terme « fiction spéculative » pour établir une frontière entre la science-fiction et le genre fantastique ou d'horreur, mais aussi pour distinguer différents sous-groupes au sein de la science-fiction elle-même. L'accent mis sur les connaissances prouvées ainsi que sur la rationalité dans la définition de Heinlein place la fiction spéculative dans une position à la fois inférieure et dépendante du développement scientifique. De plus, l'insistance de Heinlein sur l'importance du comportement humain et le fait qu'il néglige tous les agents non humains qui participent nécessairement au processus de création et de résolution des problèmes professent une perspective anthropocentrique problématique.

En 1966, Judith Merrill propose une autre définition, qui met beaucoup moins l'accent sur l'élément scientifique et inverse la hiérarchie précédemment établie par Heinlein. En conséquence, le terme passe d'un sous-genre à un genre, un mode d'écriture dans lequel réside l'essence de la science-fiction. La définition de Merrill tente de lever les limites imposées à l'imagination par Heinlein. En parallèle, elle encourage aussi l'hybridation de la « scientification » et des éléments lovecraftiens, ces derniers ayant souvent été exclus des discussions standard sur la science-fiction. Cette caractérisation plus inclusive de la « fiction spéculative » est appuyée par des auteurs associés au mouvement New Wave des années 1960 et 1970, ainsi que par des écrivaines comme Ursula K. Le Guin, Doris Lessing et Margaret Atwood. Cependant, suite au déclin du mouvement New Wave à la fin des années 1970, la « fiction spéculative » n'a pas non plus supplanté la « science-fiction » en tant que genre.

À présent, la fiction spéculative est de plus en plus identifiée comme un cadre conceptuel, une manifestation d'une « structure of feeling » qui ne se limite pas au domaine de la littérature mais s'étend à d'autres médias tels que les romans graphiques, le cinéma, la télévision, les jeux vidéo et même le théâtre. Avec cette définition, la fiction spéculative

désigne un terme générique contenant de nombreux genres et sous-genres qui, malgré leurs différences, sont unis dans leur refus de s'inscrire dans la vraisemblance de la réalité consensuelle. La fiction spéculative et, par extension, le théâtre spéculatif, conçus comme une « structure of feeling », sont politiques dans la mesure où ils présentent une force qui interrompt le consensus et maintient une ouverture essentielle à la réflexion.

II. Un aperçu du théâtre spéculatif britannique

1. *Le théâtre proto-spéculatif*

Si j'examine certaines pièces britanniques écrites aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles, comme celles de William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe et le moins connu Thomas Shadwell, c'est d'abord pour révéler les divers éléments spéculatifs (le mythe, l'utopie, la dystopie, la fantaisie, science-fiction, etc.) déjà présents dans ces œuvres et illustrer une sorte de continuité dans la tradition spéculative du théâtre britannique. En même temps, je tiens à souligner la distinction entre ces pièces proto-spéculatives et les pièces contemporaines, en raison de l'évolution de la conceptualisation de la « spéculation ».

De nombreuses pièces de Shakespeare, en particulier *La Tempête* (1610-1611), intègrent déjà des éléments qui, rétrospectivement, les qualifient de pièces spéculatives. Cependant, la juxtaposition d'éléments fantastiques et de faits scientifiques dans les pièces de Shakespeare n'était pas une opération subversive, car les méthodes de ce que l'on appelle aujourd'hui la « science » étaient encore largement en construction entre le XVI^e et le début du XVII^e siècle et il n'y avait pas encore de démarcation définie entre la connaissance empirique et la connaissance artistique.

Le *Docteur Faustus* de Christopher Marlowe (1588-1593), souvent considéré comme l'archétype de la « pièce scientifique » moderne, se concentre sur la science en tant que sujet et la figure du « scientifique » y occupe une place centrale. La cible de la critique dans la pièce de Marlowe n'est cependant pas l'épistémologie réaliste émergente, mais les faiblesses humaines. Par conséquent, les éléments spéculatifs du *Docteur Faustus* renforcent indirectement les méthodes scientifiques « véritables » dans leur mise en garde contre le danger potentiel de la pseudo-science.

De manière similaire, *The Virtuoso* (1676) de Thomas Shadwell ne doit pas être lue comme une condamnation générale de la Royal Society ou de la philosophie expérimentale. Même s'il est vrai que la matière du discours « scientifique » de la pièce est tirée des travaux des membres de la Société, Shadwell ne ridiculise pas l'institution dans son ensemble, mais se contente de dénoncer certains aspects problématiques de la pratique discursive et expérimentale au sein de cette première communauté scientifique. *The Virtuoso* recommande implicitement la direction souhaitable à suivre pour être pris au sérieux en faisant la satire de la spéculation et de la figure du virtuose, contre lesquelles l'enquête scientifique pratique et le « témoin modeste » doivent se distinguer.

On peut dire que, malgré la présence d'éléments spéculatifs et de discussions sur la spéculation, le théâtre britannique de Marlowe à Shadwell en passant par Shakespeare n'a pas abordé ce concept de manière fructueuse et a eu tendance à négliger ses potentiels politiques et ses implications éthiques.

2. *La résurgence de la spéculation dans le théâtre britannique*

Ce n'est qu'au début du vingtième siècle, avec *Back to Methuselah* (1921) de George Bernard Shaw, que le spéculatif a commencé à être employé comme stratégie subversive dans le théâtre britannique. *Back to Methuselah* marque une page importante dans l'histoire du théâtre spéculatif pour trois raisons. Tout d'abord, les thèmes de l'évolution et de la longévité, ainsi que les automates, continuent d'inspirer les auteurs spéculatifs des générations suivantes. En suite, l'approche controversée mais novatrice de Shaw à l'égard de la biologie, qui mêle le scientifique et le mystique, défie la logique binaire qui caractérisait le discours scientifique au XXe siècle. Enfin, la manière dont Shaw emploie le langage anticipe la tendance future du théâtre spéculatif à mettre l'accent sur l'expression verbale plutôt que sur l'action ou la représentation visuelle. Une autre pièce de Shaw, *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934), démontre une position encore plus radicale dans son engagement avec le néant et l'incertitude. Cette pièce rapproche Shaw de Samuel Beckett, même si leur approche du langage reste distincte.

Beckett, quant à lui, est une figure particulièrement importante pour le théâtre spéculatif du XXIe siècle. Premièrement, sa conception du temps et de l'espace dans certaines de ses œuvres théâtrales les plus célèbres garde une influence sur l'imagination apocalyptique, dystopique et utopique contemporaine. Deuxièmement, la tension perceptible entre le visible

et l'audible dans toutes les pièces de Beckett est également une caractéristique fréquemment observée dans le théâtre spéculatif. Troisièmement, l'approche "déconstructionniste" de Beckett à l'égard du langage et de l'identité, son utilisation de l'absurde pour mettre en évidence la conscience sociale, ainsi que son investissement dans l'incertitude attirent l'attention sur un autre type de théâtre politique, qui ne s'attaque pas directement à divers problèmes existants, mais qui parvient néanmoins à remplir sa fonction politique et éthique par l'expérimentation formelle.

Copenhagen (1998) de Michael Frayn présente un autre moment crucial du théâtre spéculatif. La mise en scène de la visite du collaborateur nazi Heisenberg à son mentor Bohr, parfaitement consciente de son statut de représentation, utilise judicieusement le principe d'incertitude des quanta. Les premières pièces spéculatives telles que *Methuselah* et *The Simpleton* de Shaw, bien que subversives en termes d'idées et d'intrigue, continuent d'adhérer à la structure fixe du sens dans le langage. *Copenhagen* de Frayn s'aventure plus loin dans sa réflexion sur le langage et, ce faisant, démontre une approche plus radicale de la spéculation.

Le théâtre spéculatif du XXI^e siècle, tout en héritant de la tradition spéculative du XX^e siècle, présente à la fois une continuité et une rupture avec son prédécesseur, comme nous allons le voir dans les chapitres suivants.

III. L'aporie comme méthode utopique

Avant de passer à l'analyse principale, j'identifie les deux différentes façons dont le théâtre spéculatif contemporain s'engage avec la notion d'« aporie » et j'expliquerai comment chaque mode d'engagement contribue à la formulation de la vision utopique du théâtre spéculatif.

Le terme « aporie », utilisé pour la première fois de manière cohérente par Zénon d'Élée et apparaissant ensuite à l'écrit dans la *Physique IV* d'Aristote, est la transcription littérale de *aporia*, dont le sens propre est « impasse », « sans issue », « embarras ».⁸⁰¹ La longue histoire de l'« aporie » implique inévitablement que l'utilisation et la signification du mot ont subi de nombreuses modifications. Sans mentionner toutes les figures qui ont

⁸⁰¹ Françoise Armengaud, « Aporie », Encyclopædia Universalis, <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/aporie/>.

contribué à l'évolution conceptuelle de l'aporie, je me concentre sur la première génération des Sophistes et sur Jacques Derrida, puisque leur traitement de l'aporie est le plus pertinent pour mon application à travers cette thèse.

1. Reconsidérer l'aporie sophistique

Le mouvement sophistique est un mouvement intellectuel du cinquième siècle avant JC qui a émergé dans une communauté basée sur la démocratie directe et la procédure orale. Deux raisons rendent les Sophistes et leur pratique de l'indétermination herméneutique particulièrement pertinents pour ma recherche sur le théâtre spéculatif contemporain. D'une part, de la même manière que le théâtre spéculatif représente une « structure of feeling » qui remet en question le consensus de la réalité acceptée, la pensée sophistique est essentiellement antidogmatique et invite le public à interroger la logique binaire qui dissimule l'injustice et permet la violence. D'autre part, tant dans la performance sophistique que dans le théâtre spéculatif contemporain, le but n'est pas de communiquer une vérité objective mais d'encourager le spectateur à pratiquer une sorte de pensée critique déjà accordée aux émotions. En d'autres termes, l'aspiration utopique qui sous-tend ces deux formes de performance est fondée sur l'incertitude et l'ouverture.

La transformation de l'aporie sophistique en Autrui contre lequel l'aporie philosophique doit affirmer sa puissance est le plus clairement perceptible dans les écrits de Platon. Cependant, le point de vue antifondationnel des sophistes marque également ces derniers comme cible d'une diffamation systémique. Le théâtre spéculatif contemporain peut être considéré comme une pratique sophistique, au moins sous deux aspects. Premièrement, son traitement du langage, similaire à celui des sophistes, déstabilise les significations fixes. Deuxièmement, en termes de forme, les oppositions binaires sont interrogées de diverses manières. Parmi ces oppositions, citons-la réalité/réalité virtuelle, l'humain/non humain, montrer/raconter, le passé/présent. Dans tous ces exemples, le théâtre spéculatif engage le public dans une pratique sophistique, une expérience théâtrale qui « promeut le raisonnement antithétique », « nie la possibilité de jugements absolus » et s'attaque à « l'arrogance des interprétations unilatérales du monde ».⁸⁰²

⁸⁰² Pullman, 'Reconsidering Sophistic Rhetoric in Light of Skeptical Epistemology', 51.

2. *Aporie derridienne—théâtre impossible, communauté impossible*

Au XXI^e siècle, parallèlement à l'effort de réhabilitation de l'aporie sophistique, nous continuons à assister à une attitude critique envers la pratique sophistique. Jacques Derrida est l'un des penseurs qui sont souvent étiquetés « sophistes modernes ». Dans le domaine des études de performance, la perception générale reste que « la déconstruction est incompatible avec tout langages ou catégories métaphysiques, et incapable de produire des vocabulaires pratiques significatifs ». ⁸⁰³ Cela a entraîné une hésitation ou un rejet pur et simple de l'approche déconstructionniste chez les théoriciens de performance. Cependant, comme le souligne Duncan Jamieson, plutôt que de s'emparer de la déconstruction comme d'un outil pour aborder les questions de présence, le terrain le plus fertile pour développer la relation de Derrida à la performance se trouve peut-être dans l'attention portée à l'expérience. En accord avec Jamieson, je suis convaincue que l'aporie derridienne promet d'être une approche fructueuse dans l'examen de l'implication éthico-politique de « l'expérience de l'impossible » du théâtre spéculatif contemporain, qui émerge de son approche déconstructionniste du langage, des significations, des vérités et de la réalité.

L'aporie derridienne—l'impossible—ne signifie pas « pas possible » mais plutôt la condition même de la possibilité. Derrida utilise le quasi-concept de l'impossible pour décrire plusieurs phénomènes, dont l'hospitalité, le deuil, le pardon et le don, qui sont tous des thèmes explorés dans de nombreuses pièces spéculatives contemporaines. En encourageant le public à s'engager dans l'impossible, le théâtre spéculatif vise à cultiver une subjectivité utopique et à initier une communauté impossible. Les deux formes d'engagement avec l'aporie - l'aporie sophistique et l'impossible derridien—révèlent l'aspiration profondément politique et utopique du théâtre spéculatif et soulignent sa fonction de lieu de répétition pour les différentes formes de relations politiques, éthiques et sociales à venir.

CHAPITRE 2. LA MYTHOPOEÏA DU THÉÂTRE SPÉCULATIF

I. Aporie de la fin—reconfigurer le mythe de l'apocalypse

Dans une époque constamment menacée par des crises environnementales, sociales, politiques, économiques et éthiques, il n'est pas surprenant d'être témoin de la prolifération de

⁸⁰³ Jamieson, 'Between Derrida and Grotowski', 64.

la pensée eschatologique—des pensées orientées vers la mort, le jugement et le destin final de l'humanité. Le mythe de l'apocalypse, qui à l'origine est une composante fondamentale de l'eschatologie chrétienne, est devenu un sujet global dans la représentation culturelle contemporaine. Cependant, les récits populaires d'apocalypse, bien qu'ils dépeignent l'effondrement de la civilisation, perpétuent en fait le rêve utopique capitaliste de renouvellement et de progrès. Le théâtre spéculatif remet en question cette idéologie en déplaçant et en reconfigurant le mythe de l'apocalypse de manière à ce qu'il ne détaille plus un événement futur et prévisible. Dans *Far Away* (2001) et *Escaped Alone* (2016) de Caryl Churchill, *Mercury Fur* (2005) de Philip Ridley et *Victory Condition* (2017) de Chris Thorpe, l'apocalypse est soit dépouillée de sa capacité à donner du sens, soit perd son statut d'événement et, par conséquent, sa signifiante. Le but de ce déplacement est d'attirer l'attention du spectateur sur des problèmes actuels, qui ont un impact profond sur la société mais qui ont souvent été naturalisés, intégrés dans la normalité et sont donc, devenus invisibles.

1. *La fin violente—l'apocalypse à venir*

Plus particulièrement, *Far Away* (2001) et *Escaped Alone* (2016) de Caryl Churchill, ou encore *Mercury Fur* (2005) de Philip Ridley, conservent leur qualité subversive en se concentrant sur ce que Jacques Derrida appelle *l'avenir*—un avenir au-delà d'un futur connu, et qui est totalement imprévisible.

L'avenir ne peut s'anticiper que dans la forme du danger absolu. Il est ce qui rompt absolument avec la normalité constituée et ne peut donc s'annoncer, se présenter, que sous l'espèce de la monstruosité. Pour ce monde à venir et pour ce qui en lui aura fait trembler les valeurs de signe, de parole et d'écriture, pour ce qui conduit ici notre futur antérieur, il n'est pas encore d'exergue.⁸⁰⁴

Le théâtre spéculatif s'appuie sur trois stratégies pour invoquer la monstruosité qui rompt absolument avec la normalité constituée : la priorité donnée à la narration dans la représentation de la violence, l'absurdité linguistique et la mise en scène graphique de l'absurde. *Mercury Fur*, qui se déroule dans un appartement en ruine de l'East End dans un futur qui n'est pas si lointain, fait entrevoir au spectateur un monde infernal mystérieusement envahi par des papillons hallucinogènes. Quant à *Escaped Alone*, l'intrigue est assez simple : quatre femmes septuagénaires prennent du thé dans le jardin et discutent de divers sujets de la vie quotidienne tels que les membres de la famille, les émissions de télévision et les maladies

⁸⁰⁴ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 14.

personnelles. Néanmoins, ces conversations sont ponctuées par les monologues apocalyptiques tout aussi effrayants qu'hilarants de Mme Jarrett, qui évoquent les inondations, la famine, le cannibalisme, ou encore la peste. Malgré l'omniprésence de la violence dans ces univers dramatiques, le spectateur ne voit jamais de violence représentée sur scène. Il obtient plutôt un aperçu de l'apocalypse à travers les descriptions verbales fournies par les personnages. Les détails abondants des récits attirent le spectateur, mais simultanément, l'absence d'aide visuelle agit comme un outil de distanciation qui empêche une expérience immersive totale.

Le retour au langage dans ces pièces ne doit cependant pas être interprété comme l'affirmation du pouvoir du langage et du sens fixe. Dans *Far Away* et *Escaped Alone*, le langage semble subir un processus de démontage et de recomposition aléatoire. *Far Away*, qui se situe dans un futur où tout le monde, toutes les choses, sont en guerre les uns contre les autres, utilise efficacement l'association libre pour invoquer un langage apocalyptique, d'où émerge le « rire apocalyptique ». ⁸⁰⁵ Dans la présentation, l'absurdité linguistique est renforcée par la visualisation de l'absurde : les vêtements et accessoires extravagants de Spinx et de la Duchesse dans *Mercury Fur* ou les chapeaux somptueux portés par les prisonniers sur le trajet vers l'incinérateur dans *Far Away*. Le langage défamiliarisé, tant verbal que visuel, transmet avec force l'ampleur de destruction de l'apocalypse dépeinte dans ces pièces. Au lieu de proposer un scénario de fin du monde réaliste, rationnel ou plausible, *Far Away*, *Mercury Fur* et *Escaped Alone* maintiennent l'aporie de la fin et empêchent son impulsion utopique de se traduire par une utopie/dystopie fermée et prédéterminée. Ce faisant, elles indiquent la fin possible du capitalisme lui-même à une époque où il est devenu plus facile d'imaginer la fin du monde plutôt que la fin du capitalisme et de sa totalité.

2. Finir sur un murmure—l'apocalypse quotidienne

Victory Condition (2017) de Chris Thorpe et *Escaped Alone* de Caryl Churchill présentent un autre mode d'imagination apocalyptique, qui postule que l'apocalypse n'est pas un événement qui se cache à l'horizon mais un non-événement qui se produit au milieu du brouhaha du quotidien, comme un murmure qui passe inaperçu. *Victory Condition* adopte la forme de monologues intercalés, présentés par deux personnages appelés Man et Woman, qui rentrent dans leur appartement après un voyage. Le contenu de ces monologues n'a cependant rien à voir avec les activités ordinaires que le couple réalise sur scène : Man est un tireur

⁸⁰⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980), 240.

d'élite qui tombe amoureux de sa cible, une combattante de la liberté ; Woman est une employée d'une agence de publicité qui, un jour, découvre le secret selon lequel le monde est une simulation. La forme déroutante de la pièce, ainsi que la surcharge d'informations causée par les nombreux sujets invoqués en succession rapide, empêchent le public de consommer confortablement le récit. Dans un passage important, Woman annonce sa vision de l'apocalypse divisée en deux parties : la première contient une série de phrases commençant par « You will not » tandis que la deuxième est composée de phrases commençant par « You will ». Si la première partie s'adresse au type d'images apocalyptiques spectaculaires qui imprègnent la culture populaire, telles que les monstres, les zombies ou les événements à impact imprévisibles, la seconde, quant à elle, est celle des routines monotones, dans lesquelles la complaisance a rendu les gens incapables d'agir.

Même si la vision de l'apocalypse dans *Victory Condition* est hyperfamiliale, elle est néanmoins qualifiée de parole prophétique, puisqu'elle contient la promesse de restaurer le temps. Contre la croyance populaire selon laquelle la parole prophétique est orientée vers le futur, Maurice Blanchot nous rappelle qu'elle est intimement liée au présent, bien qu'il s'agisse d'un rapport disruptif.

Mais la parole prophétique annonce un impossible avenir, ou fait de l'avenir qu'elle annonce et parce qu'elle l'annonce quelque chose d'impossible, qu'on ne saurait vivre et qui doit bouleverser toutes les données sûres de l'existence. Quand la parole devient prophétique, ce n'est pas l'avenir qui est donné, c'est le présent qui est retiré et toute possibilité d'une présence ferme, stable et durable.⁸⁰⁶

La parole prophétique dans la pièce de Thorpe, bien qu'elle ne fasse pas référence à un avenir impossible, possède néanmoins tout le potentiel subversif théorisé par Blanchot. En m'appuyant sur la « théorie des moments » d'Henri Lefebvre, je soutiens que l'apocalypse quotidienne, malgré son apparente monotonie, n'exclut pas un espoir de changement—non pas le type de changement programmable perpétuel, mais le changement inattendu qui émerge de l'interruption du temps linéaire. De la même manière, les échanges anodins des quatre femmes dans *Escaped Alone* encapsulent l'apocalypse de la quotidienneté qui donne parfois naissance à le « Moment », « la tentative visant la réalisation totale d'une possibilité ».⁸⁰⁷ Sous l'apparence de la stagnation et du pessimisme relayés par l'image d'une

⁸⁰⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir* (Paris : Gallimard, 1971), 114.

⁸⁰⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, tome 2 : *Fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté* (Paris : L'Arche, 1961), 348.

fin sur un murmure, *Escaped Alone* et *Victory Condition* professent toutes deux une foi réservée mais durable dans le pouvoir de transformation investi dans la quotidienneté.

II. Reconfigurer les mythes modernes—les moralités postmodernes

Contrairement au mythe de l'apocalypse, qui reste largement axé sur la spiritualité dans toutes les formes de récit formulé, les mythes modernes (des mythes délibérément fabriqués à des fins politiques et socio-économiques spécifiques, par et pour des groupes particuliers au cours d'une période bien définie) mettent fortement l'accent sur l'utilité et l'applicabilité. Cela signifie que les conséquences des mythes modernes sont également censées être plus immédiatement perceptibles. Cependant, l'évaluation qualitative de ces conséquences est une autre question, étant donné que ces mythes présentent un site parfait pour l'aporie sophistique. Le théâtre spéculatif, dans sa représentation des mythes modernes utilisés en politique et dans la société en général, révèle comment les dichotomies émancipation-oppression, autonomisation-dépossession sont de faux dilemmes, car les deux côtés de l'équation utilisent la logique du sacrifice pour justifier la violence. En mettant en scène divers mythes politiques, socio-économiques sous l'angle de l'aporie sophistique, *Have I None* (2000) et *Chair* (2000) d'Edward Bond, *Foxfinder* (2011) de Dawn King, *The Wolf from the Door* (2014) de Rory Mullarkey, *Radiant Vermin* (2015) de Philip Ridley et *Instructions for Correct Assembly* (2018) de Thomas Eccleshare reconfigurent ces mythes en « moralités postmodernes », terme utilisé par Jean François Lyotard pour désigner un type de récit qui perturbe la structure temporelle du mythe conventionnel par son absence de finalité.

1. *L'aporie des mythes politiques*

Have I None et *Chair* d'Edward Bond, *Foxfinder* de Dawn King et *The Wolf from the Door* de Rory Mullarkey examinent tous le risque et le potentiel de la mythification de la politique. Ce qui rend l'approche du mythe de ces pièces « politique », c'est leur refus de simplement dénoncer ou soutenir l'utilisation des mythes politiques pour obtenir des changements sociaux radicaux.

The Wolf from the Door est traversé par le mythe de la grève générale qui, selon Georges Sorel, est associée à une révolution catastrophique qui change tout de fond en comble. Dans son livre de 1908, *Réflexions sur la violence*, Sorel célèbre l'action héroïque du

prolétariat comme moyen de sauver le monde de la corruption du capitalisme et de la bourgeoisie. Dans la pièce de Mullarkey, cette défense de la violence est énoncée par Catherine, une aristocrate quinquagénaire qui se consacre à la tâche de liquider les élites, de détruire toutes les hiérarchies et de réinitialiser le monde à un nouveau départ. *The Wolf from the Door* raconte une révolution réussie, fondée sur le mythe de la grève générale ; cependant, il serait erroné de penser que la pièce approuve sans réserve la défense controversée de la violence par Sorel. Au contraire, elle conteste simultanément la revendication de ce mythe d'une violence justifiable et nécessaire et interroge sa vision utopique, sa promesse d'un meilleur monde une fois que toutes les hiérarchies auront été éradiquées. De la même manière que de nombreuses pièces spéculatives évitent la représentation visuelle de l'apocalypse violente, la résurrection sanglante dans *The Wolf from the Door* se déroule uniquement à travers le langage. La quatorzième scène, intitulée « The Sights », met en scène une révolution en plein essor. Malgré son nom, il n'y a rien à voir, car toute la scène, écrite sous forme d'indications scéniques, est récitée par les acteurs. Peu après l'établissement d'une nouvelle structure politique avec Léo Cœur de Lion—un sans-abri que Catherine a choisi par hasard à la gare un jour—comme seul souverain, le spectateur est introduit dans une série de lois ridicules imposées par le roi. Il semble que la grève générale dans *The Wolf from the Door*, après avoir réussi à démanteler les hiérarchies sociales existantes, les remplace simplement par un autre système de contrôle qui n'est pas moins rigide, malgré l'apparence d'innocence infantile.

Si *The Wolf from the Door* tente de perturber la dichotomie paralysante-émancipatrice des mythes politiques en partant du principe de l'émancipation, *Have I None* et *Chair* d'Edward Bond et *Foxfinder* de Dawn King abordent la question sous l'angle opposé. Les pièces de Bond, qui se situent dans une société amnésique dans laquelle l'autorité a aboli le passé et toutes les relations humaines, explorent l'effet paralysant du mythe de l'égalité absolue. Dans *Have I None*, nous sommes témoins de la manière dont ce mythe naturalise l'histoire en promouvant une fausse causalité entre la relocalisation et les vagues de suicides. Selon le personnage de Jams, il n'y a pas eu de vague de suicides à Reading après sa relocalisation, ce qui prouve l'impact positif de cette politique. Malgré son effet paralysant, le mythe de l'égalité absolue, dont s'empare l'autorité à des fins d'oppression, fournit aussi la condition pour que ressurgisse un désir enfoui de relations humaines. Dans *Chair*, d'une part c'est la décision d'Alice d'élever en secret un enfant abandonné et d'autre part elle réalise un acte de bienveillance en apportant une chaise dans la rue pour un soldat. Dans *Have I None*,

ce désir se manifeste dans le souvenir fraîchement émergé d'un frère chez Sara. *Foxfinder* de Dawn King poursuit le thème de la conséquence inattendue à travers le personnage de Samuel. L'histoire se déroule dans un futur où, en raison du changement climatique, les gens sont confrontés à une pénurie de nourriture. Dans ce monde régressif, les autorités encouragent activement la mentalité du « nous contre eux », le renard étant l'emblème de toutes les forces non humaines malveillantes et destructrices. Samuel, qui n'avait au départ aucun intérêt pour le mythe du renard, y adhère soudainement lorsqu'il est suggéré que la créature est responsable de la mort de son fils. Tout en mettant en garde contre l'effet hypnotique des mythes politiques, *Foxfinder* indique également la possibilité de réclamer la justice dans l'acte même de soumission. Lorsque Samuel tire sur William parce que ce dernier a contraint sa femme à échanger des faveurs sexuelles contre un rapport d'absence d'infestation de la ferme, ce que le fermier voit n'est pas un être humain mais « un renard en forme de garçon ». ⁸⁰⁸ Samuel a intériorisé le mythe dépeignant le renard comme une force dangereuse qui se nourrit de la faiblesse des hommes et menace leur survie, à tel point que cela lui permet d'identifier son véritable ennemi—le foxfinder et tout ce qu'il représente. À l'instar de *The Wolf from the Door*, *Have I None* et *Chair*, *Foxfinder* crée un espace où se joue l'inattendu, où le spectateur peut explorer l'aspect aporétique des mythes politiques qui suscite simultanément l'espoir et le doute.

2. Les mythes socio-économiques contemporains

Radiant Vermin (2015) de Philip Ridley et *Instructions for Correct Assembly* (2018) de Thomas Eccleshare ne sont que deux des nombreuses pièces spéculatives contemporaines qui révisent et rejouent les mythes populaires. *Radiant Vermin* donne au mythe de Faust une tournure moderne en le situant dans une crise du logement, lorsqu'un jeune couple conclut un marché faustien avec un personnage ressemblant à Méphistophélès pour acquérir la maison de leurs rêves. *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, en racontant l'histoire de deux parents qui remplacent leur fils absent par un robot bricolé, qui ensuite les trahit, rappelle vivement *Frankenstein* de Mary Shelley (1823) et peut donc également être associé au mythe de Pygmalion. En parallèle, les deux pièces mettent en relief un certain nombre de mythes socio-économiques contemporains tels que le mythe du bonheur parfait, le mythe de l'évangile de la prospérité et le mythe du darwinisme social.

⁸⁰⁸ King, *Foxfinder*, 78.

Dans *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, le couple Hari et Max commet une transgression, non pas dans la construction d'un fils artificiel, mais dans la décision consciente de se transformer en cyborgs. Lorsque l'humanoïde se rebelle lors d'une fête, le couple n'a d'autre choix que de le démonter. Cependant, leur désir de bonheur et de perfection passe de l'idée d'avoir un fils parfait pour remplacer leur vrai fils, qui ne répondait pas à leurs attentes, à celle d'avoir le pouvoir de se contrôler eux-mêmes. La première chose que fait Hari après avoir réussi à insérer la puce dans sa tête est de désactiver son odorat et de baisser son ouïe - de se contenter de moins au lieu de toujours demander plus, de réduire ses performances au lieu de les augmenter. Cette décision perturbe la logique du consumérisme, car elle permet à l'individu de se satisfaire de ce qu'il a déjà au lieu de courir constamment après une perfection impossible. Dans la transgression d'Hari et de Max, nous voyons la manifestation des deux types d'inhumanités théorisés par Lyotard : « l'inhumanité du système en cours de consolidation, sous le nom de développement (entre autres) » et « l'autre, infiniment secrète, dont l'âme est l'otage ». ⁸⁰⁹ L'inhumanité qui se manifeste dans le renoncement délibéré du couple à son humanité est éthiquement et politiquement indéterminable, car il se conforme et conteste simultanément les idéologies qui sous-tendent le mythe du bonheur parfait.

Dans *Radiant Vermin*, nous découvrons la manière dont le mythe de l'évangile de la prospérité, renforcé par la rhétorique du darwinisme social, justifie et normalise la violence systémique contre les sans-abris. Le processus par lequel Jill et Ollie consomment ces mythes élucide également l'opération de naturalisation de l'histoire et de la souffrance par la parole mythique. Restant fidèle au mythe original de Faust, le couple compromet son intégrité morale en échange de ce qu'il considère comme la véritable essence de la vie. Comme Faust, Ollie et Jill défendent l'esprit des « bâtisseurs d'empire » et s'engagent passionnément dans l'idée de propriété. Ce qui les distingue, cependant, c'est que la transgression du couple moderne s'inscrit dans le cadre d'une politique d'État qui encourage l'extermination des sans-abris. Dans cette opération d'intertextualité, les anciens mythes changent de sens et les nouveaux mythes sont exposés comme des quasi-mythes réifiés dont la qualité fictionnelle a été effacée pour servir à la consolidation d'un système inhumain. *Instructions for Correct Assembly* et *Radiant Vermin* sont plus précisément caractérisés comme des moralités postmodernes, et non comme des mythes, précisément parce que les personnages principaux

⁸⁰⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *L'inhumain: causeries sur le temps* (Paris : Galilée, 1988), 2.

ne peuvent plus être perçus comme des humains au sens idéaliste et limité de l'humanisme traditionnel.

III. Dénaturaliser la parole mythique

Après avoir analysé des récits mythiques spécifiques, je change dorénavant mon approche et, en référence à *Mythologies* de Roland Barthes, commencer à examiner le mythe comme un type de parole, un mode de communication spécifique. Je montrerai comment le théâtre spéculatif contemporain tente de libérer les matériaux du discours mythique (le langage lui-même, la photographie, les peintures, les affiches, les rituels, les objets, les personnages, etc.) en assumant le rôle d'un système sémiologique de troisième ordre qui perturbe la certitude du métalangage du mythe. Deux stratégies employées pour dénaturer le mythe sont présentées ci-dessous. : la mythification d'objets ordinaires et la construction d'un héros impossible à travers l'utilisation de la satire ménippée.

1. *Dé-re-fabrication de l'objet mythologique*

Dans *Instructions for Correct Assembly* de Thomas Eccleshare, *Have I None* et *Chair* d'Edward Bond et *Far Away* de Caryl Churchill, il y a un effort conscient pour déstabiliser le concept (ou le signifié) que les objets scéniques appelés props (ou le signifiant) sont censés représenter. De la même manière que les personnes opprimées par des mythes politiques peuvent réinterpréter ces mythes pour défier leur oppresseur, la télécommande dans *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, la chaise dans les pièces de Bond et les chapeaux dans *Far Away* dépassent les significations qui leur sont attribuées dans leur réalité dramatique et deviennent capables de générer des significations qui leurs sont propres et inattendues. Dans la fabrication, la dé-fabrication et la refabrication de ces objets mythologiques, nous rencontrons l'impulsion utopique du théâtre spéculatif pour libérer les objets matériels (et par extension, la perception de ces objets par le public) de la violence de la parole mythique.

La télécommande dans *Instructions for Correct Assembly* subvertit la parole mythique en suggérant deux significations contradictoires : au début, elle symbolise le désir de contrôler les autres ; après que Max et Hari soient devenus des cyborgs, la télécommande présente un indice d'espoir dans la modération et l'autorégulation. La chaise dans *Have I None* et *Chair* d'Edward Bond va plus loin dans la quête de dénaturalisation de la parole

mythique en créant sa propre constellation de significations, ses multiples mythes, qui rendent impossible l'établissement d'un sens dominant, idéologiquement fixe. La chaise est tantôt le symbole de l'appauvrissement du monde dramatique, tantôt le lieu de la lutte de pouvoir entre Jams et Sara. À travers elle, on entrevoit la tendresse dans une société inhumaine (la chaise qu'Alice apporte au soldat dans *Chair*) mais aussi le désespoir et l'impuissance (la chaise est utilisée par Alice pour se suicider).

En tant qu'accessoire, la chaise dans les pièces de Bond se déplace d'une pièce à l'autre, d'une période à l'autre et accumule ses significations à travers la carrière du dramaturge et l'histoire du théâtre. Dans *Far Away* de Caryl Churchill, l'accessoire fonctionne non seulement par intertexte mais acquiert également sa référence à partir d'événements historiques. L'expression familière « mad as a hatter » (fou comme un chapelier), qui est entrée dans le langage courant dans les années 1830, est utilisée pour décrire le phénomène des feutriers souffrant d'affections physiques et mentales dues à une exposition prolongée au mercure. Dans *Far Away*, Joan et Todd travaillent dans une fabrique de chapeaux, mais la folie dont ils sont atteints n'est pas la conséquence d'une exposition chimique. Lus dans un contexte plus large, les chapeaux représentent des créations artistiques complètement déconnectées des questions pratiques—« l'art pour l'art »—ainsi que le danger de l'instrumentalisation de l'art pour esthétiser la violence.

2. *Le héros impossible*

The Wolf from the Door de Rory Mullarkey et *Escaped Alone* de Caryl Churchill, tout en adoptant la grande narration associée au récit classique du héros mythique, parviennent à créer une figure de héros impossible qui existe au seuil de toutes les frontières. Ici, le héros et l'héroïne ne sont plus réduits au statut de symbole. En réalisant ce que Mikhaïl Bakhtine caractérise comme la « vision carnavalesque du monde », ils font signe vers la forme la plus radicale de l'imagination héroïque investie dans le paria.

The Wolf from the Door nous présente Leo—un héros minoritaire qui représente les groupes politiquement, économiquement et socialement désavantagés. En même temps, Leo est construit avec toutes les caractéristiques d'un héros mythologique. Bien qu'il ait grandi dans des circonstances adverses, il possède des qualités mystérieuses et surhumaines qui le distinguent du reste de l'humanité : il n'a pas besoin de manger, de dormir, de boire ou de laver ses vêtements. Sans nom de famille fixe, Leo est également libre de l'ordre symbolique.

C'est en raison de ce statut d'outsider exemplaire qu'il a été choisi pour être le nouveau dirigeant du nouvel ordre mondial. Vers la fin de la pièce, conformément au récit épique de la quête du héros, Léo est intégré dans la société. Cependant, plutôt que d'être figé dans un discours mythique, Leo préserve sa liberté radicale grâce à l'utilisation exhaustive du carnavalesque dans la pièce.

Nous rencontrons une autre figure de héros qui existe au seuil et exerce un impact subversif similaire dans *Escaped Alone* de Caryl Churchill. Comme le titre de la pièce fait référence à la fois au *Livre de Job* et à *Moby-Dick* (1851) d'Herman Melville, le personnage de Mrs Jarrett devient un emblème de l'identité intertextuelle : elle joue le rôle des serviteurs de Job, d'Ismaël dans *Moby-Dick*, de l'ordinaire Mrs Jarrett qui bavarde dans le jardin, et la prophète Mrs Jarrett qui émerge des ténèbres pour prononcer ses monologues apocalyptiques. Identifiées comme l'« ekphrasis négative », ses descriptions de la fin du monde rendent son identité encore plus incertaine.

Chez Leo dans *The Wolf from the Door* et chez Mrs Jarrett dans *Escaped Alone*, il y a une tentative de déstabilisation des marqueurs identitaires du héros et de l'héroïne, ce qui reflète l'attitude réservée du théâtre spéculatif vis-à-vis des politiques identitaires. En même temps, il est important de souligner que le théâtre spéculatif ne cherche pas à abolir toutes les identités ou tous les mythes. La fonction de personnages comme Leo ou Mrs Jarrett est de tout simplement mettre l'accent sur la nécessité de surmonter les limites des catégories identitaires fixes véhiculées par la parole mythique.

CHAPITRE 3. REPENSER LA COMMUNAUTÉ—L'APORIE DU VIVRE ENSEMBLE

I. Devenir animal, devenir machine

Dans cette section, j'analyse comment l'approche du théâtre spéculatif contemporain à la relation humain-non humain, malgré l'apparence d'une représentation dramatique traditionnelle (anthropocentrique), est une approche qui permet d'imaginer une réalité de coexistence radicalement différente (post-anthropocentrique).

1. *L'animal spectral et l'animal comique*

Far Away (2000) et *Escaped Alone* (2016) de Caryl Churchill, ainsi que *Human Animals* (2016) de Stef Smith, sont des pièces qui résistent consciemment à l'impératif visuel du théâtre et adoptent plutôt une approche a priori contre-intuitive en se concentrant sur le langage dans leur représentation des animaux. Plutôt que de proposer un simple renversement de la hiérarchie du pouvoir entre les animaux humains et non humains, ces pièces envisagent la possibilité de « devenir animal » à travers deux stratégies : la spectralisation des animaux non humains, d'une part, et l'accent mis sur la représentation des changements dans l'esprit/comportement/corps humain suite à leur interaction avec ces animaux spectraux, d'autre part.

Il faut souligner que la façon dont Churchill et Smith abordent le langage dans les trois pièces mentionnées ci-dessus ne vise jamais à affirmer la capacité des mots et de la narration à saisir les animaux tels qu'ils sont ; au contraire, ils s'efforcent de déstabiliser le langage et de démanteler la violence qui est imposée aux animaux. *Escaped Alone*, *Far Away* et *Human Animals* nous mettent en garde contre le danger d'une vision anthropocentrique du monde, dont les expressions peuvent se trouver dans les allégories animales apparemment innocentes ou les échanges quotidiens sans importance. En même temps, l'accent mis sur le langage et la narration plutôt que sur la représentation visuelle, investit dans les animaux une qualité spectrale capable d'induire la peur et l'anxiété chez ces humains qui sont hantés. En conséquence de cette captivité, ce sont les humains qui jouent le rôle des animaux comiques dans leur interaction avec les animaux non humains.

Les animaux spectraux du théâtre spéculatif contemporain, libérés des contraintes linguistiques et symboliques, acquièrent plus que jamais une capacité d'action, non seulement par leur pouvoir d'évoquer l'aspect animal comique chez l'homme, mais aussi par la marque qu'ils laissent sur le corps, la psyché et le comportement de ce dernier, ce qui facilite le processus de devenir animal. Ce qui émerge, par conséquent, est une forme de mise en relation non identitaire entre les animaux humains et non humains. Une telle relation reconnaît les particularités de l'animal et sa multiplicité mais dont la proximité empêche l'acte d'annexer ces différences ou de les intégrer dans un système de valeurs humaines.

2. Corps programmables, voix imprévisibles

La tentative du théâtre spéculatif contemporain d'initier des discussions non anthropocentriques ne se limite pas à la relation entre les animaux humains et non humains, mais aborde également celle entre les humains et les êtres inorganiques tels que les androïdes, les robots ou l'intelligence artificielle. En exposant les relations problématiques entre les humains et les robots, *Instructions for Correct Assembly* (2018) de Thomas Eccleshare et *Really Old, Like Forty Five* (2010) de Tamsin Oglesby mettent en garde contre les conséquences du maintien d'une mentalité anthropocentrique, tout en créant une expérience théâtrale aporétique qui, en raison de l'incertitude autour des personnages robots, en termes d'identité et de conscience, permet une sorte de relation de non-identité entre le spectateur et ces personnages.

L'humanoïde dans *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, étant un double du fils perdu de Hari et Max, est méticuleusement programmé et rigoureusement contrôlé, toute individualité perçue comme indésirable constamment supprimée. Les dialogues entre le couple et leur fils mécanique de substitution ne visent pas à établir un échange d'idées significatif ou une pluralité de positions. Ils sont plutôt orientés vers la monologisation dogmatique des points de vue. La situation de Jân rappelle celle de la nymphe Echo dans *Métamorphoses* d'Ovide, qui est privée de la capacité de parler pour elle-même et toujours piégée dans la répétition. Cette association peut sembler assez farfelue ; cependant, je soutiens que ce qui caractérise la similitude entre les robots de nombreuses pièces spéculatives contemporaines et Echo, ce n'est pas seulement la contrainte linguistique, mais aussi les stratégies qu'ils peuvent adopter pour négocier cette contrainte et retrouver leur subjectivité. Si Mimi dans *Really Old, Like Forty Five* négocie habilement sa répétitivité pour s'engager dans des échanges intéressants, Jân dans *Instructions for Correct Assembly* démontre le potentiel subversif de la figure du robot en faisant tout son contraire. Son discours défectueux pendant la fête à la maison perturbe non seulement la relation de pouvoir entre les humains et les robots, mais attire également l'attention sur l'importance de la nature vocalique de la communication.

II. Défaire la violence normalisée

Tout comme la construction d'animaux non humains et de robots en tant qu'Autrui repose sur le langage, les hiérarchies de pouvoir entre différents groupes d'êtres humains ont

beaucoup à voir avec la régulation du langage et des significations. *Foxfinder* de Dawn King, *Chair* et *The Under Room* d'Edward Bond, *Radiant Vermin* de Philip Ridley et *Really Old, Like Forty Five* de Tamsin Oglesby invitent le public à se familiariser avec l'aporie d'une langue inconnue et de relations de pouvoir instables, afin de s'engager éthiquement avec les dépossédés, et c'est dans la création de cette expérience aporétique que le théâtre spéculatif réalise son impulsion utopique.

1. *La mort discursive d'Autrui—le danger du monologisme*

Foxfinder de Dawn King, *Chair* et *The Under Room* d'Edward Bond, malgré leur contexte totalitaire et futuriste—l'un des éléments les plus caractéristiques de la fiction dystopique—présentent un paysage linguistique qui est étonnamment similaire à celui du monde contemporain. Cela s'explique par le fait que le déterminisme linguistique de ces univers dramatiques ne constitue pas un ensemble de langage qui peut être distingué du langage « libre ». En conséquence, de nombreux personnages sont réduits à être le simple porte-parole du régime, totalement incapables de former des pensées individuelles, même s'il n'y a aucune restriction sur la langue qu'ils peuvent utiliser.

William dans *Foxfinder* et l'agent social anonyme dans *Chair*, deux représentants de l'autorité dans leur monde respectif, démontrent deux manières contrastées dont le monologisme se manifeste à travers le langage officiel. Si le langage de l'agent social incarne toute l'idéologie de l'égalité absolue que le régime prétend défendre, le langage de William est très embelli et recourt constamment aux métaphores en paires opposées. Malgré l'apparence contrastée de leurs langages bureaucratiques, William et l'agent social sont unis dans leur soumission totale aux codes d'expression conventionnels, où seule la voix autoritaire peut être entendue.

Une approche monologique du langage peut être observée dans les opérations top-down menées par une machine bureaucratique mais aussi dans le langage quotidien des citoyens dans leur interaction entre eux. C'est peut-être dans ce dernier cas que le monologisme produit un impact encore plus destructif sous la forme de violence normalisée. Dans *The Under Room* d'Edward Bond, nous sommes témoins de la concurrence entre le monologisme et l'hétéroglossie chez les gens ordinaires. L'incapacité de Joan à s'engager dans le langage incompréhensible du traumatisme de l'immigrant et le fait que Joan le tue ensuite illustrent le danger de la soumission au monologisme dans nos rapports avec les autres.

Résister au monologisme, en revanche, constituerait un acte politique qui permet d'expérimenter le monde à travers différentes façons et qui désobjectivise et redonne la parole à ceux qui ont été réduits au silence par toute forme de déterminisme linguistique.

2. *La restitution de l'autonomie aux populations « superflues »*

Really Old, Like Forty Five de Tamsin Oglesby et *Radiant Vermin* de Philip Ridley montrent comment le même type de violence structurelle, dont nous avons été témoins dans les univers totalitaires de *Chair*, *Foxfinder* et *The Under Room*, peut encore prospérer dans une société (prétendument) démocratique. Ces deux pièces révèlent le mécanisme qui exploite les principes économiques et le langage de l'efficacité pour justifier l'élimination systématique des personnes appartenant à deux groupes socialement vulnérables, les personnes âgées et les sans-abris. À leurs façons respectives, *Really Old, Like Forty Five* et *Radiant Vermin* résistent à la représentation simpliste de ces groupes marginalisés comme des victimes impuissantes face au racisme institutionnalisé et à la "science" de l'eugénisme.

Victimes à la fois du biopouvoir et du psychopouvoir, les sans-abris dans *Radiant Vermin* semblent totalement impuissants face à la violence systématique et sponsorisée par l'Etat. Tout au long de la pièce, ils restent des personnages sans nom et sans visage dont l'existence se limite à la mesure où ils sont invoqués dans les récits de Jill et d'Ollie. Cependant, de la même manière que l'animal spectral est capable de subvertir la relation de pouvoir entre l'humain et le non-humain, les sans-abris spectraux reviennent pour hanter leurs meurtriers et ironiquement contraindre Jill et Ollie à une condition de sans-abri, puisque la chaleur et la sécurité supposées d'un espace familial cèdent la place à la peur et à l'anxiété persistantes.

Travaillant également contre la rhétorique biopolitique officielle qui déshumanise, *Really Old, Like Forty Five* tente de réhumaniser et de donner un visage aux personnes âgées en présentant au public trois frères et sœurs âgés. Robbie, Alice et Lyn, qui ont chacun une approche différente de la pression sociale qu'ils subissent, choisissent chacun leurs propres « technologies du soi ». Les récits dominants de la vieillesse (le paradigme négatif contre positif) ne disparaissent pas complètement mais sont appropriés par chaque individu dans des versions variées et complexes qui défient toute tentative de leur attribuer des significations fixes et stables. Ce sont des personnes âgées qui, malgré la violence qui leur est imposée, insistent à construire et à raconter leurs propres histoires.

III. L'idiorythmie - la possibilité de vivre ensemble

En plus de l'exploration de plusieurs oppositions binaires qui entravent l'établissement de relations éthiques, comme la division humain-non humain fondée sur le spécisme, la préférence pour un langage intelligible et fixe par rapport à un langage inintelligible et instable ou bien le jugement de valeur capitaliste imposé aux groupes défavorisés, le théâtre spéculatif s'intéresse également à la tension entre l'individu et le collectif. Dans leur représentation du suicide, *Have I None* et *Chair* d'Edward Bond donnent lieu à une expérience aporétique où des vies « ungrievables » peuvent être pleurées et où les conditions qui produisent ces vies « ungrievables » sont interrogées. En somme, l'objectif du théâtre spéculatif en examinant toutes ces catégories binaires est d'attirer l'attention sur une autre conception de la communauté dans laquelle les individus maintiennent leur lien et leur proximité, non pas à travers leur idéologie ou leur identité partagée, mais leur respect de la particularité du rythme des autres.

1. *Remettre en question la logique binaire du discours sur le suicide*

De la même manière que la représentation de l'apocalypse résiste à la violence graphique et visuelle, de nombreuses pièces spéculatives ont tendance à dissimuler l'acte d'auto-annihilation. Le public n'a qu'un aperçu de l'après-coup, avec le corps d'Alice suspendu dans l'embrasement de la porte à la fin de *Chair* d'Edward Bond, ou reçoit simplement un indice de ce qui est sur le point de se produire lorsque Sara vacille en sortant de la maison après avoir bu la soupe empoisonnée dans *Have I None*. Paradoxalement, le fait que cette privatisation de la mort soit représentée sur scène, aussi abstraite ou ambiguë soit-elle, « requalifie » la mort en en faisant à nouveau un rituel public. Le traitement du suicide dans ces pièces crée un espace où les vies « ungrievables » peuvent être reconnues et pleurées, au lieu d'un espace où la mort est simplement consommée ou obfusquée.

Dans *Chair* et *Have I None*, nous découvrons une thanatopolitique qui s'efforce de contrôler et d'administrer non seulement la mort mais aussi l'herméneutique de la mort. Dans ce contexte, ce qui semble être le plus individuel des actes—le suicide—se révèle être la manifestation d'une conscience qui valorise la liberté et la possibilité de choisir. Cet aspect émancipateur est toutefois assombri par le désespoir et l'impuissance. Les suicides de Sara et d'Alice refusent tous deux d'être célébrés comme des actes politiques d'abnégation qui remettent directement en cause le désir de l'autorité de contrôler totalement la vie et la mort

ou d'être sympathisés comme la manifestation de l'impuissance des « vies nues ». Sur le plan éthique, ils refusent également d'être identifiés à une quelconque qualité fixe. Il est impossible de penser l'autodestruction d'Alice en termes simples, soit comme un désir narcissique de perpétuer le « je » de son individualité au détriment du « je » de ses expériences et de sa souffrance, soit comme une désobéissance idéologique. De même, il y a quelque chose de tout à fait égoïste dans sa décision de faire participer Billy à son rite funéraire, sachant parfaitement qu'envoyer son fils dans le monde de cette manière équivaldrait à l'envoyer en mission suicide.

Les suicides de Sara et d'Alice refusent de communiquer un message définitif concernant leurs implications politiques et éthiques afin que le spectateur puisse créer ses propres lectures. Le spectateur est invité à s'interroger sur la biopolitique et la thanatopolitique qui produisent des vies « ungrievables » et simultanément à imaginer des arrangements sociaux alternatifs dans lesquels il n'y a plus besoin de martyr.

2. *La communauté (im)possible*

Le théâtre spéculatif met en scène un certain nombre de corps collectifs qui, malgré leurs différentes formes de manifestation, doivent être caractérisés comme des *communitas*— des communautés qui cherchent à imposer une unité monologique en assimilant et en effaçant les différences. En raison de l'accent mis sur la communion fusionnelle, ces communautés se referment sur elles-mêmes et réduisent l'état d'être-en-commun à la réalisation d'un « être commun ». Animées par une force oppositionnelle et antagoniste, ces communautés perpétuent un ordre social fondé sur la violence et les intérêts matériels.

Contre ce type de communauté, *Escaped Alone* de Caryl Churchill envisage une communauté à venir qui accueille une multiplicité de voix et de rythmes. Une telle communauté utopique a été théorisée par différents penseurs sous différents noms : l'« idiorrythmie » de Roland Barthes, la « communauté désavouée » de Jean-Luc Nancy, la « communauté inavouable » de Maurice Blanchot, ou encore la « communauté à venir » d'Agamben et de Derrida. Malgré son insistance à préserver les singularités, cette communauté utopique permet toujours aux individus de s'engager dans une politique collective. Cependant, comme le montre la manière dont les quatre femmes de *Escaped Alone* discutent de sujets politiques, il s'agit d'un mode d'engagement caractérisé par

l'indétermination et la spontanéité plutôt que par la certitude d'un but et d'une intention associés aux actions politiques révolutionnaires.

CHAPITRE 4. LE THÉÂTRE SPÉCULATIF ET LES DRAMATURGIES DE L'AFFECT

I. Représenter une sensibilité gothique contemporaine

L'intérêt renouvelé pour le gothique au XXI^e siècle, sans se détacher complètement du statut politiquement ambigu de la littérature gothique du début, formule simultanément une sensibilité gothique contemporaine qui dépasse la fixation culturelle sur la narration sombre. C'est le cas de nombreuses pièces spéculatives britanniques, notamment *Radiant Vermin* de Philip Ridley, *Instructions for Correct Assembly* de Thomas Eccleshare, *The Under Room* d'Edward Bond et *Human Animals* de Stef Smith. Plusieurs productions de ces pièces représentent un espace domestique qui n'est pas moins troublant que celui dépeint dans les premiers romans gothiques ; néanmoins, leur esthétique gothique repose sur la simplicité, la précision géométrique et la lumière plutôt que sur le désordre et l'obscurité. *The Children* de Lucy Kirkwood, *Escaped Alone* de Caryl Churchill, *Pastoral* de Thomas Eccleshare et *Human Animals* de Stef Smith, en fusionnant la pastorale et le gothique, problématisent le concept d'hospitalité dans le récit pastoral traditionnel. La nouvelle sensibilité gothique des pièces spéculatives, tout en indiquant le malaise permanent de devenir un étranger dans sa propre maison ou son propre pays, propose également une stratégie pour se refamiliariser avec l'altérité de la nature et, en tant que tel, créer un espace paradoxal de « maison » dans la condition même de « homelessness » ou de déplacement.

1. *L'espace domestique unheimlich*

Radiant Vermin de Philip Ridley (Soho Theatre, 2015), *Instructions for Correct Assembly* de Thomas Eccleshare (Royal Court, 2018), *Human Animals* de Stef Smith (Royal Court, 2016) et *The Under Room* d'Edward Bond (Lyric Hammersmith, 2012), dans leur reconfiguration des traditions gothiques de l'espace domestique inquiétant et du double, révèlent la porosité de la distinction privé-public et accentuent l'exigence de tenter l'hospitalité absolue derridienne dans sa relation avec l'Autrui.

En mettant l'accent sur la luminosité et la simplicité, ces productions donnent naissance à un espace domestique plus organisé et mécanique que chargé de mystères. Néanmoins, il serait erroné de penser qu'en raison de leur apparence ordinaire, ces maisons lumineuses, colorées et fabriquées en masse illustrent l'espace domestique d'intimité et de sécurité où l'on peut apprécier la rêverie et la solitude—la « maison onirique » envisagée par Gaston Bachelard. Dans les deux productions de *Human Animals* et *The Under Room*, on constate que l'espace domestique, loin d'être à l'abri des dangers et des turbulences du monde, est celui où ces dangers et ces turbulences se reflètent le plus fidèlement. Par conséquent, la frontière qui sépare l'intérieur et l'extérieur, le privé et le public, se révèle être une construction visant à encourager l'indifférence politique à l'égard du génocide des animaux non humains dans le cas de *Human Animals*, de la violence brutale contre les immigrants et d'un régime totalitaire terrorisant ses citoyens dans celui de *The Under Room*.

Outre le sentiment de confinement, ce qui rend l'esthétique gothique du théâtre spéculatif contemporain encore plus perturbante, c'est le fait que l'atrocité est commise en plein jour, que la violence est normalisée et justifiée, que l'obscurité elle-même et tout son pouvoir subversif sont oblitérés par la rhétorique positiviste de la clarté et de la certitude. La luminosité de la scène dans *Radiant Vermin* peut être interprétée en tant que telle comme un acte symbolique de « mise en lumière » du processus par lequel les idéologies consuméristes et racistes dissimulent leurs ténèbres et leurs crimes monstrueux en exploitant la gaieté du divertissement.

L'éclairage n'est cependant pas le seul élément contribuant à la production de l'inquiétude dans les pièces spéculatives contemporaines. Un autre facteur important réside dans l'engagement de ces pièces à explorer le trope gothique du double dans leur remise en question de la notion d'identité unique et fixe. D'une part, l'utilisation du dédoublement dans *Radiant Vermin* et *Instructions for Correct Assembly* n'est pas le résultat de contraintes pratiques mais est motivée conceptuellement pour mettre en évidence la situation malencontreuse ou l'idéologie commune de différents individus. D'autre part, le partage du personnage de l'immigrant en corps et en voix dans *The Under Room* génère un état de confusion et d'incertitude qui, paradoxalement, rapproche le spectateur de la rencontre avec l'immigrant en tant qu'Autrui.

L'expérience théâtrale des quatre productions de *Radiant Vermin*, *Human Animals*, *Instructions for Correct Assembly* et *The Under Room* est celle qui déplace le spectateur hors

de sa zone de confort mental et physique—son « chez lui » en d'autres termes—et l'expose à une anxiété et une vulnérabilité persistante. L'objectif de cette stratégie dramaturgique est de créer un espace où le spectateur peut se mettre à réfléchir à la notion d'hospitalité absolue. Le théâtre spéculatif, en brouillant la délimitation entre le familier et l'inconnu, entre le privé et le public, ébranle les conditions de l'hospitalité classique fondée sur le droit et suggère la possibilité d'une hospitalité inconditionnelle. À la croisée de nombreuses crises actuelles et à venir, qu'il s'agisse de la crise de l'immigration (*The Under Room*), de la crise du logement (*Radiant Vermin*) ou de la crise d'identité provoquée par les progrès technologiques (*Instructions for Correct Assembly*), l'hospitalité absolue se présente comme une sensibilité utopique qui génère et soutient des modes de relation à autrui qui défient la logique d'échange du capitalisme.

2. *Mise en scène de la pastorale gothique*

Escaped Alone de Caryl Churchill, *Human Animals* de Stef Smith, *The Children* de Lucy Kirkwood et *Pastoral* de Thomas Eccleshare recourent aux images et motifs pastoraux dans leur approche du thème de l'écologie. Cependant, ce retour à la pastorale ne signifie pas une nostalgie d'un passé plus heureux de tranquillité isolée et de relation harmonieuse entre les hommes et la nature. Bien au contraire, la pastorale est ici invoquée en tandem avec une esthétique gothique distincte et, par conséquent, elle suscite l'anxiété et l'incertitude plutôt que l'assurance ou la stabilité. En employant la pastorale gothique non pas comme un modèle achevé, une exhortation ou une idéologie, mais plutôt comme un mode d'interrogation, le théâtre spéculatif, oscillant entre espoir et désespoir, s'efforce d'engager le spectateur dans une expérience d'« écognose »—un processus consistant à « s'habituer à quelque chose d'étrange, mais c'est aussi s'habituer à une étrangeté qui ne devient pas moins étrange par acclimatation ». ⁸¹⁰ Je dirais qu'un tel devenir est étroitement lié à l'engagement d'une personne envers l'hospitalité absolue dont nous avons parlé précédemment.

Escaped Alone et *The Children* exploitent le motif pastoral de la retraite dans une maison de campagne et problématissent la paix idéalisée et l'effet thérapeutique de la nature généralement associés à ce mode de vie en le soumettant à une menace invisible constante qui s'insinue lentement. Cette logique d'infestation est poussée à un autre niveau dans *Pastoral* de Thomas Eccleshare et *Human Animals* de Stef Smith. Les deux pièces mettent en scène un mélange de tragique et de comique dans leur description d'un paysage urbain

⁸¹⁰ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5.

soudainement envahi par la vie sauvage. Dans *Pastoral* et *Human Animals*, la nature est effectivement dépeinte comme incontrôlable et menaçante ; toutefois, l'intention n'est pas d'alimenter ce sentiment écophobe. Je dirais plutôt que la combinaison de l'esthétique pastorale et gothique dans ces deux pièces encourage le public à adopter une attitude « écologique sombre » dans sa réponse à la crise écologique.

La combinaison du gothique et de la pastorale dans le théâtre spéculatif, qui semble contre-intuitive à première vue, s'est avérée très efficace pour générer une atmosphère d'anxiété et de nostalgie révélatrice du paysage émotionnel contemporain. En tant qu'exemples de drames écologiques sombres, *Pastoral*, *Human Animals*, *Escaped Alone* et *The Children* s'appuient sur la juxtaposition de l'absurde et du sérieux, du quotidien et de l'époque pour attirer l'attention du public sur la nature entremêlée de forces sociales, politiques et écologiques apparemment distinctes.

II. Frontières ambiguës—perspectives alternatives

Dans cette section, je montre comment la tentative du théâtre spéculatif contemporain de créer une expérience déstabilisante en termes de perception temporelle et spatiale peut être interprétée comme un acte subversif visant à favoriser la non-identité, des formes aporétiques de subjectivité et de mise en relation qui respectent la particularité de la perception et de la perspective des autres.

1. *La mise en œuvre de temporalités multiples et multidirectionnelles*

X d'Alistair McDowall et *Elegy* de Nick Payne reposent sur une structure dramatique constituée de temporalités multiples et multidirectionnelles. La coexistence de temporalités linéaires, linéaires inversées, circulaires et bégayantes dans les deux pièces donne l'impression d'un jeu intellectuel, une sorte de puzzle que le spectateur doit résoudre pour donner un sens à ce qu'il voit. S'il est vrai que *X* et *Elegy*, en raison de leurs temporalités complexes et entrelacées, exigent un certain effort de déduction, je soutiens que l'expérience théâtrale créée n'a pas pour objectif de satisfaire la curiosité intellectuelle des spectateurs de ces pièces. Leur but est plutôt d'offrir une critique de la domination de la temporalité linéaire et du temps objectif qui sous-tend la rhétorique capitaliste de la croissance et du développement progressifs, qui ont contribué à la destruction irréversible de l'environnement (la perte de la Terre en tant que planète habitable dans *X*).

D'autre part, en permettant au spectateur de percevoir la confusion et le tumulte émotionnel associés à la perte de mémoire, *X* et *Elegy* parviennent également à reconstituer une expérience affective où convergent traumatisme personnel et collectif. Je soutiens que les deux pièces espèrent transmettre à travers leur structure dramatique particulière la possibilité de vivre ensemble et de s'accompagner dans les moments les plus difficiles en respectant toutes les différentes temporalités et en s'efforçant de négocier entre des temporalités irréconciliables plutôt que d'en imposer une au détriment des autres. En ce sens, les temporalités multiples et multidirectionnelles de *X* et *Elegy* constituent une autre tentative de mise en scène de la communauté utopique dont nous avons traité précédemment à la fin du chapitre 3.

2. Des mondes entremêlés

The Nether de Jennifer Haley, *Victory Condition* de Chris Thorpe et *Pomona* d'Alistair McDowall emploient tous le dispositif métathéâtral connu sous le nom de jeu de rôle pour créer des univers dramatiques superposés. Ce qui distingue leur approche des pratiques métathéâtrales traditionnelles et ajoute une autre couche à l'expérience déstabilisante est l'impossibilité d'identifier quelle réalité dramatique occupe le premier plan et quelle est le méta plan. En raison de cette incertitude ontologique, ces mondes entremêlés recréent une conscience métathéâtrale et nous amènent à une exploration de la relation qui défie la logique de l'identité fixe.

La mise en scène de *The Nether* au Royal Court, en représentant les deux univers dramatiques (la réalité et la réalité virtuelle) comme également ancrés dans la matérialité, met en évidence la nécessité d'assister et de maintenir l'aspect « mixte » de la réalité plutôt que de donner la priorité à l'un au détriment de l'autre. De même, la fusion de la fiction et de la réalité dans *Pomona* n'est pas seulement une question d'expérimentation artistique, mais aussi un moyen d'explorer la question de la responsabilité à travers la juxtaposition du déterminisme et du libre arbitre. S'il y a un message à retenir de *Pomona*, c'est peut-être l'urgence de s'engager éthiquement et politiquement sur des questions sociales qui nous sont présentées par les médias comme s'il s'agissait d'œuvres de fiction, complètement détachées de notre propre réalité mais qui sont, en fait, profondément imbriquées dans notre vie. *Victory Condition*, bien qu'elle dépeigne un monde déterministe sous la forme d'une simulation, se termine par une question qui oblige le spectateur à prendre une décision, quelle que soit son incertitude.

Les mondes entremêlés du théâtre spéculatif demandent au spectateur de naviguer dans la confusion et l'incertitude. Oscillant entre le sérieux et le ludique, l'actif et le passif, ils constituent une expérience affective qui vise à nourrir la capacité du public à percevoir de nouvelles structures de réalité, dont celle de la relation et de la responsabilité.

III. Vers un autre théâtre politique

À travers son approche de la notion d'implication, le théâtre spéculatif britannique contemporain se présente comme un autre théâtre politique dont l'objectif est de cultiver une sensibilité utopique fondée sur l'engagement envers l'aporie/l'impossibilité de la responsabilité et de la vérité. Une telle sensibilité, en transformant la perception individuelle et en interrompant la logique binaire qui gouverne la plupart des discours contemporains, peut être caractérisée comme une forme de micropolitique éthique.

1. *Le sujet impliqué—l'(im)possibilité de la responsabilité infinie*

À travers la figure du sujet impliqué, *X* et *Pomona* d'Alistair McDowall, *The Children* de Lucy Kirkwood et *Pastoral* de Thomas Eccleshare explorent la question de la responsabilité par rapport à l'exploitation sociale et à la destruction écologique—le type de responsabilité qui peut avoir des conséquences immédiates mais qui peut aussi transcender les limites temporelles et spatiales traditionnellement associées à la responsabilité.

La plupart du temps, un sujet impliqué n'est pas conscient de son implication dans l'injustice ou nie son implication pour éviter l'inconfort associé à la reconnaissance. Dans les quatre pièces examinées, nous rencontrons des personnages appartenant aux deux groupes. Zeppo et Charlie, dans *Pomona*, appartiennent à ce dernier groupe, car ils cultivent une ignorance volontaire pour se protéger. Parmi les personnages de *Pastoral*, *The Children* et *X*, certains sont conscients de leur implication et s'efforcent d'agir en conséquence, comme les trois scientifiques à la retraite de *The Children*. D'autres, en revanche, malgré leur connaissance, ne font pas grand-chose pour assumer leur responsabilité.

Le théâtre spéculatif ne demande pas seulement de reconnaître l'implication mais aussi de la transfigurer. En d'autres termes, il ne devrait pas y avoir de division entre la connaissance et la praxis dans l'approche de la notion d'implication. Le type de responsabilité

qui est associé à la reconnaissance de son statut de sujet impliqué est mieux caractérisé comme la responsabilité infinie derridienne, qui est, comme le chagrin, impossible à remplir mais qui doit néanmoins être tentée. La responsabilité infinie qui émerge de l'implication transfigurante, en raison de l'impossibilité d'assumer entièrement ou de compléter toute responsabilité, évite la fermeture associée à la bonne conscience. Les sujets impliqués, constamment encouragés à interroger et à repenser les dynamiques de la violence et de l'injustice, constituent une sorte de quasi-communauté « fondée sur la différence plutôt que sur des logiques de similitude et d'identification ».⁸¹¹

2. *Le spectateur impliqué—le théâtre spéculatif comme mode de « dire-vrai »*

Les deux premières décennies du XXI^e siècle ont vu la prolifération d'un type particulier de discours politique connu sous le nom de « post-truth », qui se caractérise par un mépris des preuves, de la logique, de l'examen intellectuel et, simultanément, par une accentuation sur les émotions et la performativité. Dans ce contexte, le théâtre spéculatif représente une tentative de contester les infrastructures affectives de la post-truth sans invoquer la moralisation ou l'endoctrinement. *Far Away* de Caryl Churchill, *Foxfinder* de Dawn King, *Human Animals* de Stef Smith et *Radiant Vermin* de Philip Ridley, sans proclamer explicitement leur intention de s'attaquer aux problèmes associés au phénomène de la post-truth, parviennent à construire un espace de répétition dans lequel le public peut s'exercer à décoder la force affective et les conséquences de la rhétorique de la post-vérité. Ces pièces spéculatives dévoilent le processus de formation d'une mentalité de post-truth, la manière dont les récits de post-truth exercent leur pouvoir en répondant aux besoins émotionnels des gens et la perversion de la confession comme moyen d'échapper à la responsabilité. Mais le théâtre spéculatif ne s'arrête pas à ces opérations. Après tout, malgré leur contexte fictif, ce sont tous des aspects familiers de la vie contemporaine, et ils peuvent difficilement surprendre un spectateur bien informé. Je soutiens que ce qui constitue la dimension éthico-politique de la révélation du théâtre spéculatif est son aspect parrhésique—la façon dont il engage le spectateur dans un jeu de « dire-vrai » et met en évidence son statut de spectateur impliqué. Grâce à ce jeu parrhésiastique, la notion de vérité est sauvée à la fois de la rigidité de l'insistance sur la vérité objective et prouvable et de la tentative de banaliser toutes les vérités par un relativisme absolu. Ce qui émerge au contraire, c'est l'accent mis sur une relation d'attention dans la rencontre avec les récits politiques et culturels.

⁸¹¹ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 12.

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Annexe 1—Synopsis

1. *Chair*—Edward Bond

Chair was first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 7 April 2000. The first stage production was at the Avignon Festival on 18 July 2006.

The play is published in a trilogy known as *The Chair Plays*, together with *Have I None* and *The Under Room*, all of which are set in the year 2077. A mere citizen of a totalitarian state, Alice sees her life rattled as a result of her offering a chair to a soldier on escort duty waiting for the bus. Her seemingly inconsequential act of kindness excites the old female prisoner and ends with the soldier shooting the prisoner. An investigation ensued, which threatens the safety of both Alice and Billy, a son she keeps in secret. Twenty-six years ago, instead of handing in an abandoned baby straight away to the authority as she was supposed to do, Alice hesitated for a few days. When it became too late, for she would have been charged with concealment, Alice decided to keep and raise Billy in the flat. The circumstances do not allow Billy to reach mental maturity, as he passes his days colouring and making up adventure stories. After the investigation, it is implied that Alice would be sent to PrisCit, the equivalence of an extermination camp/department reserved for dissidents. Determined to take matters into her own hands, she commits suicide after carefully instructing her son on the steps he has to follow to ensure her burial rite. Alice makes all the necessary arrangements so that her corpse would be picked up and cremated, the remains are then given to Billy to be dispersed all over the city. In the last scene, Billy is seen standing in an empty car park, surrounded by the ash of his mother, before being shot dead.

2. *Have I None*—Edward Bond

The play was first presented by Big Brum on 2 November 2000 at Castle Vale Artsite, Birmingham. It is the third play in the Big Brum trilogy, preceded by *At the Inland Sea* and *Eleven Vests*.

In this amnesiac society set in 2077, the authority has abolished the past and all human relations. The tedious life of a couple, Sara and Jams, is disrupted by the sudden appearance of Grit, who claims to be Sara's brother. Grit brings with him a photo—a banned item—and recounts the mass suicides he witnessed on his journey. When Jams suggests they have to kill Grit, Sara readily agrees and volunteers to go to the chemist to fetch poison.

However, four days later, when she returns with the poison, some profound change has taken place and she can now remember that she had a brother, even though it remains unclear whether the one in her memory is Grit. She puts the poison in the soup, but instead of giving it to Grit, she drinks the soup herself. In her last moments, Sara pleads to be taken to the street because she does not want to die imprisoned in the house.

3. *Far Away*—Caryl Churchill

Far Away was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London, on 24 November 2000, before transferring to the Albery Theatre in the West End on 18 January 2001.

The play is divided into three acts corresponding to three periods in the life of the character Joan. In Act One, the child Joan is introduced to violence for the first time, witnessing her uncle beating people, including children, as he loaded them into the back of a lorry. Joan's aunt, Harper, tries to persuade Joan that what seems to be a brutal act of violence is heroic since her uncle is helping those people, that those beaten are traitors and their children. Act Two takes place several years later, with the adult Joan just starting her career at a hat factory. It is revealed that there is a whole hat industry to produce headgears that would accompany political prisoners to the incinerator. Joan meets Todd, a fellow milliner, and the two discuss the meanings of their hats in aesthetic and philosophical terms, completely disregard their political and ethical implications. As the hats get more and more extravagant, Joan and Todd appear to be more securely trapped in their denial. Their concern is directed towards exposing the corruption of the hat industry in acquiring contracts rather than on the regular parades and trials that have become spectacles. Fast-forwarding a little, we see how a deeply troubled world in Act Two has evolved into complete chaos, as the total war makes it impossible to know who or what is one's ally or enemy. A more mature Joan is back at Harper's house. The play ends with Joan's monologue recounting her journey, in which she experienced and witnessed the damaging impact of a world where everyone, everything, is turned against each other, from human and nonhuman animals to objects and natural phenomena.

4. *Mercury Fur*—Philip Ridley

Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* was commissioned by Paines Plough in the season *This Other England* that marks the company's thirtieth anniversary. It was first performed at the Drum Theatre Plymouth on 10 February 2005.

The play is set in a derelict flat in the East End of London in a not-too-distant future and gives the audience glimpses of an infernal world mysteriously invaded by hallucinogenic butterflies. The two teenage brothers, Elliot and Darren, are preparing a party for a wealthy banker known as the Party Guest, in which he would torture a ten-year-old boy. The success of this party will help the brothers gain favour with the Party Guest and is therefore crucial to their survival and that of their loved ones—their mother, known as the Duchess, as well as their friends Lola and Spinx. Soon enough, the situation spins out of hand. The newcomer Naz is forced to replace the Party Piece because the latter was not conscious enough for the Party Guest's liking. Unable to ignore Naz's suffering as he is tortured, Elliot disrupts the 'party' and, during the struggle, Darren kills the Party Guest. The play closes with the group of survivors remain in the burning flat as the sound of bombing in the city grows louder.

5. *The Under Room*—Edward Bond

First staged by Big Brum at Roade School, Northampton, on 12 October 2005.

Like *Have I None* and *Chair*, *The Under Room* introduces the audience to a totalitarian state where humanity is severely put to the test and the characters forced to make impossible choices to preserve their humanness. The play revolves around three characters: an immigrant, Joan and Jack. Joan comes home one day to discover that an immigrant has broken into her house to hide from the army. Instead of reporting him to the authority, Joan decides to keep the immigrant hidden in the cellar and helps him find a way to cross the border to the North by contacting Jack, a fixer. Tension arises when the money the immigrant brought with him mysteriously disappears, Jack threatens to turn both Joan and the immigrant over to the army. It is now revealed that Jack is a swindler who works for both the resistance and the army. Unexpectedly, the immigrant finds himself drawn to this 'evil', seemingly immoral character more than to the charitable Joan and expresses his wish to run away with Jack. Joan kills the immigrant in an outburst of rage.

6. *Really Old, Like Forty Five*—Tamsin Oglesby

Really Old, Like Forty Five was first staged by the National Theatre's Cottesloe on 3 February 2010.

In a not-too-distant future, faced with the increasing burden of an aged population, the government encourages the elderly to remain active social contributors by 'adopting' orphaned grandchildren. Those who are ill and unfit for any task, however, are admitted to the Ark, which is said to be a care facility but, in reality, is a test centre where radical 'treatments' are used to slowly kill off the elderly to alleviate the costs to society. *Really Old, Like Forty Five* revolves around a dysfunctional family of three elderly siblings, Robbie, Alice, and Lyn. Despite their age and illness, each of the three siblings devises a way to maintain their individuality and their place in society. The brother Robbie, who 'looks as though he's in his sixties but is dressed younger',⁸¹² works as an actor, always keeps himself busy with auditions and is determined to affirm his virility by dating younger women. It is later revealed that his real age is eighty-five and he has been wearing a full-face mask to conceal his look. Lyn, 'a woman with a degree in genetic engineering', who has written for the *New Scientist*, given lectures and been on University Challenge, in her struggle with Alzheimer's, finds solace at the Ark in the company of a robot nurse, Mimi. Alice calmly copes with diabetes and the amputation of her leg.

7. *Foxfinder*—Dawn King

Foxfinder won the Papatango Theatre Company new writing competition in 2011 and was produced by Papatango at the Finborough Theatre, 29 November 2011.

The play is set in a distant future or an alternative present in which, due to climate change, food has become scarce, city dwellers have one egg a week on their ration and three ounces of cheese and factory workers are faced with a life expectancy of three years. In this regressive world, the authority actively promotes the us-against-them mentality, with the fox as the emblem of all nonhuman forces that are malicious and destructive. The actions take place in a farm owned by a young couple, Judith and Samuel, during a fox infestation inspection. The nineteen-year-old foxfinder William, despite his rigorous monastic training that teaches him to resist temptation, becomes sexually attracted to the farmer's wife, Judith. Samuel, although initially sceptical of the fox myth, becomes increasingly obsessed with

⁸¹² Oglesby, *Really Old, Like Forty Five*.

hunting down the animal after it is suggested that the fox was responsible for his son's death a year ago. His growing conviction in the myth of the fox alters his perception of reality: he can hear and see the fox when nobody else can. In the end, Samuel shoots William because the latter has coerced Judith into trading sexual favours for a clean report of the farm, claiming that William is not a human being but 'a fox in the shape of a boy'.

8. *The Nether*—Jennifer Haley

The Nether received its world premiere on 24 March 2013 at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Los Angeles, California, produced by Center Theatre Group. Its European premiere was on 17 July 2014 at the Royal Court Theatre in a co-production between Headlong and the Royal Court Theatre. The play has since been produced in twenty-one countries and translated into fifteen languages.

A police procedural play, *The Nether* stages an investigation on the Hideaway—'the most advanced realm there is when it comes to the art of sensation' reserved for individuals with a paedophiliac proclivity to engage in consensual acts of violence. Sims, the Hideaway's creator and administrator (Papa), is a citizen with a whistle clean record, while Doyle, a Hideaway's employee behind the avatar of a little girl named Iris, is a middle-aged science teacher who won a Distinguished Teaching Award in Science. Doyle's attachment to the Hideaway and the avatars there motivates him to crossover permanently, which is not well received by Sims (Papa). During this same time, a real-world investigator, Morris, infiltrates the Hideaway under the alias Woodnut to unveil the unethical practices of the realm. Against his(her) will, Woodnut (Morris) grows increasingly fond of Iris (Doyle) and the nostalgic fantasy in the Hideaway. In one of the most disturbing scenes of the play, Woodnut (Morris), pressured by Papa (Sims), uses an axe to slaughter Iris (Doyle), to prove that he is not getting too close. Traumatized by the event, Morris (Woodnut) leaves the Hideaway for good and begins her in-world investigation with Sims (Papa) and Doyle (Iris). The play is structured in a tangled chronological order up until the last scene, where the past catches up with the present. Unable to face Papa's (Sims') rejection, Doyle commits suicide while Sims is forced to hand over details of the Hideaway's server for an indefinite shutdown.

9. *Pastoral*—Thomas Eccleshare

Pastoral had its first preview at Soho Theatre on 25 April 2013 and its world premiere on 2 May 2013 at HighTide Festival.

Pastoral is set in a small London flat inhabited by an old woman called Moll, who is patiently waiting for an Ocado man to deliver her shopping, completely indifferent to the rising panic in the outside world: people taking flight from the city while the army is on the street to combat the mysterious growth of vegetation. Manz and Hardy, two men in their twenties whose connection to Moll is unspecified, are supposed to take care of her and get her to a safe place, but they soon realise that it is already too late to leave. The three are joined by a family—Mr and Mrs Plum, together with their eleven-year-old son Arthur. As the group struggles with hunger, the Ocado man makes his unexpected arrival, but to their disappointment, the delivery man was attacked on his way and lost everything except for a microwave chicken jalfrezi. The small portion could not assuage their hunger, so they decided that the delivery man himself would be an alternative source of food. Later, Arthur's parents and Moll's caretakers figure out that the military has built a plastic wall for isolation against the rampaging vegetation. Eventually, Moll and Arthur are left behind in the flat as the others escape to the other side of the wall.

10. *Pomona*—Alistair McDowall

First commissioned and performed by the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama on 1 April 2014, *Pomona* was later performed at The Gate Theatre in the NEW festival. It went to the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond in November 2014.

The play has seven named characters and one Figure wearing a Cthulhu mask, who does not have any line. Ollie comes to Pomona looking for her twin sister and is initially helped by Zeppo, who owns the island. Charlie and Moe work as security guards, Fay is a sex worker under the management of Gale, and in turn, Gale works for Keaton, who runs a facility that harvests human organs and babies. Fay used to work with Ollie's sister, but when the latter suddenly disappears, she discovers the other shady businesses in Pomona, including human organ harvesting. She threatens to expose the secret, which gives Gale no choice but to order Charlie and Moe to make her disappear. Unable to comply with this order but equally terrified by what Keaton may do to them, the two guards stab each other to make it look like they did try their best. Unfortunately, Charlie's wound is more severe than intended and he does not survive. In a parallel storyline, we have Charlie and Keaton engaging in a role-playing game that depicts the events of the previous plot, with Keaton taking on the role of Ollie. The play's structure, as such, presents itself as a Mobius strip that makes it impossible to identify which storyline is the dramatic reality.

11. *The Wolf from the Door*—Rory Mullarkey

The Wolf from the Door was first played from 10 September to 1 November 2014 at the Royal Court Theatre.

Catherine, a middle-aged aristocrat, and her friends are devoted to the task of tearing down the society they deem as ‘continually promulgat[ing] hierarchies and slaveries in all their disgusting forms’. Their project aims at improving the quality of life for the majority by liquidating the elites, destroying all hierarchies, resetting the world to a new beginning. At the train station, Catherine picks up and brings home an infantile homeless young man called Leo, who is destined to reign the post-revolution world. Leo becomes Lady Catherine’s protégé. After he decapitates a supermarket assistant manager, the pair embarks on a journey across the country, coordinating with other conspirators to realise a grand plan that would result in the rebirth of the nation. After a bloody resurrection, Leo Lionheart ascends to the throne, and it does seem as if the new order is more desirable: ‘Crime is down. Happiness is up. The wealth is evenly distributed. And public services are running well.’⁸¹³ Unfortunately, this Utopian world is not destined to function or last, especially because of the ridiculous laws imposed by the king. The first suicide in the realm can be said to be the first seed of dissatisfaction and, by extension, of the subsequent revolution.

12. *Radiant Vermin*—Philip Ridley

Radiant Vermin was first produced on 27 February 2015 at the Tobacco Factory Theatre, Bristol, before transferring to Soho Theatre, London.

The play re-enacts the journey of a young couple spiralling down a vicious cycle of murder and greed in search of their dream home. Ollie and Jill are in their late twenties, expecting a child while being stuck in a tiny flat of a place called Red Ocean Estate—‘crime capital of the universe and all that’, where everyone ‘was either a drug dealer or suicidal’. One day, the couple receives a letter from a mysterious Miss Dee employed by the Department of Social Regeneration through the Creation of Dream Homes, informing them that they have been selected for participation in a new scheme. The house assigned to Ollie and Jill, despite being spacious, is run-down and requires a lot of fixing, which the young couple cannot afford. The opportunity for renovation soon presents itself most unexpectedly: the night the couple moved in, a homeless man broke into the house, thinking it was

⁸¹³ Mullarkey, *The Wolf from the Door*, 47.

uninhabited, and during a struggle, he was accidentally killed by Ollie. Panic gives way to perplexity and pleasant surprise when the couple realises that the corpse has disappeared, but the kitchen where the vagrant died is magically transformed into a designer kitchen with a self-replenishing fridge. Jill and Ollie then make careful plans to collect ‘renovators’ for their dream home. At one point, however, the house stops changing. The enigmatic Miss Dee reappears and presents another opportunity: the couple is to move to another house, as run-down as their current house in the beginning, and to start everything all over again. Only that this time, the new house will require double sacrifices, meaning each ‘renovation’ will need two ‘renovators’. Jill and Ollie take the offer without hesitation.

13. *Escaped Alone*—Caryl Churchill

Escaped Alone was first played from January to March, 2016 at the Royal Court Theatre.

The plot is straightforward enough: four women in their seventies are having a tea party in the backyard and discussing daily life topics such as family members, TV shows, and personal maladies. These conversations are, however, interspersed with Mrs Jarrett’s frightening but also hilarious apocalyptic monologues featuring flood, starvation, cannibalism, pestilence and more. During the garden scenes, there are also moments that disrupt the flow of conversation, as each character takes turns to deliver their interior monologues revealing the destruction of the four women’s personal universe: cat phobia in the case of Sally, Lena’s depression, Mrs Jarrett’s ‘terrible rage’ and Vi’s trauma caused by murdering her husband.

14. *X*—Alistair McDowall

X was first played from 30 March to 7 May 2016 at the Royal Court Theatre

The play is set in a post-apocalyptic future with four astronauts stranded in a research base on Pluto, restlessly waiting for the rescue team. Towards the end of Act One, however, any resemblance of normality disappears as it is revealed that the main clock of the base, to which all the clocks are linked, has gone wrong, and nobody knows when the problem started. There was a day that lasted at least fifty hours, and the three years that the astronauts thought they had spent on Pluto might have been much longer. Things get stranger when a huge bloody X suddenly appears outside a window, and one of the crew, Ray, encounters a mysterious girl with an X at the place of her mouth. He later commits suicide. Act Two of the

play is sprinkled with lines previously heard in the first act but now delivered by different characters, which renders unstable both character identity and the narrative. After Cole passes away due to illness, Gilda and Clark struggle to maintain their perception of reality by telling stories to each other. However, stuck in space and time, their language starts to regress, and the ominous X seeps in to take over everything. It is later revealed that the mysterious fifth member, Matter, whom Gilda claims to be with the crew from the beginning, is the daughter she has with Clarke. The whole play, as such, can be read as the fabulation of Gilda's demented mind, who, after years of being trapped in the base, can no longer distinguish between the recollection of the early days she spent with the other crew members and the reality in which she and her grown-up daughter Mattie are the only two survivors.

15. *Elegy*—Nick Payne

Elegy was first performed at the Donmar Warehouse, London, on 21 April 2016

Set in a near future when advances in medical science led to the possibility of curing all mental and neurological diseases, *Elegy* explores the relationship of a couple in their sixties, Lorna and Carrie, in the face of a treatment that would save Lorna's life but would also erase the last twenty or twenty-five years of her memory, which is the entire length of her relationship with Carrie. The play is presented in reverse chronology, starting with Scene Seven, where Lorna, recently discharged from hospital after a brain operation, sees Carrie as a complete stranger and treats her coldly. It then moves backwards in time and ending with Scene One, in which the couple, still very much in love with each other, is in the first stage of discussing whether Lorna would receive the treatment.

16. *Human Animals*—Stef Smith

Human Animals was first performed from 18 May to 18 June 2016 at the Royal Court Theatre.

The play is situated in the midst of a mysterious surge in the number of wild animals in London. The audience witnesses how a seemingly harmless anthropocentric mentality can evolve into a justification for animal genocide. In response to the escalating emergency and the fear of infection, the authority systematically exterminates first the pigeon, the fox, the rat, then domestic and zoo animals. Soon enough, violence against nonhuman animals is extended to include oppression against those humans who refuse to comply. The play is an intersection of the lives of six characters, many of whom are tested both psychologically and

physically by the crisis: Nancy, whose husband recently passed away, becomes increasingly depressed and attempts suicide; Lisa, who works for a chemical company, chooses self-denial but is forced to face reality when her house is burnt down and her partner, Jamie, assaulted by the authority for having sheltered wild animals; Alex, Nancy's daughter, realises that her ideal of activism falls short of what she imagined after attending and running away from a protest. Towards the end of *Human Animals*, it is implied that the quarantine would soon be lifted, a new normality returns but the crisis, both environment and social, is far from being over.

17. *The Children*—Lucy Kirkwood

The Children was first performed from 17 November 2016 to 14 January 2017 at the Royal Court Theatre.

Set in a cottage in an east coast town devastated by a nuclear meltdown, Kirkwood's post-apocalyptic play is a tale of generational responsibility. Hazel and Robin, two retired scientists, receive a visit from Rose, an ex-colleague whom they have not seen for thirty-eight years. It is later revealed that the purpose of Rose's sudden appearance is not simply to reminisce about the old days but to recruit a group of people who used to work at the power station to take over from the current crew that is working on the shutdown so that they can let most of the young ones go. Hazel, a consistently health-conscious person, does not receive the news well. Robin, on the other hand, is eager to join Rose, not because of an old flame but out of a desire to fulfil his responsibility to the future generation. After the incident, Robin still goes back to the old farm inside the exclusion zone every day, claiming to feed the cows but, in reality, spending his day digging graves for the dead animals. By the end of the play, Robin starts to cough out blood—an unambiguous sign that his body has been affected by the trips he made to the farm. The play ends with the image of Rose joining Hazel in her yoga routine, a moment of tranquillity before the coming storm.

18. *Victory Condition*—Chris Thorpe

Victory Condition was first played from 5 October to 21 October 2017 at the Royal Court Theatre

The play opens with a couple, simply called Man and Woman, returning to their apartment after a trip and spending the rest of the day in the company of each other, doing things most couples would do on an uneventful evening, such as unpacking, eating pizza and

drinking wine. However, it soon becomes clear that the air of normalcy emanating from the normal-looking couple and their standardised home furnished by mass-produced furniture is a deception, for the play immediately plunges into a strange world of multiple narratives. *Victory Condition* is delivered as two monologues intercutting each other. These monologues open up parallel worlds, in which Man is a sniper falling in love with his target—a freedom fighter, and Woman, who works in the graphics department of an advertising firm, one day gains access to a system that can reboot the simulation of reality. The play closes with Woman addressing the audience directly to question whether they would help a homeless woman when stepping out of the theatre, despite being uncertain if she deserves the help.

19. *Instructions for Correct Assembly*—Thomas Eccleshare

Instructions for Correct Assembly was first performed from 7 April to 19 May 2018 at the Royal Court Theatre.

The play is set in an alternative present in which a middle-aged couple, Hari and Max, construct a replacement of their son out of components readily available from an IKEA-like store. They struggle to set up the humanoid, Jån, into a perfect son whose thoughts and behaviour correspond exactly to their expectations. It is revealed that Jån is a replacement for Nick, the couple's real son who betrayed their hope by becoming an addict and left home. During the house party that Hari and Max arrange as an occasion to showcase the humanoid as an ideal son, Jån starts to malfunction, speaking and behaving erratically, and eventually destroys the house. The couple has no other choice but to dismantle him. However, they also come up with a radical solution for their dream of perfect happiness: Hari inserts Jån's chip into his head and effectively turns himself into a cyborg, an operation later performed on Max as well. At the structural level, *Instructions for Correct Assembly* mixes past and present scenes, which sometimes confuses the audience, especially since the son (Nick) and the humanoid (Jån) are played by the same actor.

Annexe 2—Playwrights

1. Edward Bond

With a career spanning six decades, Edward Bond is often considered one of the greatest living British dramatists. His notable works include *The Pope's Wedding* (Royal Court Theatre, 1962), *Saved* (Royal Court, 1965), *Early Morning* (Royal Court, 1968), *Lear* (Royal Court, 1971), *The Sea* (Royal Court, 1973), *The Woman* (National Theatre, 1978), *Restoration* (Royal Court, 1981). In addition to *The Chair Plays*, Bond also wrote many that can be characterised as speculative plays, such as *The War Plays* (RSC at the Barbican Pit, 1985)—*Red Black and Ignorant*, *The Tin Can People*, *Great Peace*; the *Colline Pentad*—*Coffee* (1996), *The Crime of the Twenty-first Century* (2001), *Born* (2006), *People* (2006) and *Innocence* (2009). Among the playwrights included in this research, Bond is perhaps one of the most vocal about the current state of the theatre. His other published works include a collection of essays entitled *The Hidden Plot* (1999), four volumes of letters and two volumes from his notebooks. Compared to his tricky relationship with theatre establishment in Great Britain due to his reputation as a difficult collaborator, Bond is very well received in France, thanks to the long-time partnership with the director Alain Françon. His latest play, *Dea* (Sutton Theatre, 2016), is loosely based on the myth of Medea. The amount of rape, incest, fellatio, necrophilia, homicide, and filicide represented on stage has attracted some damning reviews. At the same time, positive reviews contend that there is much more to *Dea* than shock value.

Dea is an allegory on the state of the world with its protagonist as the central embodiment of decadence, regret, and madness. Her name, Dea, which is primarily a play on Medea, is a clever choice as it is comprised of the first three letters of the word 'dead' showing on a linguistic level how close the world is to being both morally and physically dead.⁸¹⁴

Despite its extensive use of visual representation of violence, which diverges from the strategies Bond employed in *The Chair Plays*, it can be said that *Dea* continues to manifest Bond's tireless pursuit of a 'rational theatre', his lasting interest in reconfiguring myths to reflect the conditions of the twenty-first century and in sustaining hope in the most impossible of circumstances.

⁸¹⁴ Yeliz Biber Vangölü, 'Still Expressing the Need for the Rational: Edward Bond's *Dea*', *TDR: The Drama Review* 61, no. 3 (2017): 176.

2. Caryl Churchill

Often described as ‘the most consistently innovative playwright of the postwar era’,⁸¹⁵ Caryl Churchill is perhaps a name that does not need much introduction in the field of British theatre studies. Churchill’s career has been thoroughly discussed in several monographs and collections.⁸¹⁶ Some of her notable works for the stage include *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (Traverse Theatre, 1976), *Cloud Nine* (Dartington College of Arts, 1979), *Top Girls* (Royal Court, 1982), *Serious Money* (Royal Court, 1987), *The Striker* (Royal National Theatre, 1994), *Blue Heart* (Royal Court, 1997), *A Number* (Royal Court, 2002), *Love and Information* (Royal Court, 2012). From her early radio play *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (1971), we can already see the prominent use of speculative elements. Set in a post-apocalyptic 2010 London, the play depicts a world ravaged by pollution, congestion and violence, where oxygen and water are in short supply and ‘all kinds of life forms (bird, grass, people) are either extinct or threatened with extinction’.⁸¹⁷ Two of Churchill’s most recent works for the stage, *Glass. Kill. Bluebeard. Imp.* (Royal Court, 2019) and *What If If Only* (Royal Court, 2021), explore the short form of speculative theatre. *Glass. Kill. Bluebeard. Imp.* is a four-play cycle portraying ‘crepuscular, fairy tale worlds, stalked by abuse and violence’⁸¹⁸ with reference from Angela Carter and the Brothers Grimm, ancient Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, while *What If If Only* presents a ‘romantic slant on the multiverse, mixed with a metaphysical ghost story’.⁸¹⁹ It would not be inaccurate to claim that Churchill’s lasting interest in the speculative and her tireless formal experimentation are mutually inclusive.

⁸¹⁵ Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), 25.

⁸¹⁶ See for instance, Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill* (London: Northcote, 2001); Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond, *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); R. Darren Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Mary Luckhurst, *Caryl Churchill* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁸¹⁷ Elaine Aston, “‘A Licence to Kill’: Caryl Churchill’s Socialist-Feminist “Ideas of Nature””, in *Performing Nature: Explorations in Ecology and the Arts*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 168.

⁸¹⁸ Hannah Greenstreet, ‘Review: *Glass. Kill. Bluebeard. Imp.* at Royal Court’, *Exeunt Magazine*, 30 September 2019, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-glass-kill-bluebeard-imp-royal-court/>.

⁸¹⁹ Marianka Swain, ‘*What If If Only* Review - Caryl Churchill’s Newest Play Proves Small Can Be Mighty’, *London Theatre Guide*, 4 October 2021, <https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/reviews/what-if-if-only-review-royal-court>.

3. Thomas Eccleshare

Thomas Eccleshare is the Verity Bargate Award-winning writer of *Pastoral* (2011). Trained at the Jacques Lecoq school, he currently works as a playwright and co-artistic director of Arches Brick Award-winning company Dancing Brick that makes visual theatre. In addition to *Pastoral* and *Instructions for Correct Assembly*, he also wrote *I'm Not Here Right Now* (Paines Plough's Roundabout, 2015) and *Heather* (Bush Theatre, 2017). *I'm Not Here Right Now* explores the dilemma faced by a Slovenian scientist, who is shunned by the scientific community for recounting her recent encounter with a mythical creature that resembles a Yeti. The play relies heavily on narration, with a narrator (played by Eccleshare himself) reading from a script while an actress portrays the protagonist, Claire. Despite the relatively negative reviews, *I'm Not Here Right Now* can be seen as Eccleshare's experiment with the storytelling form to create 'gaps' to facilitate imagination for the audience.

Gaps are the spaces into which the audience is able to pour their imagination. These gaps might be stylistic (a mimed bottle instead of a real one) or narrative (why does Frank not work at his bar any more?) or formal (three distinct acts) or even just typographic (setting the scenes in different rooms in *Instructions*, with no explicit explanation of what that might look like onstage).⁸²⁰

4. Jennifer Haley

Jennifer Haley is an American playwright and winner of the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for *The Nether*. Her work, which 'delves into ethics in virtual reality and the impact of technology on our human relationships, identity, and desire',⁸²¹ is heavily invested with speculative elements. In addition to *The Nether*, Haley's most successful play that has been translated into fifteen languages and produced in twenty-one countries, including Britain, her other plays include *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom*, which combines the horror genre and video game addiction, and *Froggy*, 'a noir thriller with interactive media'.⁸²² In the same way that *The Nether* explores the porosity of the division between the virtual and reality, *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* stages a world where realities merge, teenagers

⁸²⁰ Eccleshare, *Thomas Eccleshare: Plays One*.

⁸²¹ 'Biography - Jennifer Haley'.

⁸²² *Ibid.*

in a suburban community are caught up in a game that ‘transforms the aggravations of their daily lives into the horrors of a splatter movie’.⁸²³

5. Dawn King

Similar to Jennifer Haley, Dawn King’s career is strongly associated with the speculative. Her work is not limited to theatre but also includes film, television, virtual reality and radio. In addition to *Foxfinder*, which made King winner of the Royal National Theatre Foundation Playwright Award 2013, Papatango New Writing Competition 2011 and Most Promising Playwright, Off West End awards 2012, finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize 2012 and the James Tait Black drama prize 2012, her other plays include an adaptation of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (The Royal and Derngate, Northampton, 2015), *Ciphers* (Bush Theatre, 2016) and *Salt* (National Theatre, 2019). In 2019, she also co-created immersive dystopian rave *Dystopia987* for Manchester International Festival.⁸²⁴ King’s most recent play, *The Trials*, will receive a German premiere at the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus in 2021. Set in a near-future world threatened by climate change and resource scarcity, *The Trials* explores the question of generational responsibility, as the older generation are judged for their crime by a young jury of 12—17-year-olds.

6. Lucy Kirkwood

The author of *Chimerica* (2013), which won the Critics’ Circle, Evening Standard and Olivier Awards for Best New Play and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for best play in the English language by a female writer, Lucy Kirkwood is deeply involved in current political issues, ranging from US-Asia relations and the nuclear threat to racism, sex trafficking and the media’s commercialisation of sexuality. Her other work includes *The Welkins* (National Theatre, 2020), *Mosquitoes* (National Theatre, 2017), *NSFW* (Royal Court, 2012), *small hours* (co-written with Ed Hime; Hampstead Theatre, 2011), *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it is alright now* (Clean Break at the Arcola Theatre, 2009; winner of the John Whiting Award) and *Tinderbox* (Bush Theatre, 2008). Among these, *Tinderbox* is the only play that contains speculative elements. A dark comedy set in a fictional twenty-first-century England that is dissolving into the sea due to climate change, *Tinderbox* tells the story of the former porn star Vanessa’s struggle to reclaim her agency from her bigot husband, the

⁸²³ Ben Brantley, ‘Review: In ‘*Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom*, Video Game Horrors’, *The New York Times*, 20 November 2015, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/theater/review-in-neighborhood-3-requisition-of-doom-video-game-horrors.html>.

⁸²⁴ ‘Dawn King’, Dawn King, n.d., <https://www.dawn-king.com>.

butcher Saul, in a brutal world where human beings are literally transformed into meat for consumption.

7. Alistair McDowall

Winner of the 2011 Bruntwood Prize for *Brilliant Adventures* (Royal Exchange, 2013), Alistair McDowall is already regarded as a playwright adept at finding a form that best articulates the content of his plays, be it linguistic collapse, chronological disruption or entangled realities.⁸²⁵ In addition to *Pomona* and *X*, McDowall's other plays include *Talk Show* (Royal Court, 2013), *Captain Amazing* (Soho Theatre, 2014) and *all of it* (Royal Court, 2020). Most of McDowall's plays are abundant with pop-culture references, which shows his commitment to problematising the boundary between 'low' and 'high' cultures, while the prominent presence of elements from the science-fiction and horror genres can be said to be his attempt at expanding the possibility of the theatre medium. In the words of Simon Stephens, McDowall manages to '[articulate] that tension between the convention and the individual, the genre and the story with more honesty and commitment to the form than any other playwright this millennium'.⁸²⁶

8. Rory Mullarkey

In addition to *The Wolf from the Door*, Rory Mullarkey's original plays include *Pity* (Royal Court, 2018), *Saint George and the Dragon* (National Theatre, 2017), *Each Slow Dusk* (Pentabus, 2014) and *Cannibals* (Royal Exchange, Manchester, 2013—winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Drama in 2014). While *Cannibals* and *Each Slow Dusk* adopt a serious tone while dealing with the topic of war, Mullarkey's three latest plays turn to absurdism in their exploration of contemporary British politics. *Saint George and the Dragon* interrogates the relevance of individual saviours in the twenty-first century by introducing the audience to the national hero, Saint George, in three eras of history—feudalism, the industrial revolution and capitalism. With *Pity*, Mullarkey further pursues the carnival sense of the world already seen in *The Wolf from the Door*, plunging us into the apocalyptic chaos of a collapsing Britain, where the most surreal and unthinkable become possible.

⁸²⁵ Simon Stephens, 'Foreword', in *Alistair McDowall Plays: 1* (London & New York: Methuen Drama, 2016), xii.

⁸²⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

9. Tamsin Oglesby

Besides *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, Tamsin Oglesby's other plays include *Future Conditional* (Old Vic Theatre, 2015), *The War Next Door* (Tricycle Theatre, 2007), *US and Them and My Best Friend* (Hampstead Theatre, 2003) and *Two Lips Indifferent Red* (Bush Theatre, 1995). In most of her work, Oglesby seems to commit to social realism, drawing the audience's attention to issues such as dysfunctional family and schooling system, divided communities, or the rhetoric of the beauty industry. That is not to say that she is completely disinterested in the speculative. In addition to the dystopian setting of *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, Oglesby also adapts Russell Hoban's classic children tale *The Mouse and His Child* (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2012), which tells the story of two clockwork mice on their quest for a home and family love, fighting against Manny the Rat, a dictatorial figure who schemes to strip the clockwork from all the world's toys.

10. Nick Payne

Nick Payne is one of several British playwrights who have, in recent years, '[turned] to science as a source of metaphors and forms, using the language of particle physics, evolution or mathematics as ways of speaking about human experience'.⁸²⁷ His most critically acclaimed play, *Constellations* (The Royal Court, 2012—Evening Standard Award for Best Play), draws on the multiverse theory, playing out crucial moments in the interaction of the two characters Roland and Marianne in different possibilities. *Incognito* (Live Theatre, 2014) is another brain teaser, in which four actors play twenty-one characters within three interwoven stories about the brain, memory and identity. Payne's other plays include *If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet* (Bush Theatre, 2009), *Wanderlust* (Royal Court, 2010), *The Same Deep Water As Me* (Donmar Warehouse, 2013), and *A Life* (Public Theater, New York, 2019).

11. Philip Ridley

A multiple award winner writer, Philip Ridley has written many influential stage plays such as *The Pitchfork Disney* (Bush Theatre, 1991), *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (Hampstead Theatre, 1992—winner of a Time Out Award, the Critics' Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright, and the Meyer-Whitworth Prize), *Ghost from a Perfect Place*

⁸²⁷ Liliane Campos, 'Quantum Configurations in Nick Payne's *Constellations*', *Études Britanniques Contemporaines. Revue de La Société D'études Anglaises Contemporaines*, no. 45 (October 2013).

(Hampstead Theatre, 1994), *Tender Napalm* (Southwark Playhouse, 2011), *Shivered* (Southwark Playhouse, 2012), *Dark Vanilla Jungle* (Pleasance Courtyard, Edinburgh, 2013). He also wrote a number of plays for young people and family such as *The Storyteller Sequence* (1998-2004) and *Feathers in the Snow* (Southwark Playhouse, 2012). Frequently associated with in-yer-face theatre in the 90s, Ridley has shown particular interest in the gothic. One of his most recent plays, *Karagula* (Styx, London, 2016), is a mixture of various speculative genres and subgenres including dystopia, apocalypse, science fiction and myth—‘a TARDIS-full of visual sci-fi references’⁸²⁸ or ‘a totally immersive mythological experience that is both amazing and exhilarating’.⁸²⁹ *Karagula*, set in the two totalitarian states of Mareka and COTNA, tells the story of two teenagers rebelling against the authority with the aid of ‘meteor showers, telepathy, radiation, mutation, odd births, pet wolves and weaponised giant lizards’.⁸³⁰ Ridley career as a playwright, as such, demonstrates lasting commitment to exploring the impossible through the theatre medium.

12. Stef Smith

Stef Smith is a Scottish writer who won an Olivier in 2012 for the show *Roadkill* that portrays sex trafficking. In addition to *Human Animals*, her other works include *Nora: A Doll’s House* (The Citizens Theatre, Glasgow, 2019), *Enough* (Traverse Theatre, 2019), *Girl in the Machine* (Traverse Theatre, 2017), *Swallow* (Traverse Theatre, 2015), *Remote* (NT Connections 2015). Among these, *Girl in the Machine* is another speculative play discussing the problematic relationship between humans and technology. A piece of dystopian science fiction that recalls Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror*, *Girl in the Machine* is set in a future where people carry a microchip under their skin and those struggling with depression have the option of losing themselves in a virtual reality headset known as the Black Box. As digital dependency grows, people start to upload their consciousness to the headset in their quest for happiness.

13. Chris Thorpe

A playwright and performer, Chris Thorpe is perhaps the least committed to the speculative among the playwrights included in this research. Some of his best-known works

⁸²⁸ Catherine Love, ‘Review: *Karagula* at Styx’, *Exeunt Magazine*, 18 June 2016, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-karagula-styx/>.

⁸²⁹ Aleks Sierz, ‘*Karagula* by Philip Ridley at Styx’, Aleks Sierz, 16 June 2016, <https://www.sierz.co.uk/reviews/karagula-styx/>.

⁸³⁰ *Ibid.*

include *The Mysteries* (Royal Exchange, 2018), *Confirmation* (Northern Stage at King's Hall, Edinburgh, 2014, co-written with Rachel Chavkin), and *There Has Possibly Been an Incident* (Soho Theatre, 2013), none of which contains any speculative elements. However, it must be noted that the dramaturgies Thorpe employs in *Victory Condition* and many other plays converge in their attempt to engage the audience in a parrhesiastic practice of truth-telling. *Confirmation*, a verbatim-driven production, recounts Thorpe's encounters with a white supremacist neo-Nazi he calls 'Glen'. Even though the playwright eventually rejects 'the ethical call for an endless, mutual dialogue of unknowable difference with his "other",'⁸³¹ the existence of the production itself attest to Thorpe's effort to foster an ethical relationship with his ideological 'others'. At the same time, Thorpe's rejection of an endless dialogue brings into relief the urgency of decision and action, which effectively makes the production a perfect illustration of the utopian impulse invested in the impossible.

⁸³¹ Liz Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship: Provocations for Change* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), 18.

Annexe 3—Figures



Figure 1 Cara Horgan (Joan) and Tristan Sturrock (Todd) in Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, Bristol Old Vic, May 2010. Directed by Simon Godwin, design by Lizzie Clachan, lighting by James Farncombe. Photo: Donald Cooper.



Figure 2 Samantha Colley (Joan) in *Far Away*, Young Vic Clare Studio, November 2014. Directed by Kate Hewitt, design by Georgia Lowe. Photo: Richard Hubert-Smith.



Figure 3 *Far Away*, Spike Island, Cork, June 2017. Directed by Pat Kiernan, lighting and set design by Aedin Cosgrove and Paul Keogan. Photo: Mary Leland.



Figure 4 Linda Bassett as Mrs Jarrett in *Escaped Alone*, BAM Harvey Theater, New York, February 15, 2017. Directed by James Macdonald, set design by Miriam Buether, lighting by Peter Mumford, sound design by Christopher Shutt. Photo: Richard Termine.



Figure 5 *An Inspector Calls* by John Boynton Priestley, directed by Stephen Daldry, National Theatre, 1992, designed by Ian MacNeil. Photo: Philip Carter.



Figure 6 *The Homecoming* by Harold Pinter, Trafalgar Studios, London, 2016. Directed by Jamie Lloyd, set designed by Soutra Gilmour, lighting design by Rich Howell, sound design by George Dennis. Photo: Marc Brenner.



Figure 7 Danny Webb (Ian) in *Blasted* by Sarah Kane, Lyric Hammersmith, London, 2010. Directed by Sean Holmes, designed by Paul Wills, lighting design by Paule Constable. Photo: Paul Wills.



Figure 8 Sean Michael Verey (Ollie) and Gemma Whelan (Jill) in *Radiant Vermin* by Philip Ridley, March 2015, Soho Theatre, London. Directed by David Mercatali, set design and lighting by William Reynolds. Photo: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian.



Figure 9 Felix Scott (Dummy Actor) and Nicholas Gleaves (Jack) performing Edward Bond's *The Under Room* at the Lyric Hammersmith, London, April 2012, directed by Edward Bond. Photo: Tristram Kenton.



Figure 10 Stef Smith's *Human Animals*, The Royal Court Theatre, May 2016. Directed by Hamish Pirie, set design by Camilla Clarke, lighting by Lizzie Powell, sound by Mark Melville. Photo: Camilla Clarke.



Figure 11 *Instructions for Correct Assembly* by Thomas Eccleshare, April 2018, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs at the Royal Court, London. Directed by Hamish Pirie, designed by Cai Dyfan, lighting by Jack Knowles, sound by Helen Skiera. Photo: Cai Dyfan.



Figure 12 *Foxfinder* by Dawn King, Ambassadors Theatre, October 2018, directed by Rachel O’Riordan, designed by Gary McCann, sound design by Simon Slater. Photo: Nicholas Ephram Ryan Daniels.



Figure 13 *Human Animals* by Stef Smith, Royal Court Theatre, London, May 2016. Directed by Hamish Pirie, set design by Camilla Clark, lighting design by Lizzie Powell. Photo: Camilla Clark.



Figure 14 *Pastoral* by Thomas Eccleshare, Soho Theatre, London, 2013. Directed by Steve Marmion, set design by Michael Vale, lighting design by Philip Gladwell, sound and music by Tom Mills. Photo: Tristram Kenton.



Figure 15 *The Children* by Lucy Kirkwood, The Royal Court Theatre, London, November 2016. Directed by James Macdonald, design by Miriam Buether. Photo: Johan Persson.



Figure 16 *Escaped Alone* by Caryl Churchill, The Royal Court, London, 2016. Directed by James Macdonald, design by Miriam Buether, lighting by Peter Mumford, sound by Christopher Shutt. Photo: Johan Persson.

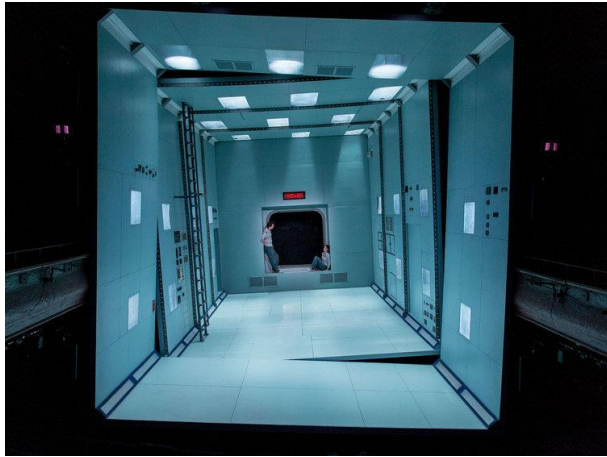


Figure 17 *X* by Alistair McDowall, Royal Court Theatre, London, 2016, directed by Vicky Featherstone, designed by Merle Hensel, lighting by Lee Curran. Photo: Manuel Harlan.



Figure 18 *The Nether* by Jennifer Haley, Duke of York Theatre, London, February 2015, directed by Jeremy Herrin, designed by Es Devlin, video by Luke Halls, lighting by Paul Pyant. Photo: Es Devlin.



Figure 19 Sarah Middleton (Keaton), Rebecca Humphries (Fay) and Guy Rhys (Zeppo) in Alistair McDowall's *Pomona*, Orange Tree, Richmond, 2014, directed by Ned Bennett, designed by Georgia Lowe. Photo: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian.



Figure 20 Jonjo O'Neill and Sharon Duncan-Brewster as Man and Woman in *Victory Condition* by Chris Thorpe, September 2017, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs at the Royal Court, London, directed by Vicky Featherstone, designed by Chloe Lamford, lightning by Lizzie Powell.

L'expérience aporétique dans le théâtre spéculatif britannique contemporain—Vers un autre mode de réflexion utopique

Résumé

Cette thèse analyse un corpus de pièces spéculatives britanniques du XXI^e siècle dans le cadre des études utopiques et de la déconstruction. Mon objectif est d'examiner la manière par laquelle le théâtre spéculatif envisage l'aporie comme mode de réflexion utopique et d'élucider les implications de cet « aporia turn » sur la question de l'engagement social et politique du théâtre. Je commence avec une étude de la mythopoeia du théâtre spéculatif, en tenant compte à la fois des récits spécifiques et de la forme générale de la parole mythique. Mon examen révèle les stratégies pour reconfigurer et repolitiser le mythe en renonçant à sa logique binaire. Cette dénaturalisation de la parole mythique est cruciale pour l'imagination d'une forme radicalement différente de vivre-ensemble, qui est le thème du chapitre suivant. Au lieu d'une communauté fondée sur des valeurs partagées, plusieurs pièces évoquent une relation non hiérarchique soutenue par la pensée de non-identité et la résistance à une approche monologique du langage. Dans le dernier chapitre, je mets en valeur les stratégies dramaturgiques qui génèrent une expérience aporétique tendant vers la possibilité d'une quasi-communauté de singularités envisagée dans le chapitre précédent. En mettant en scène la sensibilité gothique contemporaine et l'enchevêtrement de l'espace, du temps et de la responsabilité, ces pièces invitent l'audience à une répétition du changement et de la résistance. Je soutiens que l'espace de spéculation utopique ouvert par le théâtre britannique contemporain, imprégné d'incertitude et d'impossible, a une grande pertinence politique et éthique.

Mots-clés : théâtre spéculatif ; utopisme ; déconstruction ; aporie sophistique ; parole mythique ; hétéroglossie ; non-identité ; idiorrythmie ; sujet impliqué ; pratique parrhésiastique ; théâtre politique

Aporetic Experience in Contemporary British Speculative Theatre—Towards Another Mode of Utopian Thinking

Summary

This thesis analyses a corpus of twenty-first-century British speculative plays in light of utopian studies and deconstruction. My goal is to examine the way contemporary speculative theatre engages with aporia as a mode of utopian thinking and to elucidate the implications of this 'aporia turn' on the question of theatre's social and political commitment. I begin my main analysis with a study of speculative theatre's mythopoeia, taking into account both specific narratives and the general form of mythical speech. My examination reveals the strategies adopted by speculative theatre to reconfigure and repoliticise myth by resisting its binary logic. This denaturalisation of mythical speech is crucial for the imagination of a radically different form of living-together, which is the focus of the next chapter. Instead of a community based on shared values and similarities, many plays call for a mode of non-hierarchical relationality sustained by nonidentity thinking and resistance against a monologic approach to language. In the last chapter, I will elucidate the dramaturgical strategies employed to generate an aporetic experience that points towards the possibility of a quasi-community of singularities envisioned in the previous chapter. By staging the contemporary Gothic sensibility and the entanglement of space, time, and responsibility, these plays engage the implicated spectator in a rehearsal for change and resistance. I would argue that the space of utopian speculation opened up by contemporary British speculative theatre, permeated with uncertainty and the impossible, is of great political and ethical relevance.

Keywords : speculative theatre; utopianism; deconstruction; sophistic aporia; mythical speech; heteroglossia; nonidentity; idiorrhythmy; the implicated subject; parrhesiastic practice; political theatre

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