**Traumas and Aporias of Oil as a Global Object of Desire: From Petro-Mania to Petro-Melancholia in Ella Hickson’s *Oil***

Dr Alireza Fakhrkonandeh

Assistant Professor in Modern and Contemporary Drama and Literary Theory

University of Southampton

**I. Introduction: Oil and World Cultures**

“Oil is an *arche* […] To posit oil as an *arche* is not a matter of abstruse cosmogony, nor some immemorial origin of things, but to thread the domain of appearance to its occluded, undemonstrable first principle. Oil is that upon which an enormous mass of extended, plastic Being directly relies for its beginning: it renders not just thinkable, but actualizable its very existence. There is an important double function here, at once epistemological and metaphysical”.1

Two looming issues have recently urged scholars and artists to deliberate on the role and nature of energy—particularly fossil fuels and, above all, oil—in relation to the life of contemporary humanity in almost all its dimensions, namely, “environmental catastrophe and capitalist crisis”.2 They have tackled these coterminous issues, not only by critiquing the means and modes of production, consumption and extraction of energy/oil, but by proposing and promoting alternative energy forms and models and manners of consumption and extraction.3 The undeniably prevalent and vital role of oil in human life and culture has urged critics such as Imre Szeman, Stephanie LeMenager and Ross Barret and Daniel Worden to consonantly define the present era as that of “petroculture,” “petromodernity,” and “oil culture” respectively. The definition of petroculture, proposed by Szeman and colleagues, illuminates the magnitude of the oil effect: “[petroculture designates] the ways in which post-industrial society today is an oil society through and through. It is shaped by oil in physical and material ways […]. Even more significantly, fossil fuels have also shaped our values, practices, habits, beliefs, and feelings”.4 Szeman, thus, proposes that we should re-conceptualize our understanding of the history of capitalism predicated on what he calls “oil ontology”. As he provocatively asks: “What if we were to think about the history of capital not exclusively in geopolitical terms, but in terms of the forms of energy available to it at any given historical moment?”5

The chief challenge this energy consciousness poses for the arts and literature concerns the concomitant questions of representation, aesthetics and form. As Pendakis acutely observes: “Is there an aesthetics of oil or are its cultural manifestations too diverse or localized to be usefully generalized?”6 If in the contemporary era of late petro-capitalism, oil is always already as much naturalized as it is capitalized,7 the crucial task left to arts and literature then is to deconstruct or denaturalize such an association or logic through various aesthetic means. Oil, and by extension energy, has come to be ascribed such a pivotal role in recent literary and cultural studies that some scholar have gone so far as to insist on the necessity of presenting a new periodization of literary periods and forms on the basis of energy regimes. More recently, Patricia Yaeger (2011), in her provocative PMLA editor’s column, has embarked on refiguring literary history by re-casting it around energy-based eras defined by wood, tallow, coal, whale oil, oil/gasoline and atomic power. In so doing, Yaeger is contending that, instead of considering literary trends and generic forms through such divisions as romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism, we should predicate our categorization and inquiry around topics specifically concerned with and driven by energy regimes of that period or beyond. She thus suggests that we consequently would have such energy-based categories as oil and nuclear literature, or speculative forms of literatures concerned with renewable energy regimes (solar and wind) still to come.8 In the same vein, Szeman discerns a critically neglected yet “foundational gap”9 in the history of literature – namely, its relation to and engagement with the question of energy (particularly oil). Accordingly, he contends that this gap stems from “the apparent epistemic inability or unwillingness to name our energy ontologies”.10

What distinguishes oil from other energy-regimes and resource-phases in human history, however, is not only the extent, scope and depth with which it has come to permeate and constitute our civilizational, social-cultural and technological infra-structures, logics and logistics. Rather, more ontologically, it is the manner in which oil has come to determine the meaning and value of the human as we hegemonically know and live it.11 This has come, not only to accord oil a unique and hard-to-supersede status, but to pose a daunting challenge to imagining and conceptualizing alternative energy cultures and non-oil-dependent human futures. A consequent concern of the cultural critics (such as John Urry, LeMenager, Szeman and Wilson) has thus been to envisage a post-oil or post-carbon economy and society, and to conceptualize the conditions of possibility for a transition beyond fossil-dependent horizons of meaning and being. That is, they strive to psychologically and existentially wean people (particularly Western people and their modes of consciousness and identity) away from oil-addiction (social-cultural modes of communication, knowledge, relationality and identification), towards alternative, non-fossil-fuel paradigms.12

This energy dependency (on oil) has long been elided from the cultural imagination and historical consciousness through various hegemonic means, including media and public discourse. Jennifer Wenzel calls energy “a great not-said” in the cultural productions of the twentieth-century and beyond.13 And Yaeger, by the same token, wonders whether “energy invisibilities may constitute different kinds of erasures”.14 Notably, Yaeger coins the term “energy unconscious” as a way of probing the presence and absence of energy within a given text or generic form.15 Yaeger also underscores the role of energy/oil as a force field, both at local (personal and textual) and global (social-cultural) levels: “energy sources also enter texts as fields of force that have causalities outside (or in addition to) class conflicts and commodity wars”.16

Ella Hickson’s *Oil* is pervaded by almost all of the foregoing issues. The play depicts the inherent and indelible entanglements of oil and the life of the human subject on various levels: the ontological, existential-psychological, the social-cultural and the political-economic. Among other forms, oil manifests itself in the play as ethos, affect, *Weltanschaung* and *Stimmung*—whereby oil, as a world-disclosing mood, reveals the world to be devolving from a life-sustaining *Gestalt* to a mere *Gestell* .17 Premiered under the direction of Carrie Cracknell at London’s Almeida Theatre on 7 October 2016, *Oil* received both great critical acclaim and scathing criticism for its elaborate and elusive form. Taking the global history of oil as its historical range and the world as traversed by oil as its spatial-geographical setting, the play moves through an array of oil-oriented and oil-driven political upheavals, including Cornwall in 1889, Persia in 1908, Hampstead in the 1970s, Iraq in 2021 and Cornwall in 2051. It furthermore affords us fleeting glimpses into other determining historical cataclysms caused by oil. A character in the play summarizes these as follows: “Gulf War 1990, sanctions that killed hundreds of thousands of children, operation Desert Fox 1998, 2001 we bomb them again, 2003 Iraq War, 2018 second Iraq War”.18 Accordingly, Hickson’s play takes as its structuring nodal points what have been called “sacrifice zone[s]”.19 The historical scope of the play is determined by the longevity of oil as constituting an epoch-making energy regime and stage of human life. In the melancholy history that unfolds upon the stage, Hickson takes her audience through a non-naturalistic journey from the beginning of petroleum extraction to a frightening, oil-less future. The play shows oil to be determinant for modes of production, social relations, economies of desire, the self-conception of human subjects and perception, and, finally, the condition of possibility of writing and communication.

Analogous to the social-cultural (and even historical) invisibility indicated above, oil seems to have remained the glaring “invisible” in modern and contemporary Anglo-American drama until very recently. In keeping with the rise in public awareness of ecological questions and environmental issues, and along with their conspicuous media coverage, there has been an upsurge of various dramatic trends and theatrical forms seeking to contribute to discourse on climate change, global warming, the relationship between human and non-human beings, and also between nature/ecosystem and technology/science. In these Anglo-American works, the foregoing issues are particularly approached and articulated through the discourse of the Anthropocene. This is attested to by a tidal rise in dramatic works that revolve around environmental-ecological issues.20

Yet, despite this growing interest, there has been a dearth of plays taking oil as their focal point. Oil drama—what I will call “Petro-Drama”—has indeed, until very recently, been conspicuous by its absence from the stage. In addition to Ella Hickson’s *Oil* (2016), there have been only seven other works which, to varying degrees, tackle the question of energy and energy politics, namely John McGrath’s *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil* (early 1970s) and *Boom* (1977), David Greig’s *Victoria* (2000), Lucy Prebble’s *Enron* (2009), Annabel Soutar’s *The Watershed* (2016), and Clare Duffy’s *Arctic Oil* (2018)—and a fascinating performance, *Crude: An Exploration* (2016), produced by the Scottish company Grid Iron.

Whilst a handful of other plays and performances have appeared on the scene of modern European drama—most prominently *Konjunktur* (1928) by Leo Lania and *Petroleuminseln* (1927) by Lion Feuchtwanger—Ella Hickson’s *Oil* is, to my knowledge, among the very first works in contemporary Anglo-American drama that takes oil and its concomitant existential-psychological, social-political and economic implications as its sole, sustained focal point. Nevertheless, the neglect of the vital relevance of oil to the modes of subjective-political economy, and to the modes of social-cultural relationality of lived experience in contemporary life, does not betoken a lesser degree of socio-cultural or political urgency or significance—at least for the Anglo-American public and life. Instead, I would argue, that it demonstrates the symptomatic invisibility of oil from literary and dramatic discourse. Indeed, if “the history of oil”, as Ghosh—writing in 1992 on the “missed encounter” between oil and the modern American novel—contends, “is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic”, Hickson’s *Oil* depicts the ravages and obscenities of such a history.21

Peter Hitchcock compounds the issue of this missed encounter by adding: “But what if the very structure of the oil encounter compels the suppression of a missed encounter”.22 In making the latter statement, Hitchcock hints at the traumatic structure of the oil encounter and, to derive our terms from Lacan, the role of *oil as an objet petit a* in such an encounter. As I will seek to demonstrate here, what Hickson’s *Oil* struggles to represent is the frame of this missed encounter. She accomplishes this, on the one hand, by exposing the political economy, cultural politics and ethics of the traumatic encounter/experience or *touché* in the real of oil’s meaning, both for the peripheral countries and Western modernity; and, on the other, by showing how the political economy of oil in globalization is contingent on a transnational division of labour. As Hitchcock explains: “The unpleasant truths of wars that kill innocents and produce environmental disasters are much easier to explicate than the *touché* stitching these truths together into the fabric of the modern state”.23 I will argue that Hickson’s *Oil*, as a paradigmatic example of world dramas, constitutes a potent means to register not only the world-systemic nature of petro-capitalism, but also the different meanings of “oil” available in different historical moments, social systems, and world cultures. More specifically, I will argue how the thematics and dynamics of the play demand us to ponder the meanings of oil under such rubrics as oil as commodity, social agent, cultural signifier, hyper-object24, and, above all, an impossible object of desire. The use of the modifier “impossible” is intended here to capture three facets of oil: its perceived nature as an at once object/signifier/symbol which is, first, transcendental, secondly, traumatic in its effects, and, thirdly, charged with unconscious cathexis, phantasies, and a libidinal economy of excess. I will thus probe this pivotal facet of oil: oil as a traumatic and aporetic object of desire along with the questions of gender politics and ethics implicated in it. Finally, probing the questions of gender politics and ethics of gender in conjunction with the economy of gendered subjectivity as depicted in the play, it will be demonstrated how May, and later Amy, come to embody a neoliberal vision of selfhood and subjective autonomy, a neoliberal mode of self-governmentality (self as an entrepreneurial agent), and, finally, a neoliberal understanding of freedom and self-worth. Of significance, in this regard, will be the questions of a neoliberal relational ethics, that is, between individuals (particularly women) and nations both within the same national world or coming from core and peripheries of world systems and between human and nature.

Until recently, there has been an absence of scholarship exploring oil’s constitutive role in “world”—and more specifically Scottish and Anglo-American—aesthetic practices, discourses, and cultural forms.25 Over the past five years, scholars across the humanities and social sciences have paid increasing attention to the ways in which petroleum circulates as “capitalism’s lifeblood”,26 further insisting on energy regimes as a foundational paradigm for both historical and literary periodization. This essay will also scrutinize the discursive mechanisms and dynamics underpinning the “constructedness of oil’s connections with futurity”27 as critically accentuated or deconstructively dramatized by Hickson’s *Oil*. The consideration of the subtle intertwining of oil-addicted culture and oil-driven capital has long been one of the focal points of critical scholarship; this has recently assumed new dimensions in the context of “materialist” understandings of culture and the attendant re-conceptualisation of literature as “worlded” (beyond a merely Said-based definition of the term).

Hickson’splay features as a densely-woven tapestry in which oil is not only shown to be inextricably intertwined with the issues of class, gender and race, but also considered in both national and international-global contexts. If oil-based neoliberal modernity and political economy (in the West and the capitalist system) involves a “structural occlusion”28 of oil and oil production, stemming particularly from the spatial-geographic displacement of production of oil and waste in remote and peripheral regions, and if this structural occlusion disrupts our ability to apprehend oil’s vitality to both middle-class comfort in systemic cores29 and the toxic material and chemical waste that is displaced on to “underpolluted” peripheral regions – then Hickson’s *Oil* seeks to subvert and counter this occlusion, by exposing the uneven political economy and social-cultural dynamics of the relationship between the core and peripheries. As such, Oil throws into sharp relief the relational dynamics between the core and periphery of the petro-capitalist world-system, and the structural inequality informing their relation. *Oil* accomplishes this counter-hegemonic move through two principal components: firstly, through a focus on the affective-psychic dynamics and economy of the characters; and, secondly, through its aesthetic method—a cartographic-diagrammatic structure and a non-naturalistic and petro-magic realist form.

By means of a genealogical method, *Oil* presents a historical chronicling of the social-cultural and political-economic effects of the discovery of oil on both Western and non-Western subjects, and culminates in a peak-oil speculative fiction (or vision) of an oil-less future in which an alternative energy resource leads to the hegemonic ascendancy of other nations and political systems (China, in this case). Hickson’s take on oil, congruent with that of Hitchcock, can be described thus: “oil’s geoculture must address its deep history in the exploitation of the [global] South and of labour” as both “first encounters […] and a present conjuncture”.30 And this is indeed the task that the play sets itself.

Hickson shows how oil is lived both as a “commodity” and a “social relation”. Hickson illustrates how the centrality of oil to modern Western (and particularly British and American) life has been as much about Big Oil’s corruption of policy or market manipulations, as it has about “a specific regime of capitalism—rooted deeply in the entire architecture of twentieth-century [Anglo-]American capital accumulation—that has become structured around a cultural politics of entrepreneurial life”.31 Both Amy and May—in their visions of gendered individuality, freedom/agency, economy and relationality—varyingly come to embody a neoliberalist ethos. Crucially, as is evidently reflected in both the form/structure and content of her play (*Oil*), Hickson shows how the capitalist world-system is a system of “cyclical” and “cumulative” crisis-formation.32 Evident cases in point are May and Amy’s implication and complicity (as Western, capitalist subjects) in the crises erupting either in their own mutual relationship or in their relation with other people and nations (Iran, Iraq, China). Hickson’s play indeed shows how oil comes to adversely affect and redefine the ethics and economy of the individual’s (May’s and Amy’s in this instance) mode of relationship (particularly in terms of ethics and economy) with the family, their local community, their native land and the nation.

**I. Oil as the Object of Desire, as *Objet a*, and as Transcendental Signified**

To begin with, the main narrative line of the play reflects many of its crucial thematic identification of oil with reference to the Bible and nature, as the trope/figure of invisibility and light of the age; second, the haunting image/phantasy of a man sucking petrol from his car and then catching fire; and thirdly, Amy’s haunting dream/nightmare of the burning man in the desert. Let us scrutinize the dynamics and implications of each scene separately.

**A. The First Moment: Metaphysics of Oil as a Transcendental Signified**

The first instance of the first moment, in which the status of oil as the ineffable, invisible sublime object (given the awe-inspiring and inconceivable amount of energy it releases/produces) is foregrounded is Part 1, when WW is explaining oil/kerosene and its benefits and uniqueness to the the allegorical-Biblical facets of oil are thrown into relief. The aporetic nature of oil is invoked again here in a different register: oil, as at once natural and magic/miraculous, abject and sublime. WW explicitly invokes this link by citing Biblical verses: “But has God not also given us kerosene? We take trees from the forest without cost. We take air from the sky—water from the river and there is always more water. In America this oil is coming out of the ground faster than we can put it into barrels—we are bleeding it—sweating it in the middle of winter”.43 The most salient point in WW’s speech here is his attempt at the occlusion of the enforced extraction of oil from the ground by referring to the easy, natural, and smooth flow of oil from the nature without human intervention. Ma Singer, however, sees through the charades of his discourse, indicating their capitalist motives: “And making a fine profit”.44 Yet WW continues to appeal to the Bible to morally justify both his activity and oil as the last resort in order to convince the traditional family. Quoting from Ephesians 5:15, WW warns: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise but as in the

transformation (Amy’s, in the case of the play) in conjunction with the formal feature of the play (petro-magic realism). It reads: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Hickson’s inclusion of this statement (about the indelible link between magic and mythic, magical, and biophysical properties of oil enter these violent struggles […] is ultimately an empirical question”.48

These magic powers particularly manifest themselves in the power-knowledge relation between the (Western) subject and the rest of the world (particularly the subjects from the peripheries of and cognitive mapping capacities of the audience to establish the relations between these ostensibly discrete geographies and histories and, subsequently, to cognitively stitch one event in one time and

 world of *Oil* is governed by a staggering instability of time and space, which refracts our postmodern condition (time-space compression) and that of subjectivity inhabiting it.49 Hickson exposes and explores the relationship between time–space compression and the fragmented

her subjects’ relations to the flows of oil and the concomitant multinational capital and, in doing so, to recover the affect (and its attendant ethics of interpersonal relationship) that the pressure of time–space compression threatens to exhaust.

**B. The Second Moment: Oil as objet a**

Pivotal to the demonstration of the “aporias of oil,” is the establishment the status of oil as *objet petit a*. In *Oil*, what leads us to identify oil (whether as a commodity, cultural signifier or material

character”, which is also the essential characteristic of *objet petit a* as elaborated by Lacan. Akin to the attributes of *objet a*, oil, in the play, features as an ambivalent object/signifier: at once ideal and traumatic.

A brief delineation of some of the pivotal characteristics of *objet a* can be illuminating for our exploration of the status of oil as *objet a*. To begin with, Lacan characterizes it thus: “[*objet a* is]
constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of lack, that is to say of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack”.52 Positing *objet a* as a “negative magnitude” which is misperceived by the subject as the “positive supplement” to the socio-symbolic reality, Slavoj Zizek explains it thus: “*objet petit a* designates that which remains of the Thing after it has undergone the process of symbolization”.53 *Objet a* can thus be characterized as a
.)”.55 This accounts for the phantasmatically restorative powers of oil (as the ultimate phallogocentric matter and signifier) promising to restore full subjectivity (absolute egoism and unity/oneness) to the subject. Lacan emphasizes the retroactive character of the *objet a* by describing it as the “object-cause” of desire. By virtue of its paradoxical constitution the *objet a* can only be described topologically as the perpetually absent locus around which the drives revolve. The *objet a* is thus the psychoanalytic object par excellence. It is “that object around which the drive moves... that object that rises in a bump, like the wooden darning egg in the material which, in analysis, you are darning the *objet a*”.56

Given the human subject’s (phantasized) perception of oil’s powers—to wit, its promise of the possibility of transcending the human limits of the body, history, space-time (particularly through speed, surplus value, and freedom), matter and *in-der-welt-sein* (being-in the-world)—oil can indeed be reckoned as an *objet petit a* par excellence. Oil as the impossible object of desire (or a screen for the phantasy *objet a*) which promises to fill the lack in the subject and the void of the Real, however, is merely half the story. Considering a whole history of human carnage, labour-resource exploitation and ecological destruction induced by oil-based political economies, this other side of the surplus value and excessive power of oil leads us to the madness, collapse and disintegration associated with the Death Drive and the Real. Viewed in this light, the blackness of oil (which grips May’s gaze in a moment of magic mesmerization at the beginning) can be construed as betokening the stain or the shield/layer behind which lies the void of the Real.57 This idea of oil as “stain” provides the possibility of identifying with the gaze (as part object and the Other). Irrupting into the visual field of the play and that of the characters as surplus (promising jouissance) and the “Signifier,” such a “stain/gaze” or “scotoma”—qua the “underside of consciousness”, qua the ungraspable Thing58 belonging to the domain of the Real—casts a toxic shadow on the world of the characters and their history due to its inherently anamorphic nature. Oil as stain/gaze, accordingly, obscures the subject’s vision, thereby thrusting them into an acute consciousness of their depersonalization in a field of meaning and visuality that infinitely exceeds them. Moreover it makes the subject acutely cognizant of finitude and the death of the human and his/her history through its sudden and dark excess. As such, it can be argued that oil (as stain/spot) is the black hole or spot around which May’s (and to a lesser extent Amy’s) reality and desire is organized and structured for the rest of the play.

This status of oil is enhanced by its being the object of desire of the Other, manifested in the infinitely extended and ever-renewed material conditions of modern and contemporary consumer petro-culture subtended by the hegemonic system and political-economic logic of contemporary history—global petro-capitalism.59 In *Oil*, May is the character who most strikingly evinces such a fetishized desire of oil from the very outset of the play. However, there are other equally haunting images of this fetishized desire and symptomatic addiction. The most riveting vision of oil addiction—an oral imagery—is that of a haunting nightmare of the burning man sucking oil from the car tank glimpsed by Amy in conjunction with the vision of the burning man in
. Oil, as far as its thematic-narrative depictions in the play and its perception by the characters are concerned, features as an *objet petit a*. That is, it features as that which resists symbolization thereby remaining beyond the limit of imaginable beyond specular, and yet is the condition of possibility of seeing/visibility/vision: light. In other words, oil as that unrepresentable sublime figure which at once illumines and blinds.

Oil, as the object of desire and love, is subtly manifested early in the play through sensory imagery and an indication of sensuous-libidinal attachment. The stage directions vividly evoke the parallel between the old and new object of erotic and affective desire by focalizing the dynamics around tactile and olfactory senses, as opposed to a visual and ocularcentric violent gaze. (The latter is evident in May’s embracing of the phallocentric/patriarchal logic, which began when she adopted

the night”.61 By moving from private sphere to public, May also subverts the gender-based and gender-inflected spatial economy and power dynamics. A few moments prior to her exit, “She dips her finger in the kerosene still on the table, she sniffs it-deep”.62 Through the perceived similarity of the stage directions, the audience can observe that May's relationship with her husband has now been superseded by a relationship with oil/kerosene, this time involving a reversal of the symbolic gender/power dynamics, to wit, May assuming the phallic, and oil the feminine positions. Further, by literally penetrating the oil with her finger, this stage direction could be analogised as heterosexual intercourse. In this sense, May subverts her feminine status by literally performing a male penetrative act, her finger acting as the phallic symbol.

 **C. The Third Moment: Trauma, Dream, Phantasy**

Proceeding to the third moment of the abovementioned pattern of the metaphysics and psychodynamics in the play, it transpires when Amy intimates to her mother the dream/phantasy she has been haunted with since her childhood:

AMY. When I was little I saw this. I used to dream. I saw a burning man.

MAY. It was a dream.

AMY. It doesn’t feel like a dream. I looked at him and then I looked at you and I remember you blinking. People don't blink in dreams.

MAY. I don't know who you're talking about.63

What is noteworthy here in Amy’s account of her dream is the uncannily liminal/ambivalent nature of her tragic vision, to wit, its dual status as both a dream and a scene

awakening”.64 Amy—resonant with the tradition of women with tragic intuition or/prophetic capacities (*à la* Cassandra)—is haunted by traumatic and nightmarish scenes which presage an impending doom. Earlier, in Part 2, when she was a child, rushing to the scene where her mother is having a conversation with Officer Thomas concerning the possibility of them getting married and leading a life of comfort in Persia, Amy blurts out: “I had a bad dream. I had a dream, Mr Thomas—there was a man, he was walking in the desert and he was burning”.65 As

in so far as he thinks, where the *res cogitans*, does not meet it”.66 Deriving his premise from Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Lacan argues that the subject’s traumatic missed encounter with the Real manifests itself as a compulsion to repeat.67

 Given that *sinthome* (revealing *objet a*) serves as the button (*point de capiton*) between the three psychic realms (real, imaginary, and symbolic), in conjunction with the fact that the encounter with the real is always a missed encounter since it can be traumatic (as it evidently

desire, (2) its association with symptomatic/traumatic phantasies and (3) its being driven by the repetition compulsion. Oil’s links with the Imaginary are revealed in its status as the ultimate phantasy come true and as an unrepresentable, invisible and volatile object of desire, or *objet a*. This is reflected in Lacan’s formula for phantasy: S[barred]◊a.

I would suggest that the ethical nature and traumatic psychodynamics of Amy’s phantasy/nightmare (the burning man in the city or the desert) will be unraveled if we consider it in the light of Freud’s and Lacan’s comments/reflections on the Burning Child. A fleeting glance at the content of this dream can be elucidating.

The dream Freud probes in his *Interpretation of Dreams* is already a meta-drama, a meta-dream, a quotation, a script (from the cultural unconscious) in circulation. Freud recounts how one of his patients attended a lecture where the story of the burning child was discussed, adding how the patient herself came to experience the scene as if it had actually befallen her in person. The

burning?” This is the unbearable moment when the father wakes up and notices the glare of light from the adjoining room.68 In keeping with his idea of dreams as fulfillment/realizations of desire, Freud believes that what causes the father to awaken is the sound of the candle toppling onto the bedsheet.

For Lacan, however, the other determining component of the dream is its being flanked with two sounds: the noise of the falling candle and the phantasmal voice of the son. Hence, the

the desire/dream that wakes up the father. Lacan states how the child’s provocative question to his father leaves a “stain.” As he observes:

Is there not more reality in this message than in the noise by which the father also identifies the strange reality of what is happening in the room next door. Is not the missed reality that caused the death of the child expressed in these words? Freud himself does not tell us that we must recognize in this sentence what perpetuates for the father those words forever separated from the dead child that were said to him, perhaps, Freud supposes, because of the fever—but who knows, perhaps these words perpetuate the remorse felt by the father that the man he has put at his son’s bedside to watch over him may not be up to his task.70

Lacan underscores what the father qua father structurally (unconsciously) misses or misrecognizes, that is, the son’s burning as a burning with sexual desire. Hence, it is the (automatic, defensive) attempt to miss the traumatic encounter with the unspeakable real that makes the father awaken.71

Reflecting on both the scene/dream of the burning child and Lacan’s thoughts on it from the
in, the death that he survives. What the father cannot grasp in the death of his child, that is, becomes the foundation of his very identity as father”.72 Caruth then proceeds to add a crucial point to her reflections on the scene: “In thus relating the trauma to the every identity of the self and to one’s relation to another, […] the shock of traumatic sight reveals at the heart of human subjectivity not so much an epistemological, but rather what can be defined as an ethical relation of the real”.73 This insightful remark on the ethical implications of this missed encounter with the Real of the traumatic dream is highly resonant with the ethics and psychodynamics of the dream Amy is haunted with, given the discursive-ontological position of Amy, the content/object of her dream, and the context of the play.

Translated into the narrative and ontological context, as well as the relational dynamics of the play,

superior position relies on the burning man—a colonized or exploited person/nation from the peripheral country.

Prima facie, Amy’s trans-national dream/phantasy seems to transcend the Oedipal economy of the Freudian/Lacanian dream. Nevertheless, a subtle point should not elude our attention, namely the Oedipal nature of political-libidinal economy underpinning the capitalist logic (

the double manner in which the phantasmatic nature of oil (as *objet a*) leaves both the colonized native and the colonialist traumatized, but also how the Death Drive attached to such an oil-driven desire (for freedom, sovereign autonomy and agency) are vividly borne out at the end of the play. Finally, both uncanny dreams—considered as embedded narratives/scenes—feature as deterritorialized spaces which are not constrained by petro-capitalist or imperial economies and relational logics thereby laying bare the Real (otherwise discursively occluded or personally repressed) of the oil age and oil-addicted human life.

A crucial, yet covert, issue that such Other-related traumatic visions haunting *Oil*’s characters throw into relief is that of “eco-ethics” – to wit, nature as the Other and the ethics of

other); hence its resisting being simply digested away by the human thereby keeping haunting the human digester/consumer. Such a dynamics ushers in not only structural doubt, hesitation and irony in ecological thought through revealing the complicity of the allegedly neutrally-positioned humans in ecological degradation. An eco-ethics driven by dark ecology is also anticipated to prompt significant epistemological and political ramifications, including a non-identitarian ecological approach that “dances with the subject-object duality”.76

**IX. Conclusion**

A crucial outcome of the (Oedipal-Capitalist) economy of desire, identification and psychic investment is the vision of gendered subjectivity and the consequent ethics of inter-personal relationship as conceived by the two main characters in *Oil*. In fact, no moment in the play better reveals the sheer similarity and symmetry to the point of identity between May and Amy than this, where they are shown to be bound by their conception of individuality and its concomitant ethics and economics. As specifically regards Amy’s boyfriend—whilst gauche and somewhat unambitious—he does not do anything to deserve this description and desertion. Amy proceeds to recount the moment of her existential lucidity and spiritual epiphany:

At about 4 a.m.—I was standing by the window, desperately waiting for the sky to get light. I put my shoes on and walked—just walked—the streets with houses all asleep, empty shops, empty stations; I stood on Waterloo Bridge at dawn and looked. (Takes a deep breath—tries to catch her breath.) The size of it. How well it all worked—everything I could see only existed because someone once imagined it might be possible. (She laughs).

I got a room in a hotel. I lay down on the bed and I could breathe for the first time in. I stared at the ceiling and thought of all the women in the world that were lying in bed alone. I could see us—like little tin soldiers, each in our ocean of white sheet—cool and calm and on our own, in our twenties and thirties, forties, fifties sixties and seventies—across the world—like a silent army. It felt—so—obvious, so exciting, our quiet secret—that we all know—we were made to be alone. I slept better than I'd slept for years. I woke up. Ordered myself a boiled egg; good bread, salty butter \* heavy silver knife, thick linen. Newspaper. Strong coffee. (Smiles, laughs softly.) I was happy.77

Her revelation comes to her in a liminal moment—twilight. Amy finds herself mired in a moment of existential crisis and stifling attachment. However, she moves on to embrace this socially-

, Amy leaving her partner without informing him or having a dialogue with him about this. As such, it can be considered as a decision impelled by neoliberal ethics where solely the interests of the individual matter and social-emotional relation with the other(s) are of subsidiary importance. Furthermore, whilst this is a profoundly ambivalent moment—at once tragic (given the kind of freedom involved), ironic (given the nature of vision of femininity and feminism), and serious (given an adamant belief in the authenticity of her vision)—the stage directions unexpectedly present it in a fairly sympathetic, or at least uncritical, light. Interestingly, the freedom which

forming a “silent army” (expressive of a passive aggressive affect)—is revealing in this regard.78

We remember the tenacious self-governmentality proselytized by May to both Amy and Nate in Part Three. The paradigmatic evidence of the neoliberalist, entrepreneurial logic underlying May’s requesting Nate to leave her daughter, as well as her attitude towards her daughter’s life choices and future, can be found in her vehement expostulation with Nate:

MAY. Listen, Nate—I could stand here and tell you to have your fun, whilst your flesh is still clinging to your bones—before you look down in the shower and see that a hurricane has passed through. I can remember how skin can feel soft like summer, how staying up all night makes you the kind of tired that you wonder why anybody bothers sleeping. Right?

craft, my friend, because there is no way on God’s earth that I will allow my daughter the chafing and the precise knowledge of the pattern of her bedroom ceiling and most of all—the feeling of being desperately, repeatedly underwhelmed.

I will not let her spend the next three years trying to project heroism on to your average face. I will not watch her try to believe a god into you. You see, unlike you, she's determined—and she could get stuck on you and I won't let that happen.

It's my job to protect her future from the passions of her present.79

Here, May asserts that the reason she disagrees with the relationship between the lovers is not a traditional one—involving the questions of financial, moral-rational and emotional

of her present”.80 The exchange value inherent in the request is starkly clear: the saving of the use value of the self through abstinent self-government in the present in return for a surplus value yielded by/in the future.

Neoliberalism, as Foucault argues, “is not just a manner of governing states or economies, but is intimately tied to the government of the individual, to a particular manner of living” (Read 2009, 27).81 Foucault illuminates the dynamics of this new field by explaining how it entails a

taking courses on a new computer software application to having their teeth whitened, can be considered an investment in human capital”.83 The profound implications of this neoliberal logic are not hard to predict for dimensions of personal life and interpersonal relationships. The latter, prominently, includes “love” and “intimacy”. This is because, when the entrepreneurial ideal of economic autonomy, investment, and risk are extended “beyond the realm of finance capital to every quotidian relation”, it indubitably comes to subsume realms hitherto perceived as independent of the market. This Subsumption includes inter-affective bonds and emotional investments between friends and lovers. It is thus that the exploitation of individuals—such as Ana, Nate, Amina, Amy herself—is “effaced in social relations”.84

By the same token, to May’s neoliberalist consciousness—committed, as it is, to a virtue ethics based on self-reliance and risk-taking entrepreneurship and an economics based on privatization, deregulation the extension of property ownership—the nature-friendly lifestyle and

of the cost and unsustainability of her entrepreneurial ethics but also of the pernicious effects of the narcissistic logic of May’s idealization of her daughter, Amy, which is evidenced by her attempt to remold her in her own image: “I don't think you're a very good mother. […] You know being smart isn't as good as being happy. She's [i.e. Amy] not as great as you think she is.” (Part 3, *Oil*) May dismisses Nate on the same principle: “You haven't got the fight in you”.87 And then Nate leaves.

Ironically, what the mother and daughter *share* is their belief in the *impossibility of sharing* anything with the Other, in conjunction with their symptomatic definition of freedom and their neoliberal conviction of an atomized individuality and the impossibility of social collectivity. Their

by her mother’s confirmation, though—astonishingly—not approval. Having heard her daughter’s account of intuitive vision, May affirms: “It’s freedom”. May, however, adds a crucial caveat or qualifier to this conception of freedom. Having undertaken a lifetime of ruptured relations and solitary pursuit of self-interest, personal gain and happiness, May has learned her bitter lesson by experiencing the consequences of investing in a future (self and time) that has exacted sacrificing

sense of freedom should not be conflated with love: “It’s not love”.88 The question of love (as an indispensable moral-existential necessity) returns with renewed force towards the end of the play as a lost and tragic opportunity between mother and daughter, between May and WW, and as a savior of humanity in Amy’s vision.89

This moment of freedom, we can argue, is a moment of privatization, welfare governmentality and birth of the personal sovereign autonomy in the sense of individual enterprising, rather than ethical autonomy or the autonomy of practical reason.90 Foucault’s cogent argument further bolsters the issue at stake here. When asked about the status of the “sovereign” subject in an interview, Foucault responded: “I don't think there is actually a sovereign, founding

] a process at once economic and moral that is concomitant with a new tendency to ‘invest’ in the self at crucial points in the life-cycle, that, above all, symbolizes the shift in the regime and governance of welfare under neoliberalism”.92 As he proceeds to elaborate: “Risk and responsibility have been thematized in new ways: there has been a shift from a disciplinary

forms of actuarial or insurance-based rationalities-and, second, to new forms of prudentialism (a privatized actuarialism) where risk management is forced back onto individuals and satisfied through the market”.93

*Oil*, in its conclusion, refuses to invest naïve utopian hope in the younger generation. This is palpably evidenced by fleeting, though crucial, indications of almost identical sameness (or unification/identification) between May and Amy in the play. The following scene starkly illustrates this:

MAY. “You'd rather live with a stranger than with your own mother?—I'd understand—if you had a husband or a boyfriend or children.—Come here, you've got a bit of hair that's just /”

AMY. / It’s fine.

MAY Come here, I’ll tuck it.

AMY. Leave it, it’s fine

MAY. May

AMY. I’m Amy.

MAY. I said Amy.

AMY. You said May.

MAY. I meant Amy.

AMY. was there a burning man?

MAY. what?94

*Oil*, nonetheless, ends on an irresolvably ambiguous note by refusing the mirror-like identity between May and Amy. Amy seems to be morally both better and worse than May. At the conclusion of the play, Amy abandons her desperate and now morally-existentially altered mother (who now believes in the primacy of love in a less egocentric way) despite her pleas—hence resembling early May in the latter’s desertion of her husband in a quest for oil-endowed freedom,

it was just love. / So much—love. Endless, infinite—and I just couldn't. / And it’s going to be gone. / And I won’t be able to get it back / And when it is—I think it’s going that... (Fade to black)”.95 The object of her hesitant ruminations here is primarily her mother’s love; and, secondarily, love (or care/affection) in a broader, globally-extended sense, which can include the

her refusal to be assimilated to her mother’s neoliberal vision of gendered individuality and community, her refusal of identification with her mother, and, eventually, her rupturing with her mother’s existential and moral logic and values. This inference, however, is complicated in the light of Amy’s own vision of femininity and feminism earlier in the play, which can unmistakably be characterized as neoliberal. And, indeed, the choice between the two aforementioned readings determines our own stance towards s vision of history and humanity as well as our understanding of those of Hickson’s. Besides, as Amy’s intimations and confessions manifest, the end foregrounds the prospect of lost and irretrievable “love”. In a similar vein, the conclusion manifests the cyclical logic of capitalist energy systems and hegemonic political economies by betokening the ceaseless extension of extractivist/capitalist logic reflected in the brooding gloom of the emergence of a new historical era. This is a new form of Chinese-led multi-national corporate capitalism, in which energy resources are now exploitatively extracted from the moon, and where the future consequences of this form of extraction are far graver than those of oil. Finally, the return (at the end of the play) to a (though different) starting point can be construed as an attempt

ecosystems”.96 Such an aesthetics (or dramatic method) has its own pedagogical, epistemological, and political implications too. By taking its audience across “monstrously gigantic” spans of time and space *Oil* encourages the audience to think across the scales of Capitalocene.97

Alireza Fakhrkonandeh

University of Southampton