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‘Her Heart Knows my Heart for a Brief Moment’: Mediated Affect and Utopian Impulse in *Many Moons* (2011) by Alice Birch

ABSTRACT

1. This article reads *Many Moons* (2011), by emergent British playwright Alice Birch, from the point of view of the ‘affective turn’ that has recently taken place in the humanities and social sciences. While acknowledging recent critiques on affect theory, this article considers its political potential and analyses two of the strategies through which *Many Moons* seeks to interrupt the ‘mediated affect[s]’ of consumer capitalist societies. These strategies, which can be considered ‘utopian performatives’, take the form of moments of ‘radical naivety’ on the part of the characters, and of the dramatization of a face-to-face encounter between two characters: Meg and Robert. The article finally explores the extent to which these strategies seek to invite spectators to break with the dominant ‘distribution of the sensible’, ultimately contributing to create ‘a new affective topology of the possible’.

KEYWORDS

British Theatre
Alice Birch
affect
ethics
Utopian performatives
‘The sensible’
subjectivity

1. *Little Light* (2015a) is Birch's 'first full-length script' (Sierz 2015), despite having been staged and published after *Many Moons* at the Orange Tree Theatre, in Richmond, where it ran from 7 February to 7 March 2015, directed by David Mercatali. *Little Light* prompted Aleks Sierz's revealing remark that '[n]ew writing doesn't come much better than this' (2015). *Many Moons* (2011), Birch's 'first full play to be staged' (Birch 2017b), ran at Theatre503 from 20 May to 11 June 2011, directed by Derek Bond. *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (2014), which has been performed in New York, Australia and New Zealand, was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of the Midsummer Mischief Festival in the Other Place, in Stratford-on-Avon, where it ran from 21 to 29 June 2014, directed by Erica Whyma. *We Want You to Watch* (2015b), an indictment on pornography, was developed in collaboration with RashDash, a company founded by Abbi Greenland and Helen Goale, and it ran at the National Theatre Temporary Theatre from 15 June to 11 July 2015, directed by Caroline Steinbeis. *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017a) also ran at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, from 3 June to 8 July 2017, and was also directed by Mitchell. Finally, *(Blank)* (2018a), her latest play to date, is a National Theatre/Clean Break co-commission, directed by Marianne O'Shea and Alex Fraser, which ran at the Orange Tree Theatre, the Lyric Hammersmith theatre and the National

Alice Birch is author of six full-length plays, namely, *Little Light* (2015a), *Many Moons* (2011), *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (2014), *We Want You to Watch* (2015b), *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017a), for which she received the Susan Smith Blackburn Award in 2017, and *(Blank)* (2018a).¹ She is also author of the stage adaptations *Ophelias Zimmer* (2015c), a feminist adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; *Shadow (Eurydice Speaks)* (2016), based on Elfriede Jelinek's *Schatten (Eurydice sagt)* (2004), a feminist rewriting of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth; and *La Maladie de la Mort* (2018b), which rewrites Marguerite Duras's 1982 homonymous novel, all of which have been directed by Katie Mitchell.² She is also author of the script for the acclaimed film *Lady Macbeth* (2016), directed by William Oldroyd, for which she received the British Independent Film Award for best screenplay in 2017.³

Simon Stephens has called Birch 'one of the most exciting playwrights in British theatre' (quoted in Bowie-Sell 2011), and Matt Hartley referred to her as a 'stratospheric writer' (Magois 2017). Also, her having collaborated with Mitchell on four different occasions, including in *Anatomy of a Suicide*, in what is an obvious and enduring affinity, attests to her growing importance as a playwright.⁴

Birch has claimed that she started writing 'as soon as she could write' (Birch 2017b), and was 'interested in form before [she] knew what form was' (Birch 2017b).⁵ Indeed, Birch's plays, which combine the attention to language and poetic detail with 'a gift for radical experiment, have been compared to those of 'Caryl Churchill or Sarah Kane' (Billington 2017), distinguishing themselves by their formally experimental character.⁶ *Many Moons*, as shall be seen, is the first play by Birch whose form is key to its utopian core of resistance as four characters who are apparently separate and distant end up coalescing in the same, affective space in a movement towards affective convergence. This article, therefore, attempts to contribute to analyse the playwrighting of what is arguably one of the most important female, and feminist, theatrical voices in the United Kingdom, through an analysis of her play *Many Moons*, thus bringing Birch's 'debut full-length play' (Costa 2011) under its much-deserved and much-needed scholarly attention. Given Birch's unquestioning attention to language and poetics, the article will carry out a fundamentally textual analysis of the play, but occasional references will be made to its original staged production.

Many Moons, written when Birch was barely 24 years old, and performed in 2011 at the Theatre503, directed by Derek Bond, interrogates some of the fault-lines that mark Britain in the twenty-first century, particularly those relating to the liberal capitalist construction of acquisitive, individualist subjectivities in hyper-connected, globalized consumer capitalist societies.⁷ *Many Moons* is set in London, and it consists of interlinking monologues from four different characters: Meg, a pregnant housewife; Juniper, a twenty-four year-old, 'hopeful' (Birch 2011: 7) girl; Ollie, a young boy of 26; and Robert, a 'shy' (Birch 2011: 7) man of 63. All these characters, as we glean through their monologues, coalesce on a hot July day at a parade in Stoke Newington's Church Street, with unforeseen consequences.

Drawing on American philosopher Lauren Berlant's claim, as stated in *Cruel Optimism*, that 'affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary' (2011: 15; see also Brennan 2004: 7), the article asserts that, through the characters' monologues, *Many Moons* depicts different 'affective scenarios' (Berlant 2011: 9) of 'crisis ordinarieness' (Berlant 2011: 10) of consumer capitalism to make visible 'how affective impact takes form, becomes mediated' (Berlant 2011: 10), as 'part of the regulation of affect conducted within the operation of power' (Butler 2008: 49). This article, indeed, transposes Berlant's affective analysis

of contemporary society into the key of drama since her understanding of the present as a 'mediated affect' (2011: 4) and of crisis as 'embedded in the ordinary' (Berlant 2011: 10) can crucially contribute to illuminate aspects of contemporary theatre and performance practice, particularly that produced after the 2008 financial crisis, and of *Many Moons* in particular.

Many Moons depicts 'a picture of an atomised society' (Bowie-Sell 2011), in which subjects are constructed as self-contained (Brennan 2004: 6) and 'vertical' (Cavarero 2011a: 195), essentially unempathic selves. Juniper, for instance, reflects a society in which people are afraid to help one another by collecting each other's post. As she claims, referring to Ollie,

His name's on the buzzer outside. And sometimes I pick up his post for him. Pop it outside the door. Millie says you should not do that really, that that's not what you do in London, people will think you're nuts. / It's just post, isn't it?

(Birch 2011: 28)

On his part, Robert, a repented, mysterious ex-paedophile, who is forced to attend a 'Circle' not to become ostracized, mocks its duplication of the same, 'vertical' logic:

I am June's Carer and she is my Cared for. As if before this / Horrible Attack / on our World / I did not care for Her and She did not Care for me. / As if it took a massive bout of Parkinson's and for her to almost disappear for the World to decide that we Care.

(Birch 2011: 17)

This article focuses on two specific strategies, however, through which *Many Moons* seeks to question and interrupt the 'mediated affect[s]' (Berlant 2011: 4) of consumer capitalism, namely, moments of what Dan Rebellato has termed 'authorial absence' (2013: 27), which take the form of a radical exposure and 'naivety' (Rebellato 2013: 17) on the part of the characters, such as when they proclaim 'their belief in the goodness of human nature' (Bowie-Sell 2011), or claim that they want to 'believe in an inherent Goodness in Others' (Birch 2011: 40, original capitalization), and the final dramatization of a face-to-face encounter between Meg, the pregnant, lonely housewife, and Robert, the guilt-ridden ex-paedophile.⁸

On the one hand, the first strategies break with theatrical realism, and are a means to invite spectators to construct an alternative 'affective *scenario*' (Berlant 2011: 9) between characters and spectators. On the other, through the final dramatization of the face-to-face encounter as the site where the relationship with the Other is negotiated, *Many Moons* seeks to produce 'ambivalence' (Grehan 2009: 22) in spectators to keep them engaged with a process of ethical reflection about the Other, 'long after they have left the performance space' (Grehan 2009: 22). The ending seeks to create what Nicholas Bourriaud calls a 'social *interstice*' ([1998] 2006: 161, original emphasis), understood as a space that 'suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system' (Bourriaud [1998] 2006: 161).

Through these strategies, which could be termed, following Jill Dolan's term, as 'utopian performatives' (2005: 8), *Many Moons* seeks to make visible 'what's collective' about affects (Berlant 2011: 9) and, in Jacques Rancière's words, interrupt 'the distribution of the sensible' (Rancière [2000] 2004: 12),

Theatre, as part of the National Theatre Connections Festival 2018, consisting of a series of sixty scenes, some connected, others less so, about adults and children impacted by the criminal justice system.

2. *Ophelias Zimmer* (2015c), a co-production by the Royal Court Theatre and Schaubühne Theater in Berlin, conceived by Katie Mitchell and created by Birch, ran at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs from 17 to 21 May 2016, after it opened at the Schaubühne in December 2015. *Shadow (Eurydice Speaks)* (2016) was first performed at Berlin's Schaubühne, where it ran from 28 September to 3 October 2016, and then at Théâtre de la Colline, in Paris, where it ran from 19 to 28 January 2016. *The Malady of Death* (2018b), a multimedia work that interrogates pornography and the male gaze, ran at Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord from 16 January to 3 February 2018, before being staged at the Barbican from 3 to 6 October 2018, with Laetitia Dosch as the woman, Nick Fletcher as the man and Irène Jacob as narrator. In an interview between Maddy Costa, Mitchell and Birch, Birch herself made clear that the original by Duras focuses on the psychology of the male character who pays a woman to spend several nights with him, but says almost nothing about the background of the woman; to counter this, Birch rewrote her as a sex worker, and single mother, someone for who the financial offer would be paramount (2018c).

3. *Lady Macbeth* (2016), with acclaimed actress Florence Pugh as Katherine, Cosmo Jarvis as Sebastian and Paul Hilton as Alexander, is about Katherine, a woman who is stifled by her loveless marriage to a bitter man twice her age, and her passionate affair with a young worker on her husband's estate, and it explores a woman who, trapped within patriarchal structures, stops at nothing to get what she wants. It is a rewriting of Nikolái Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (2015), and Birch has claimed that, whereas Leskov did not empathize with her main character, she and Okroyd wanted to 'find a way to go with her' (Birch 2017d). Birch is currently writing a feminist TV adaptation of *Love and Capital* (Gabriel 2011), which is about Karl Marx's private life and marriage, and an original pilot entitled *Circleville* for HBO.

4. It is worth noting that Birch was also invited as guest speaker at a symposium *Drama, Theatre and Young People* which was held in Lille (France), and that included a Round Table with Birch, stage director Arnaud Anckaert and Birch's translator into French Séverine Magois, and clearly attests to her growing international appeal. The symposium was held in Lille University from 2 to 3 February 2017, and it was organized by Constantin Bobas, Claire Hélié and Véronique Perruchon. The symposium also included a translation workshop with students from Lille University led by Magois on Birch's unpublished monologue 'Salt' and a

which 'revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak' (Rancière [2000] 2004: 13). As shall be seen, the alternative understanding of ethics and subjectivity that Birch proposes can be understood in terms of what Rosi Braidotti conceptualizes as an 'ethics of sustainability' (2008: 181) and of what Jean-Luc Nancy has called the 'singular being' (1991: 4), or that subject that leans outside itself, 'over that edge that opens up its being in common' (Nancy 1991: 4).

Reviewer Natasha Tripney has asserted that *Many Moons* 'works best as a portrait of social disconnect and of the loneliness one can feel in a city full of people' (2011), and Birch herself has defined the play as staging 'different facets of loneliness' (Birch 2017b) and as being 'about the absence of community' (Birch 2017c, interview). Indeed, although Juniper is constantly connected to social media, on her birthday she has no one to share it with, betraying that she feels 'a little bit vulnerable, I think I'll just stay on the safe side and not bake a cake' (Birch 2011: 26). On the other hand, Meg lives in a loveless marriage with an unfaithful husband and has enormous rage and grief because her first daughter died in an accident. She claims that 'I am not silly. / I am not mad. / I Am / lonely' (Birch 2011: 53), but ignores Robert's wave, despite the attraction that the play suggests she feels for him, prompting Robert's comment that 'people are not friendly in London. / Perhaps I am branded / Perhaps it is just London' (Birch 2011: 23).

In this connection, Judith Butler claims that 'our affective and moral responses are regulated by interpretative schemes' (2008: 49) conducted within the field of the political and that account for the 'differential ways in which we experience and regard [...] vulnerability' (Butler 2008: 49). Thus, *Many Moons* attempts to disrupt the obviousness and naturalness of the affective underpinnings of neo-liberal consumer capitalism, which favours the efficient management of emotions in the public sphere, and against its dominant affective regime, postulates that 'our existence is always in itself collective' (Negri 2004: 7), ultimately contributing towards creating 'a new affective topology of the possible' (Rockhill [2000] 2004: 23).

'THE SPACE AND PLACEMENT OF THE HEART': AFFECT, NORMS AND POWER

As Patricia T. Clough asserts in *The Affective Turn*, there recently has been a surge of interest in sensation and the passions within the humanities and social sciences, which she terms as an 'affective turn' (2007: 2), and that has entailed a re-centering of the body. In this sense, this article revisits the work of Benedict de Spinoza (1632–77), and particularly his volume *Ethics* (1677), where he aims to re-conceptualize human beings from passive and subjected to the world's causal force, to powerful, desiring actants. Indeed, according to Spinoza, the external world has a strong causal force in a human body's power to act. Through joyful encounters and 'harmonious synchronicities with other bodies' (Nicholson 2014: 337) that are life affirming, however, human beings can play a more active role in the cause of their affects and circumstances, which may ultimately lead to the possibility of challenging the habits of power. Undoubtedly, his interest in the ethics of affective bodies means that his work can be translated or adapted to speak to theatre and performance, and can illuminate how contemporary British theatre, through collective feeling and action, may suggest ways to break through institutional normalization and dominant affective regimes.

In 'On the origin and nature of the affects', from his volume *Ethics* (1677), Spinoza considers desire, love and sorrow to be the 'three primary affects' (2001: 145), and defines affects as ideas

by which the mind affirms of its body, or any part of it, a greater or less power of existence than before; and this increase of power being given, the mind itself is determined to one particular thought rather than to another. (Spinoza 2001: 158)

Brian Massumi, perhaps the writer who has developed Deleuze's work on affect most systematically, defines it in a dynamic way as 'a body movement looked at from the point of view of its potential – its capacity to come to be or better, to come to do' (2015: 7). It is worth noting, however, that Massumi, among other affect theorists such as Silvan S. Tompkins, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick or Simon O'Sullivan, have been the focus of recent critiques of affect, such as, for instance, the one expounded by Clare Hemmings, in 'Invoking affect: Cultural theory and the ontological turn', or Ruth Leys, in 'The turn to affect: A critique'. Leys, for instance, claims that, by considering affect as 'a matter of autonomic responses that are held to occur below the threshold of consciousness and cognition and to be rooted in the body' (2011: 443) critics such as Massumi enact a Cartesian, mind-body dualism 'below the threshold of meaning and ideology' (Leys 2011: 451). Hemmings, in her turn, points out 'the myriad ways that affect manifests precisely not as difference, but as a central mechanism of social reproduction in the most glaring ways' (2005: 550–51), citing, for example, 'the delights of consumerism [or] [...] feelings of belonging attending fundamentalism of fascism' (Hemmings 2005: 551), all of which question its capacity to restructure social meaning.⁹ This has led feminist critics such as Sarah Ahmed, for instance, to forego the distinction between affect and emotion, considering them as part of a social continuum, since 'bodily sensation, emotion and thought' cannot be 'experienced as distinct realms of human "experience"' (2004: 6), thus seeing both affect and emotions as 'a means of theorizing the social' (Liljeström and Paasonen 2010: 18).

While taking Hemming's and Leys's critiques into consideration, this article seeks to consider the capacity of affect, as 'unformed or unstructured' intensity (Ngai 2005: 25), to challenge the dominant social order, even if, in line with Spinoza, it also considers affect as both bodily and political, since 'the decree of the mind, the appetite, and determination of the body are coincident in nature, or rather that they are one and the same thing' (2001: 103). Indeed, as operating within power structures, affect is not purely autonomic and 'independent of meaning and intention' (Leys 2011: 450), but involved in the political and ideological field. Frédéric Lordon, for instance, sees politics as an '*ars affectandi*' (2016: 35, my translation) and asserts that 'affects are the substance of politics' (Lordon 2016: 15, my translation).¹⁰ In line with Massumi, however, this article will distinguish between affect and emotion, seeing affect as the immediate, bodily desire for connection that the characters experience towards one another, and emotion as having to do with how neo-liberal ideological frames channel or 'capture and closure affect' (Massumi 1996: 228) into expressions of resentment, rage or fear, thus constructing the 'vertical' (Cavarero 2011a: 195), individualistic subject of neo-liberalism.

As shall be seen, as opposed to the consumer capitalist view of an isolated, individualistic self, which the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero has theorized as the 'vertical' (2011a: 195), neo-liberal self-inherited from modernity,

performance of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*, directed by Anckaert, held at Théâtre du Prisme at Le Garage, in Roubaix (Lille).

5. Birch made this comment at the opening ceremony of the symposium *Drama, Theatre and Young People*, which was held in Lille University, and where she had been invited as guest speaker. In relation to Birch's concern with form, in the Round Table Birch claimed that, in the theatre, 'the rhythm and every word must have an impact on spectators. On stage you cannot go back to the page, so the rhythm and the choice of words is more important than the meaning' (Birch 2017b). She added that, when she re-drafts, she 'write[s] the whole thing out again, because rhythm is so important, and changing an "it's" for an "it is" has repercussions' (Birch 2017b). It is also worth noting that Katie Mitchell has claimed that *Anatomy of a Suicide* has 'one of the most exciting forms she has ever been presented with as a director' (2017d).

6. One of Birch's most experimental pieces is a poetic monologue, 'Salt', commissioned by Birch's translator into French, Séverine Magois, which she wrote for the experimental theatre project 'A Room in Town, opus 3' (2011–13), a project for theatre in rooms commissioned and produced by the Comédie de Valence artistic collective, consisting of three twenty-minute plays to be staged in three different rooms in a hotel. 'Salt' is about a man who retells

the trauma of his daughter's suicide, and that was performed as a duologue with the daughter, and it is arguably the seed of her full length-play *Anatomy of a Suicide*. According to Magois, it is 'an extremely complex text, and because the plays were all performed inside a hotel, spectators shared the hotel room with the characters in extreme proximity and intimacy' (2017). 'Salt' was translated into French by Magois, and then directed by Richard Brunel in May 2013 at Comédie de Valence, Centre dramatique national Drôme-Ardèche, with Denis Sneguirev as the father, and Philippe Chevalier as the daughter. For more information, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxjhDTcl86c>.

7. Bond's production ran from 17 May to 11 June 2011 at Theatre 503, with Esther Smith as Juniper, Esther Hall as Meg, Jonathan Newth as Robert, and Edward Franklin as Ollie. Natasha Tripney praised the actors' performance, claiming all the actors captured the characters' deep, essential ambivalence. As she puts it, Esther Hall captured 'Meg's emotional flatness', conveying 'an overwhelming sense of absence to her performance', whilst Edward Franklin as Ollie was 'sweet and open' and only made 'Birch's revelations about this character all the more troubling' (Tripney 2011). She also claimed Jonathan Newth captured the ambiguity of his character, never entirely losing audience sympathy when his past came into focus, and Esther

the play invites spectators to conceive of subjectivities that 'inclin[e]' (Cavarero 2011a: 195) towards the Other. Indeed, despite their damaging isolation, all the characters express an almost somatic, immediate need for increased aliveness and connection through the metaphor of the beating, racing heart. When Meg, who has been feeling excruciatingly lonely, meets Ollie at the Stoke Newington parade, she claims that 'I am whirling past the boy in a slight daze – my heart crept up to five beats a minute, just for that minute and he looked straight through me' (Birch 2011: 43), thus feeling an increase in her power of acting. In his turn, Ollie asserts '[i]t was on the 18th of July that my Heart began to Beat' (Birch 2011: 10), and referring to his wife June, Robert claims he is 'in possession of the greatest kind of love. [...] I know the lines upon her hand. [...] Real intimacy. And the reason my heart is steady' (Birch 2011: 14).

In the article 'Inclining the subject: Ethics, alterity and natality', Cavarero asserts that, from Kant, to Hobbes and Descartes, to Canetti, the modern self has been constructed as 'transparent or opaque, enthralled by the dream of its own autonomy and integrity' (2011b: 16). Cavarero draws on Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), and mobilizes Arendt's definition of 'inclination' against the traditional Western ideology of individualism through a focus on relationality and dependence. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt regards human beings as equal, and sees birth or natality as 'the naked fact of our original, physical appearance' ([1958] 1998: 179), that is, as standing for an essential human condition. As Cavarero explains, taking the new-born as emblematic of the fundamental fact of human vulnerability, Arendt asserts that human beings are 'constitutively exposed one to the others, beginning with the initial phase of this appearance: birth' (2011a: 199). Ultimately, therefore, Cavarero expresses the necessity to redefine the subject as being 'inclined' (2011b: 17) to the Other and, moving away from feminist critics who have valued interdependency over dependency, such as Carol Gilligan (1982) or Joan Tronto (1993), she chooses the unbalanced, unilateral inclination as a new ethical paradigm.

Cavarero's inclining subject resonates with Nancy's notion of a subject that leans outside itself, 'over that edge that opens up its being in common' ([1986] 1991: 4). In *La Communauté Désœuvrée* (*The Inoperative Community*) ([1986] 1991), Nancy reacts against both the failure of Soviet communism and the subsequent advent of neo-liberalism, and sets out to question the idea of a homogeneous community, characterized by 'common being', as opposed to 'being-in-common'. However, he also questions the traditional theory of individualism, in that it takes the individual as a self-contained, self-sufficient being, when s/he is, he claims, 'merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community' ([1986] 1991: 3).¹¹ Also, he adds, 'the individual can be the origin and the certainty of nothing but its own death' (Nancy [1986] 1991: 3). Thus, Nancy describes the 'singular being' as one who, as opposed to the individual, accepts its own finitude, and the community of singular beings as an ethical paradigm. On these terms, 'being "itself" comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness, and, if you will [...] as *community*' (Nancy [1986] 1991: 6, original emphasis). In consequence, we are all exposed to others, 'always turned toward an other and faced by him or her, never facing myself' (Nancy [1986] 1991: xxxvii–xxxviii).

As shall be seen, *Many Moons* thus seeks to redefine the self not in terms of 'vertical[ity]' (Cavarevo 2011a: 195) and possession, but in terms of the acknowledgement of our ontological vulnerability and the 'inclination' (Cavarero 2011a: 195) towards the Other. It is worth noting that the characters

end up converging at the parade, thus fleetingly sharing the same physical and affective spaces. Thus, in *Many Moons*, it is the form of the play itself in the recomposition of stage space it suggests that seeks to reflect 'the profoundly relational nature of human subjectivity' (Braidotti 2008: 34), thus expressing the notion of the ecstatic body and of the sharing of positive affects that fulfil the subject's capacity for interaction and freedom.

'THE PACE AT WHICH IT BEATS': INCOMPLETION, RESISTANCE AND BEING 'EC-STATIC'

Precisely to suggest the characters' isolation, Bond staged the play, as Daisy Bowie-Sell claims, with the four characters stand[ing] on an almost bare stage', who, 'although they are physically near to each other, each [...] is alone with their thoughts' (2011). In this context, and as Bond himself claims, 'the characters never talk to each other – we never see a live human connection in the play, the only connection that can be made is to us – the audience' (Bond 2018, interview). Bond also tried to suggest the junctures and separations of Stoke Newington on the stage itself. As he puts it,

the set designer, James Perkins, re-created road junctions from around Stoke Newington in pieces of timber, and strung them above the audience. The globe on the set had an orbit routed into the stage, we could see it had passed this way before, and was elevated, on a slope – with the potential of rolling down, perhaps.

(Bond 2018, interview)

Thus, the affective mediation of consumer society was evoked through the mise en scène itself, which also suggested the notions of social disconnection, fragmentation and loneliness. It is with the aim to question the 'mediated affect[s]' (Berlant 2011: 4) of consumer capitalism that the character's monologues contain moments of what Rebellato has termed 'authorial absence' (2013: 27), such as when the characters postulate themselves as constituted by a radical exposure and 'naivety' (Rebellato 2013: 17). At these moments, the role of the author seems to be questioned, thus giving rise to an 'instability', 'ambiguity' (Reballato 2013: 27) and 'non-identity' (Rebellato 2013: 26), through which spectators are invited to emerge out of the dominant affective 'interpretive frames' (Butler 2010: 34). These moments usually express a 'utopian dream of perfect communion' (Rebellato 2013: 17), and cause an interruption in the 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière [2000] 2004: 12), which 'supposes a prior aesthetic division between the visible and invisible, the audible and the un audible, the sayable and the unsayable' (Rancière [2000] 2004: 3), thereby 'modifying the very aesthetico-political field of possibility' (Rockhill [2000] 2004: 3).

These moments of disruption are particularly present in Juniper's monologue, which is a 'direct address to the audience' (Birch 2011: 9), where she tells spectators about her radical openness and willing exposure to others, and how happiness resides in the sharing of affects with the Other. As she puts it,

I am Looking for Love. I am Actively, looking for Love. You know those traffic light parties where you wear red if you're not available, amber if you might be and green if you absolutely are? Well I'm on green. Constantly.

Smith as Juniper was hopeful and kind with a delicate desperation underneath (Tripney 2011). Interestingly, *Many Moons* speaks to Stephen Brown's *Future Me*, which ran in 2007 also in Theatre503, and that is also about the possibility to forgive a child abuser. *Many Moons*, which was finalist in the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, was also staged in Village Theatre in Australia, by Said & Done productions, where it ran from 9 to 13 September 2015 as part of the Sydney Fringe Festival.

8. From now on, whenever specific words from the play's quotes are capitalized, it is an emphasis present in the play itself. As Birch puts it in the opening stage directions, 'upper and lower case letters are there to help the actor in terms of pace or weight of their words' (2011: 7). *Many Moons* could be claimed to be the first play where Birch puts into practice what could be termed as her 'affective playwrighting', which consists of some words being capitalized for the sake of affective intensity. As stage director Derek Bond puts it, in relation to his staged production of *Many Moons*, this

[was] something the actors did instinctively, because Alice had put those letters there. They are like accents (é / á / etc) but lighter than if Alice had put WHOLE WORDS in capitals, or in bold type. When the actors were reading the words, Alice's style helped them very naturally.

(Bond 2018, interview, original emphasis)

9. For an analysis of how capitalism has thrived by imbuing commodities with positive, joyful affects, see Frédéric Lordon (2013: 93).
10. In French, 'Les affects sont [...] l'étoffe de la politique' (Lordon 2016:1 5).
11. In the same line as Cavarero, as shall be seen, Nancy claims that 'such an incarnation of humanity, aggregating its absolute being beyond relation and community, depicts the destiny willed by modern thought' ([1986] 1991: 5). Like Cavarero's notion of inclination, he claims that a community cannot be made 'with simple atoms. There has to be a *clinamen*. There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other' ([1986] 1991: 3, original emphasis). Affect, which is produced as part and parcel of a process of relating whereby beings exist at all, is thus this 'glue' or *clinamen* Nancy and Cavarero claim is constitutive to the human being.

I sometimes think my Heart will fall Out of my ribcage and land at my feet, the pace at which it beats.

I like a lot of things – I *love* a lot of things. I get excited pretty easily about food and friends and parties and events and the weather and sex and films and just hanging out. [...] I sometimes just get on a train to wherever without buying a ticket and just chat away to whoever I'm next to.

I'd say I was a feminist – but probably not in front of a boyfriend. Not that sexy really, is it? I want to do a bit more, maybe volunteer – there's a shelter not far from me for women and I think I'd be very good at that.

Mum worries that I'm not safe – a lot. That I'm too friendly.

(Birch 2011: 12, original emphasis)

Juniper presents herself as inherently joyful and in need of the Other. She shows and describes herself as ontologically precarious, that is, as essentially open to the Other, thus recognizing 'precariousness as a shared condition of human life' (Butler 2010: 13). She, furthermore, shows no fear to offer her ontological vulnerability to the other while at the same time being receptive or 'responsive' (Butler 2010: 61) to the other's 'appeal' (Butler 2010: 61) – 'I'm on green, constantly'. As Butler explains, 'if this precarious status [of the human being] can become the condition of suffering, it also serves the condition of responsiveness, of a formulation of affect' (2010: 61) which holds the potential to 'destabilize dominant power relations [...] fixed identities and mainstream values' (Braidotti 2008: 192). In this context, late capitalist affective mediation is represented through the mother's fears that she may be 'too friendly'.

Through Juniper, then, who asserts the positive affects of connection with others – 'I want to do a bit more, maybe volunteer' – and acknowledges herself as a desiring, sexual being, Birch challenges dominant understandings of happiness as based on striving for or attaining external 'happy objects' (Ahmed 2010: 21) that become socially invested with affective value, and suggests, instead, that happiness itself can be found in the affective, 'anonymous, impersonal donation of potential' (Anderson 2006: 739), and in the subject's 'joyful affirmation as *potentia*' (Braidotti 2011: 313). Thus, Birch seeks to redefine the human being, in Rosi Braidotti's terms, who follows on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's interpretation of Spinoza, as 'intensive' and 'driven by affect' (2008: 185), and ethical behaviour as that which 'confirms, facilitates, and enhances the subject's *potentia* – the capacity to express her or his freedom' (Braidotti 2008: 186).

As Rebellato puts it, these moments in which the character is given such freedom of unsophisticated expression, as is the case with Juniper's monologue, become 'oddly dislocating [...] [since] [t]here is no sign that this is meant to be ironic' (2013: 17). Through her passionate and embodied monologue Juniper thus carves up a space for politics (Rockhill [2000] 2004: 3), in Rancière's sense, that is, a space of '*dis-sensus*' understood as a 're-ordering of the senses' (Corcoran [2010] 2015: 4, original emphasis) that may 'reconfigur[e] the common experience of the sensible' (Corcoran [2010] 2015: 23) for spectators, and reveal the contingency and limitations of late capitalist horizons of affect.

Indeed, these moments of dramatic intensity "pause", rupture or entirely reconfigure the flow of stage action [...] [and are] constitutive of a reach for new values, new possibilities of living, beyond the grip of capitalism' (Megson 2013: 34). In *Utopia in Performance* (2005), Dolan calls them 'utopian performatives' (2005: 5), which

1. describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the
2. attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone above the present,
3. into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment
4. of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically
5. striking, and intersubjectively intense.

6. (Dolan 2005: 5)

7.
8. Thus, such moments of utopian performativity, in 'mak[ing] the text more
9. elusive and less fully established in performance' (Rebellato 2013: 27), may
10. enable the creation of alternative 'affective *scenarios*' (Berlant 2011: 9) between
11. the characters and the auditorium, which may open spaces for intersubjec-
12. tivity amongst spectators, ultimately enabling the creation of 'intermittent
13. acts of political subjectivization' (Rockhill [2000] 2004: 3) outside the liberal
14. capitalist model.

15. In Bond's production, spectators were constantly reminded of the tension
16. between the characters' physical separation and the possibility of their coming
17. together through joyful, life-affirming encounters, which is essential to the
18. play's utopian core. Even if the characters never talked to each other onstage,
19. Bond emphasized the characters' latent affectivity and the possibility of the
20. ecstatic subject by suggesting a movement towards convergence through the
21. stage design, set and music:

22.
23. we kept coming back to the idea of orbits, and constellations. Objects
24. moving through space, related to each other, part of something, but
25. never connecting. [...] The characters didn't 'see' each other on stage,
26. they moved around each other. Movement became more frequent as
27. the tension in the play built, and they ended up being physically closer
28. than they had started out, but still in their own spaces. [...] Music
29. was key too. I commissioned the composer duo Benson Taylor and
30. Ellis James to create a piece with 4 instruments, which we used at the
31. opening and closing, and then also gave me a pallate of 'stings' – one,
32. two or three note stabs played on those 4 instruments (violin, cello,
33. viola, piano). This too was a way of showing the potential of these
34. instruments / people coming together harmoniously, which we do not
35. get in the play.

36. (Bond 2018, interview)

37.
38. Thus, in his staged production, Bond tried to elicit a synaesthetic type of
39. audience perception that invited spectators to experience the play's tension
40. between the characters' separation and the possibility of their coming together
41. through collective feeling and action. Such synaesthetic *mise en scène*, indeed,
42. aimed to poetically represent 'what's collective' about affects (Berlant 2011: 9),
43. offering spectators a 'utopic point of embarkation from crushing social realities
44. into a more liberated personal imaginary' (Megson 2013: 34).

45. **AMBIVALENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ETHICS: THE APPEAL** 46. **TOWARDS RESPONSIBILITY**

47.
48. *Many Moons* concludes in a deeply ambivalent ending as Meg decides to knock
49. on Robert's door after fleetingly meeting him at the Stoke Newington parade,
50. and after having long felt drawn towards him, and also, arguably, afraid of him
51. because of his mysterious, abusive past. It is clear that Meg feels ambivalent
52.

towards Robert throughout, and even when she decides to meet him directly at his home, spectators have been privy to how she logs in to hate-filled sites on the Internet that condemn paedophiles. At the same time, spectators are never allowed to forget that, as she walks towards Robert's door, she is carrying a kitchen knife with her. Through their face-to-face encounter, and as shall be seen, Birch explores what Butler, by reference to the notion introduced by Emmanuel Levinas, calls "the 'face'" (2006: 131), used, as Thompson explains, both

literally as the face of the other and more conceptually as a term for the limit of our ability to know the other. In the face of a person, we see something of who they are and yet we are also made aware that they are not fully knowable.

(2009: 161)

Indeed, Birch dramatizes the ambivalence that Meg and Robert feel towards one another, and how Meg hovers between responding to and accepting 'the call of the face' (Thompson 2009: 174), and exploiting his ontological 'exposure and dispossession' (Butler 2010: 55), thus abusing Robert's essential vulnerability. As shall be seen, *Many Moons* dramatizes the struggle that is ethics in a paradigmatic manner through Meg and Robert's encounter, allowing spectators to experience that '[a]n ethical politics flows from our constitutive powerlessness in the face of the other' (Thompson 2009: 168). The event is told first by Meg and then by Robert, as Robert's monologue closes the play:

MEG: I'm thinking of Flora and the baby and of Robert and his wife
with the knife in my hand and and my feet on hot tarmac.
The baby is still.
The pork will be ready.
My feet reach the grass beneath their door.
I can see a moon behind the sun.

ROBERT: The doorbell rings.
The right lung on a human is larger than the left one. This is because of
the space and placement of the heart.
I can feel a light humming in my cheek.
The doorbell rings.
I love you, I say, waiting for the silence.
And then.
For the first time in five years.
Just Once.
Moving into the quiet for four beautiful moments.
I love you too.

(Birch 2011: 56)

In this passage, Meg is desperate for someone to blame, 'almost certainly suffering post-traumatic stress after the death of her daughter' (Bond 2018, interview). It is a passage of intense dramatic irony since the spectators know much more about Robert than Meg does, such as, for instance, his deep love for his wife. As Robert reports through his monologue, at this precise moment, and after five years, Robert's wife has responded to Robert's solicitations of love with 'I love you too', and this is also, crucially, the precise moment when

he is opening the door to Meg, who has already mentioned 'the Japanese carving knife' (Birch 2011: 52) twice at the end of the play.

Birch's mastery of theatrical tension comes to its full expression at this point, as Robert mentions his heart to refer to the affective, inherently joyful nature of human beings, believing it to be so intrinsic to them that he feels it is inscribed in the self-same anatomy of the body – 'The right lung on a human is larger than the left one. This is because of the space and placement of the heart'. In the same breath, however, the word 'heart' suggests the flipside of the individual's affective nature, namely, their exposure and vulnerability to violence, and therefore stresses the late capitalist mediation of affect, which enables Meg to channel her rage towards expressions of hate against paedophiles, and that will probably contribute to cause Robert's death.¹²

Birch dramatizes what Levinas has called the "'temptation'" that a subject may feel in the encounter with the precarious life of the other' (Butler 2010: 172), and how non-violence, or the recognition of 'the face' of the Other, is not a principle but an 'address or appeal' (Butler 2010: 165). Butler claims that we are 'formed through violence' (2010: 167), and yet that is precisely why we have a responsibility not to repeat it since 'it is precisely because one is mired in violence that the struggle exists and that the possibility of non-violence emerges. [...] The struggle against violence accepts that violence is one's own possibility' (Butler 2010: 171), and the ethical quandary or 'struggle' (Butler 2010: 172) emerges from this ambivalence in the encounter with the face, which is 'a desire to kill, an ethical necessity not to kill' (Butler 2010: 173). From this point of view, Levinas presumes that 'the desire to kill is primary to human beings' (Butler 2006: 137); thus, 'the ethical injunction is precisely to militate against that first impulse. [...] [M]arshalling the desire to kill in the service of an internal desire to kill one's own aggression and sense of priority' (Butler 2006: 135).

In *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age*, Helena Grehan asserts that, '[i]f a performance is successful in terms of its ability to engage spectators in a process of ethical reflection, it will leave them feeling ambivalent' (2009: 23). Ambivalence is understood here as

a form of radical unsettlement, an experience of disruption and interruption in which the anodyne is challenged. Ambivalence keeps spectators engaged with the other, with the work, and with responsibility and therefore in an ethical process, long after they have left the performance space. (Grehan 2009: 22)

The ending of *Many Moons* is ambiguous enough to leave spectators feeling ambivalent as to whether Meg will accept 'the call of the face' (Thompson 2009: 174) or not, leaving it up to them to decide on the ultimate meaning of the play. Also as spectators must complete the play themselves, they are confronted with the kind of 'ambivalence' that Grehan writes about – which is precisely a space for ethical deliberation. Robert's claim that '[t]he right lung on a human is larger than the left one. This is because of the space and placement of the heart', which aims to dispel his fear of violence and formulates his 'awakeness to the precariousness of the other' (Butler 2006: 134) functions as a 'utopian performative' (Dolan 2005: 7) for spectators, which aims to 'intimate the possibility of self-realization or transcendence within alternative worlds' (Megson 2013: 34).

12. It is worth noting that, in a personal interview, Birch asserted that 'Meg kills Robert' (Birch 2017c, interview), and Bond himself claimed that this is what his staging aimed to suggest. As he puts it,

Robert has a fleeting moment of connection with his wife – a brief flash of optimism before the ultimate tragedy. Robert mentions his lungs – and his heart – in his last speech. I always imagined this was where he was stabbed by Meg in the moment immediately after the play ends. (Bond 2018, interview)

In this respect, Natasha Tripney pointed out that Bond's production excelled 'in the building of tension', which was 'suberbly handled' (2016).

CONCLUSION

Through the aforementioned moments of utopian performativity, that is, both through the moments of 'radical naivety' (Rebellato 2013: 17) present in Juniper and Robert's monologues, and through the ambivalence of the ending, which dramatizes the struggle for ethics and the need for an acknowledgement of the face, *Many Moons* presents a poetics that suggests ways to break with the dominant distribution of the sensible, and with the 'affective atmosphere[s]' (Berlant 2011: 15) of 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant 2011: 10) of liberal capitalism, creating a space for 'dis-sensus' (Corcoran [2010] 2015: 4), whereby spectators may be able to question the 'bordered' (Esposito 2010: 13), 'immuniz[ed]' (Esposito 2010: 14) subject of liberal capitalism.

Indeed, as has been seen both through Juniper's monologue and through Meg and Robert's face-to-face encounter, *Many Moons* shows that, 'where bodies are in agreement, there is a [certain] potential to break the restrictions of living in a regulated society' (Nicholson 2014: 337). This conviction is expressed through the metaphor of the racing heart, and through the play's form itself, which leads towards the coalescing and convergence of the characters, albeit in fleeting encounters, and which invites spectators, through the play's interlinked monologues, to imagine a different type of spatiality alongside a new affectivity, that is, from the initial individualism and isolation towards the collective sharing of affects. Thus, the play's ethics of resistance is mirrored in the plays' very form and the specific spatiality that it creates onstage, which seeks to lead spectators towards 'a revolution accomplished in consciousness' (Negri 2004: 1).

The play also suggests, however, that this initial, affective need of the Other often becomes mediated into emotions of distance and even hate. When, towards the end of the play, Meg knocks on Robert's door, '[her] Heart [...] positively racing' (Birch 2011: 52), she is clearly finally enlivened by hate and retribution. In the same manner, Ollie – who has 'never been one of the lads' (Birch 2011: 47) – is unable to approach Juniper on equal terms, describing dominant masculinity as aggressive, and succumbing to abusing the little girl, thus embodying the 'negative affects' (Ngai 2005: 3) of neo-liberalism, and the underside of the 'vertical' (Cavarero 2011a: 195), male subject. In this sense, paedophilia is clearly symbolic, in the play, of a desire for an increased affectivity, thus standing as the symptom of a larger, social malaise. The most important question posed by *Many Moons*, however, is whether the emotions of loneliness, anxiety or resentment generated by neo-liberalism will remain individual and separated, or whether they will eventually be followed by collective affects that may be harbingers of a revolutionary collective empowerment.

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