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Author(s)	Lonergan, Patrick
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## **‘A twisted, looping form’ – Staging Dark Ecologies in Ella Hickson’s Oil**

Ecological art, writes Timothy Morton, ‘must include ugliness and disgust, and haunting weirdness, and a sense of unreality as much as reality’ (2018: 138). Ella Hickson’s Oil premiered in 2016, two years before that statement was published in Morton’s Being Ecological – yet, as I argue in this paper, an analysis of Hickson’s play illustrates the validity of Morton’s claim, while also revealing the potential of theatre to foster new modes of ecological awareness or – to borrow a term from another of Morton’s books - of ‘ecognosis’ (Dark Ecology, 2016: 5). Hickson’s use of theatrical form registers the sense of ‘weirdness’ that arises from ecological awareness, making Oil a key example of how new stage representations of reality – particularly relating to the performance of time – are being developed in plays on ecological themes. By considering the relationship between the length of a human life and the depletion of a so-called ‘natural resource’ over three centuries, Hickson shows that one function of art in the Anthropocene era might be to identify the impact of human activity across what Morton calls ‘monstrously gigantic’ spans of time and space (2016: 25). In doing so, she has created a play that encourages audiences to think deeply about dark ecology and its consequences.

The action of Oil unfolds in five parts, the first set in Cornwall in 1889 and the last taking place in the same location in 2051, with the intervening scenes set in Tehran (in 1908), London (in 1970) and Kurdistan (in 2021). Its primary focus is the relationship between a mother and daughter, stretching from the conception of the latter (which is revealed in the first part of the play) to the old age of the former (shown in the concluding scene). Hickson is thus merging two chronologies, one exploring the history of England’s use of oil from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, and the other covering the span of the seven or eight decades that usually make up a single human lifetime, which in the present case is that of the mother, May. ‘I knew that we had to take one character through time in order to emotionally relate to [her],’ explained Hickson:

One of our problems in using natural resources is that they [last] slightly longer than our own lifetime. Oil takes 150 million years to make. We will have used all of it in 250 years. And somehow because that 250 years is just a

smidge longer than one lifetime, it feels like no-one has to take singular responsibility for what is [an] awful use of resources (Almeida Theatre, 2016)

Hickson is thus attempting to bridge a gap that has also been identified by Timothy Morton: the space between the individual's responsibility for causing global warming by burning fossil fuels (which is, Morton points out, statistically insignificant on an individual basis) and the undeniable need to attribute responsibility to the human species for the transformation of the climate (a need complicated by the fact that some groups of humans are more responsible than others [note 1]). In such a context, oil – or, more precisely, our species' use of it – might be considered one example of what Morton calls 'hyperobjects', entities 'so massively distributed we can't directly grasp them empirically' (2016: 11). It might therefore be possible to consider Hickson's Oil in relation to Morton's discussion in Dark Ecology of the music video for Orbital's 'The Box', which, he writes, 'performs the difficulty of thinking on more than one scale at once' – an act that is exactly 'the thinking that ecological awareness demands' (2016: 40). Hickson is not just thinking at the level of both individual and species simultaneously; she is also seeking to enhance the audience's capacity to engage in that kind of thinking independently.

Hickson's Oil can readily be analysed in the context of the particular space and time of its premiere. Originally produced at the Almeida in London in October 2016, it offered British society an unambiguously negative perspective on its imperial past only four months after the Brexit referendum, demonstrating that nostalgia for Empire remained a potent force in the life of that nation. It also explored the relationship between capitalism and the patriarchal mistreatment of women at a time when the #metoo movement was gaining force. Furthermore, only a month before the signing of the Paris Agreement, it left its 2016 audience in no doubt that their use of fossil fuels was and would remain morally as well as ecologically disastrous.

But my suggestion is that Oil also transcends those particulars, that it can and must be seen as an exemplary form of ecological art in the terms that Morton proposes. In the argument that follows, I want to draw attention to its moments of 'ugliness and disgust', and its deliberate 'weirdness'. But its most important achievement, I suggest, is its blend of 'unreality' with 'reality', both of those words being placed in quotation marks because Hickson demonstrates their interchangeability and thus their imprecision. Hers is an approach that allows

audiences to begin the process of thinking on multiple chronological levels or scales – but it also demands they consider whether their conception of ‘reality’ has become a barrier to the resolution of the climate crisis. As Bonneuil and Fressoz point out, the approach of governments to tackling climate change displays evidence of a ‘reality schism’ whereby a ‘façade of global governance [is] quite removed from a “world reality, that of the globalization of markets and the frenetic exploitation of resources”’ (2016: 218). Hickson’s play explores and explodes that schism, and requires us to reconsider our own agency in the ‘exploitation of resources’ too.

It is possible to locate Oil in the context of a number of recent dramatic works that seek to promote ecological awareness by adopting non-realistic and/or metaphorical approaches to the representation of time. Una Chaudhuri has identified how certain plays have sought to ‘undertake recalibrations of scale across the drama of ideas, distorting its familiar surfaces to reveal the “footprints of hyperobjects” all around us and within us’ – a development that she sees as a signal of the emergence of a ‘new – Anthro-scenic – imagination, figuring species life across many scales’ (183). Within the British tradition, [note 2] Joe White’s Mayfly (2018) is, like Oil, a play that encourages audiences to think ‘across many scales’, using the short lifespan of the eponymous insect as a metaphor for the relationship between the duration of a human life and the progression of the natural world over centuries. ‘Time is always moving somewhere,’ writes White in his stage directions, and his use of form attempts to encapsulate the accuracy of that observation (2018: 2). Mike Bartlett’s Earthquakes in London (2010) also blurs distinctions between past, present and future, jumping between 1969 and 2525 to explore how humanity reacts when faced with the prospect of global catastrophe. Also significant is Bartlett’s use of the materiality of theatre to develop his themes. ‘The stage should overflow with scenery, sound, backdrops, lighting, projection’ he writes, explaining that because his play is ‘about excess ... we should feel that’ (2010: 5). Bartlett’s stage direction displays his awareness that live performance is itself a form of consumption; it is an act that uses energy, releasing carbon to the atmosphere and requiring materials to be created and destroyed. When performed on stage, Earthquakes in London becomes a symbol of excess and an example of the excess being symbolised, looping back on itself like one of Morton’s ouroboroses in Dark Ecology.

Hickson’s representation of time is similar to Bartlett’s, rooting her audience in the present by dramatising both their history and an imagined version of their

future(s). But whereas Earthquakes emphasises Bartlett's themes by using stage objects to create an atmosphere of excess, Hickson uses ambiguity, imprecision and poetic diction to force the audience to grope their way past the familiar in order to develop new forms of knowledge and understanding. One of the clearest examples of that approach is her use of what she calls 'interscenes' – five of them in total – to mark the passage of time. That term is undeniably theatrical, combining a prefix that is spatial ('inter', implying an object between discrete entities) with a word that presupposes the act of being seen by an audience within a temporally finite boundary. Yet the passages themselves comprise written statements that are of uncertain theatrical application: they are not attributed to actors as spoken dialogue, nor do they explicitly direct stage action. If anything, they read like poems.

The first interscene describes a woman (presumably May, though the script does not specify that it must be), leaving a farmhouse:

A woman steps out into the night  
Carrying a single lamp  
She walks barefoot across freezing fields  
She walks and walks and walks and walks. (26)

A director or designer would most likely consider those sentences to be similar to the other stage directions in the play, though they might consider the repetition of the word 'walks' as redundant. But how might one of those theatre-makers render the statements that follow?

She walks through lands, through empires, through time.  
A woman walks across a desert.  
The air is hot; the night is black.  
One newborn baby gasps for breath.  
A million newborn babies gasp for breath. (54)

Certainly, any of those effects can be created in a theatre – perhaps through digital projections and sound design, or even by the words being spoken aloud, whether 'live' or in recorded form. [note 3] But what is significant is that Hickson leaves room

for interpretation – and thus leaves her own intentions deliberately opaque; indeed, opacity is the most apparent of her intentions.

As we move into later interscenes, the instructions become increasingly allusive and evocative. The repetition of the word ‘walks’ in the first interscene is echoed in the second: a woman ‘drives and drives and drives and drives,’ Hickson writes (54). And that echo reverberates into the third: she ‘flies and flies and flies and flies’ (85). These sentences gesture back to one of the epigraphs in the published script, which is described by Hickson as a ‘Saudi saying’: ‘My father rode a camel. I drive a car. My son flies a jet airplane. His son will ride a camel’ (ix). [note 4] But it also gestures forwards, moving the audience from the past to the future, signalling the passage of time by referencing modes of transportation that become faster as the play continues. As a stage direction, the words ‘walk’, ‘drive’ and ‘fly’ need only be used once – but their repetition within and between interscenes works emotionally, creating mood by marking successive moments in time.

The interscenes thus become more open to interpretation as the play develops. What to make of the third passage, in which a woman ‘flies above time’ (85)? Or the fourth, in which a child ‘flies backwards into the future’?

A child drives backwards.

A child walks backwards

Retreats, returns, retracts

Yestermorrow.

A child returns, retreats, contracts

A child sits.

Home in time for bed. (101)

These written statements describe acts of repetition and return, but are themselves repetitious. From context, the word ‘yestermorrow’ is likely to be understood by readers and/or audience-members, though perhaps on an emotional level rather than in a literal sense. Something similar is likely to be true of the other phrases: an airline pilot might not know how to fly ‘backwards into the future’ but a poet might.

The effect of such techniques is to blur distinctions: between stage directions and dialogue, certainly – but also between the status of the script as both performance text and book. There is even a blurring of the formal boundaries of the

play itself. The last action onstage is contained in the fifth 'interscene', which follows the last act – and Hickson's use of the word 'interscene', rather than something more conclusive such as 'epilogue' or 'coda', demonstrates that she is attempting to cause the play to feel unfinished even as the curtain falls. The audience is left to wonder about the 'scene' that, it is implied, awaits the characters in their future, an effect intensified by Hickson's decision to conclude with an unfinished sentence: 'And when it is – I think it's going to be the kind of regret that...' (124). But not only is the sentence unfinished; it is also looping: it is an act of anticipation ('it's going to be') that is also an act of looking back ('the kind of regret'). And there is a further loop in the fact that the interscene requires the audience to imagine a future in which her character attends a museum that commemorates our era as history: we are imagining forward to an act of retrospection into our own present, like the child flying backwards into the future. This temporal arrangement is, to use Morton's terms, 'weird: it has a twisted, looping form' (2016: 6).

A parallel can be drawn here with Morton's discussion in Hyperobjects (2013) of the poem 'Midnight Oil' by Sheryl St. Germain, a composition that responded to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010. Noting St. Germain's use of unconventional line indentation, Morton suggests that the effect of the poem is to create the impression that a 'gigantic force had reversed the normal right-left polarity,' an act that casts into doubt the 'foregrounding of the human subject's supposed priority to things' (2013: 178). In a similar way, Hickson's interscenes defy simple categorisation, dispensing with punctuation in their typographical form, and dispensing with the need to provide clarity in relation to intention and agency in their performed manifestations. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that they provide evidence of having been worked upon by a 'gigantic force', but Hickson's willingness to be inscrutable bears comparison with the achievement of 'Midnight Oil'.

Of course, many dramatists write stage directions that offer theatre-makers the freedom to respond imaginatively – one thinks of Hickson's wonderful instruction in The Writer (2019): 'no pressure, but just in terms of defending the whole of art, this [scene] should be totally magic' (2019: loc. 629). It is also possible to call to mind plays such as Sarah Kane's 4.48 Psychosis (2000), which leaves undefined the setting, characters and other ordinarily essential elements of the play's form. But Hickson's interscenes are unusual: they seem familiar – they look like stage directions – but they behave oddly. They too could fairly be described as weird, both

in the sense used by Morton and in the more colloquial application of that word. Judged simply as instructions that directors, actors and designers must render on stage, these interscenes demonstrate that Hickson requires those first readers of her script to engage in new forms of thinking – something that is also required (but not quite in the same way) of those who read the published script independently of its live performance.

The desire to encourage readers and audiences into new modes of thinking is also evident in her chronology, which is linear (though not uncomplicatedly so, as I explore below) but which shifts us from the realm of history (the first three scenes are set in the past and are linked to important moments in Britain's relationship with oil-producing countries) to that of speculative fiction (the fourth and fifth take place in the audience's future). In this context, Oil bears comparison not only with Earthquakes in London but also with a number of other plays on ecological themes that draw on conventions from science fiction and even fantasy. Perhaps the best example of such work is Caryl Churchill's Far Away (2000), which has been described by Elaine Aston as a play that exemplifies dark ecology in its projection of a future in which the co-existence of the human and non-human has become 'so unthinkable ... that we risk the apocalyptic extinction of all forms of life' (2015: 71). Churchill's scenes gradually estrange the audience, moving from what we know – the domestic, the workplace – to the surreal (a parade of hat-clad prisoners being marched to execution) and concluding in a setting that is at once recognisable and incomprehensible, a world in which 'everything's been recruited' in a devastating war (2003: 43).

Taken together, the strategies evident in plays such as Churchill's and Hickson's might be explored by reference to Amitav Ghosh's observation that novels and short stories about climate change often read like science fiction: 'it is as though in the literary imagination, climate change were akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel,' he states (2016: 7). Ghosh's point relates specifically to the reluctance of literary journals to feature imaginative writing about the climate crisis – something that stands in contrast with the willingness of theatres such as the Almeida, the Royal Court and Britain's National Theatre to stage the plays mentioned in this article. Even so, we can derive two important propositions from Ghosh's comment. The first is that if our models of representational realism fail to accommodate the realities of climate change, then those models must be in need of

revision. And the second is that those models of realism might be inhibiting our ecological awareness, and therefore our ability to produce meaningful change: one explanation for human inaction in the face of climate change might be that, on some level, we collectively see the transformation of our planet as an event 'akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel'. Bruno Latour's trenchant critique of realism seems relevant in this context:

How could we deem 'realistic' a project of modernization that has 'forgotten' for two centuries to anticipate the reactions of the terraqueous globe to human actions? ... How could we call 'rationalist' an ideal of civilization guilty of a forecasting error so massive that it prevents parents from leaving an inhabitable world to their children? (2018: 66)

If either of the above two propositions is true, then it seems reasonable to infer that plays such as Far Away and Oil are important because they are leading audiences away from what Latour calls the 'realistic' or the 'rationalist' in order to allow us to better understand reality. Again Morton's model of the ouroboros seems apt: it is only by journeying away from the real that we might find our way back to it.

Indeed, Hickson makes clear that the unreal is often a version of the real that has yet to be fully understood. Another of her epigraphs is Arthur C. Clarke's famous observation that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic' (Hickson, 2016: ix), a statement that is borne out on several occasions during her play. May's first experience of the sight of kerosene burning is transformative because it breaks down – but also expands - her understanding of the real: 'How can a million years fit on one person's finger?' she asks. 'Magic?' (18). She is, to return to Morton's formulation, learning to think on two different scales simultaneously.

But the determination of what is – or is not – magical is soon revealed as an indicator of power. By the second scene, May seems (in several important senses) disenchanted, seeking to return from Tehran to England at a time when the Persian oilfields were becoming productive – very much to the advantage of the British Empire, which had taken ownership of that resource thanks to the D'Arcy Concession of 1901. A character called Samuel – a stage emblem of imperial boorishness – speaks to May about his interactions with the local people: 'You should see the faces of the natives when we showed them some new gear this

afternoon,' he sneers, adding that it was 'like they were watching magic' (36). Implied in these words is Samuel's belief that Britain's entitlement to another country's resources is derived from its superior scientific knowledge, its military prowess and its 'civilised' behaviour.

Those words recur but obtain new meaning in the play's fifth part when Fan, a Chinese salesperson, visits May's house in Cornwall in an attempt to sell her access to a new energy resource. May is hostile and unimpressed, but her daughter Amy is thrilled by the new technology: 'What is it? It's not connected to anything; it's generating right here. Is it...?' -

**Fan** Cold fusion.

**Amy** There's a nuclear reaction happening, there? Right – there?

**Fan** You're looking at it like it's magic. (116)

In that same scene, the stage directions tell us that Amy tries to touch some of Fan's equipment 'as if they are magic" (115). May's position has been reversed again: in 1908 she was a compatriot of a man who felt powerful because he saw as scientific what others saw as magical, but by the end of the play, England has become a country that is dependent upon other nations' scientific discoveries: the coloniser has become the customer – which means that May is back where she started. On an individual level, this is a story of growth and reversal – and thus of a form of change that is also somewhat static. But on a higher, species-level plane, Hickson is showing us that history repeats itself: throughout her play, the division of the global order is carried out according to those who control energy and those who need it. The identity of the people and nations who benefit from that situation might change, but the fundamental imbalance remains. Hence, the use of the word 'magic' – with all of its connotations of unreality – is used to mask actions that have a deadly, lasting and 'real' material impact.

Certainly, Oil engages in critique of Britain's imperial past: such countries as Libya and Iran may not have been part of the Empire but their ownership of oil quickly led Britain to attempt to dominate them anyway. In the second part of the play, an English character called Thomas gives a fictitious account of the real reaction of William Knox D'Arcy to the discovery of oil in what is now Iran.

When Mr D’Arcy first struck, he came back to the house that night. He sat out on that veranda – stared out across the land. I took him a drink; his face was wet with tears, he says – ‘I have just unleashed unthinkable misfortune on Persia, haven’t I?’ (43)

D’Arcy’s prediction would of course prove accurate. The audience is therefore imagining a character imagining a potential future that is also the audience’s past: more looping. But perhaps there is also a subtle allusion to a scene in Churchill’s Cloud Nine (1979), in which the coloniser Clive reports a moment of self-awareness: ‘I tell you Harry, in confidence, I suddenly got out of Mrs Saunders’ bed and came out here on the verandah and looked at the stars.’ (2013: 282). Cloud Nine, of course, is also a play that blends different periods of time in order to explore the agency of the individual in sustaining ‘monstrously gigantic’ social structures – which, for Churchill, relate to the legacies of British colonialism.

In a brief but incisive analysis of Hickson’s play, Vicky Angelaki suggests that by investing in the female and maternal and accentuating [both] throughout, Oil asks its women, who are always agents and never passive, until inactions of their own and of previous generations render them so, to step outside their individual frames of reference and view the bigger picture (2019: 19).

Hickson’s play, in other words, is legible as a feminist critique of the exploitation of oil – but it also demonstrates how feminism can offer ways of thinking about the role of the species in bringing about the Anthropocene era. As Morton points out, ‘from the beginning ecognosis was installed within the weird essentialism exemplified by French feminism’, and he quotes Carla Lonzi’s statement that ‘the women’s movement is not international but planetary’ (Morton, 2016: 65). But, as Angelaki argues, the mother-daughter dynamic of the play fails to offer models of freedom or escape: ‘as the duo repeats itself, so does everything else. Therefore, loops, like vicious circles of choices and attitudes, are far from easy to challenge,’ and breaking them is even more difficult. ‘It is not an optimistic take on humanity’s agency in the environmental crisis,’ Angelaki concludes (20).

How then might we interpret or stage the mother-daughter relationship? Again Churchill’s example is helpful, for just as she uses a family unit in Cloud Nine to

represent her themes metaphorically, Hickson similarly presents the relationship between May and Amy as a loose metaphor for the interaction between England and the oil-producing countries of the Middle East and north Africa. There are, of course, obvious risks in using a parent/child relationship as an analogy for a complex, volatile and deeply unequal set of relationships between different regions of the world. As examples such as Cloud Nine – or Hickson’s characterisation of figures such as Thomas or Samuel in Oil’s second part – show, colonial and/or capitalist forms of exploitation frequently come in the form of a self-justifying paternalism. May is guilty of this attitude too, telling her daughter that she should not speak in Farsi: ‘You should speak to them in English,’ she states – ‘them’ being the Persian people that Amy interacts with. ‘If you’ve got the chance to educate them – you owe it to them to do so’ (53).

Yet Hickson herself does not seek to present that relationship as straightforwardly hierarchical: ‘the co-dependence of the mother and child speaks to our co-dependence with the Middle East about oil’ (Almeida Theatre, 2016), she argues. Elsewhere, she explains that

The mother/daughter dynamic was something that was right there in the first draft. I decided on it quite instinctively, I knew that I was going to have to cover 250 years, I knew that the use of global resources through, largely, one generation, but what will end up being three generations, had to have a conversation between an older and younger generation. (Hopkins, 2017)

The strategy of representing oil-producing countries as a child (and probably as a white child in performance) to England’s mother avoids the danger of appearing patronising (or worse) because the action shows that relationship functioning across an entire lifetime, and thus allows us to see how power shifts between the two characters. May cares for Amy in the second and third parts of the play – but by its conclusion, that role has been reversed: indeed, one of the reasons for Fan’s visit is that Amy had been enquiring about automated home care for her mother (118), showing a clash between caring responsibilities and professional obligations that May herself experienced when she had to hide Amy under a table in part two. It is thus interesting that at least one reviewer of the original Almeida production saw May and Amy not just as a mother and daughter but argued that:

Amy represents [May's] alter ego and what May could have been if she had made less drastic choices. Even May's recurrent statement that all she did to succeed in life was for Amy's sake sounds unconvincing when their different visions of life clash, and the border between controlling and enabling Amy becomes blurred (De Ambrogi, 2016: e14).

The fact that the name 'Amy' is an anagram for 'May' suggests other forms of similarity, that both characters may be different but are made up of the same core elements. And, returning to Bruno Latour's remarks above, the parent/child relationship also brings into focus our era's central anxiety: this generation's apparent inability to leave an 'inhabitable world' for our children.

Judged moment by moment, the two women seem unlike – but again we find similarities when their actions are considered over a longer span. May is dazzled by a gift of kerosene from a man in the first part of the play (18); Amy gorges herself on Turkish delight – another gift from a man – in the second (49). May is observed having sex with her husband by an older woman, Ma Singer, in the first part of the play (10); May becomes the observer of her own daughter's (rather awkward) sex act with her boyfriend in part three (55). Other images are more subtly reflective of each other. For example, in the first part of the play May prepares a rotting chicken carcass for her family's evening meal, engaging in a series of actions that frequently produce reactions of disgust in the other characters (and, it seems reasonable to assume, in many audience-members also). To be born, May notes in that same scene, is to 'come out dead or hungry' (13), and that line – together with the presence of a dead animal onstage – is a reminder that human hunger is relieved only through the death of other living beings. We find a faint echo of that link between life and death at the conclusion of the play's fourth part, which finds Amy 'covered in blood' but seated at 'an exceptionally well-made breakfast table' (99). The boundaries between living and dying, between delight and disgust, and between violence and survival remain blurred, even if the scenery is a little different from one scene to the next. This represents an acknowledgement on Hickson's part of the importance of what Morton calls 'agrilogistics' in leading us to the Sixth Mass Extinction and the climate crisis, which he relates the 'ontological anxiety' caused by 'fear about where our next meal was coming from' (2016: 77).

This is not to suggest, however, that the women are identical or even (always) equal to each other. May's treatment of her daughter is frequently abusive, such as when she forces Amy's boyfriend Nate to leave her in part three: 'If you loved you – like I love you. You would not let you fuck him ... I love you more than you love you right now – and that is why I know what's best' (70). As an approach to parenting, May's attitude is not very different from the way in which Thomas speaks of the British treatment of the Shah in Tehran (42). She therefore both exemplifies and symbolises a colonial, exploitative attitude. And, as Kimberly Skye Richards summarises, Hickson's later scenes

... represented the transformation of "infantile" oil-producing countries into mature, rebellious, independent nations that resent supervision and insist that they be freed from its oppression. Increasingly desperate to maintain access, the parental figure was increasingly willing to make ethical compromises and unleash misfortune on less powerful others. (583)

Amy should not be seen as a cipher for oil-producing countries, however, since she also maps out new ways of being English: she is curious about the world, something that is evident in her ability to speak Farsi (in part two), Arabic (in part four) and Mandarin (in part five). May, however, remains hostile to difference to the end (especially when it is embodied by another woman): encountering Chinese technology in her own home, she is disgusted by Amy's enthusiasm for Fan: 'Where's your patriotism? Where's your self-respect?' she demands (118). But again, what looks like inter-generational difference is also recurrence: just as May is hostile to a visitor bringing a new source of energy, so was Ma Singer hostile to the American kerosene salesman in Part One: 'Your father turns in his grave to hear his own family sell his home off for some price,' she says (21). But May found that salesman so persuasive that she instantly set about changing her life.

Implicit in Ma Singer's remark is a sense of how things 'ought' to be done, a belief that a dead generation imposes an obligation on a living one. The colloquialism of 'turning' in a grave is apt here: death represents the end of a line, but it also operates cyclically in the sense that each generation must make way for the ones that follow it. The questions of what we owe to the dead – and of what they owe to us – are, in theatrical terms, as old as Oedipus and Antigone; they are

present in King Hamlet's instruction that his son 'remember me'; they are a core dramaturgical element of countless contemporary plays. But, returning to Morton's Dark Ecology, it can also be said that they are the key questions for the Anthropocene era too: ecological awareness both demands and engenders our acceptance that our responsibilities will outlive us. Oil is an attempt to dramatise the need for that acceptance.

Hickson, then, has created a play that confounds our understanding of both the real and the unreal. In its exploration of the relationship between a mother and daughter, it is prosaically realistic - often familiar, frequently conventional and sometimes (deliberately) clichéd. And in its tracking of those two lives across three centuries, it is both unreal and unrealistic: often jarring, frequently confusing and sometimes (deliberately) obtuse. In creating space to allow the real to meet the unreal, Hickson shows the limitations of both categories and directs our attention to the 'reality schism' that underlies our perception of the climate crisis.

Oil represents the beginning, middle and end of a single life, and it dramatises the oil age from discovery to depletion. But it also shows that even if individual cases differ, patterns persist: the problem of burning fossil fuels may be solved by leaving them in the ground, or may (as is more likely) be resolved when they run out – but what both Ella Hickson and Timothy Morton show, in their different ways, is that the greater problem is an underlying conception of the world as subservient to human subjectivity. For Morton that conception begins with the emergence of agriculture: as he frequently quips, we are still Mesopotamians (2016: 42-5). For Hickson, it relates more to desire and its gratification: 'I wish I'd learnt to ask for less earlier,' says May (97), [note 5] encapsulating in one sentence the history of her life, her nation and her species. Oil is a play that refuses us the instant gratification of the instantly legible – it challenges us to reconceive our notion of the real, and shows the human individual's agency on a 'monstrously gigantic' scale. In doing so, it tells us that we need to think in new ways – but it also shows how such thinking might be possible.

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## ENDNOTES

1. While acknowledging the complexity of the debate, for the purposes of this article I follow Morton in attributing responsibility for climate change to the human species rather than particular nations. This is not to ignore or flatten out differences but, following Morton, I adopt the approach developed by Dipesh Chakrabarty in viewing global histories of capital in the context of species history of humans (2009: 212-5)
2. The examples selected here are all drawn from contemporary British theatre. This is not to ignore the many other plays on comparable themes, both from within and beyond the English-speaking world. My inclusion of texts is intended to allow for comparisons between works that might have informed the composition and/or reception of Oil, so is for the most part limited to works premiered in London since 2000.
3. In the premiere production of the play, a variety of strategies were used, including projections and recitation of lines. The analysis here, however, is based on an understanding that the script makes other approaches possible
4. This seems to be a variation of a saying attributed to Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum of Dubai: 'My grandfather rode a camel, my father rode a camel, I drive a Mercedes, my son drives a Land Rover, his son will drive a Land Rover, but his son will ride a camel'
5. This line echoes a statement in another important British drama on ecological themes, Lucy Kirkwood's The Children, in which one of the characters expresses her despair because she does not know how to 'want less' (2015: 77).