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## Theatre That Speaks to Its Moment: *Melt* (2017) by Shane Mac an Bhaird

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**Abstract.** In *Melt* (2017), by Shane Mac an Bhaird, two Irish scientists struggle in the Antarctic to reach glory from their research while Veba, a female creature found in the subglacial lake, questions the reality or fantasy of the episode. The study carried out in this article considers, first, the context of creation of the play through the presentation of the concept of new Irish theatres in the millennium, which involves the appearance of companies and social activism movements that challenge the notion of what theatre means. This is followed by an analysis of Ireland and the Anthropocene, to contextualise the play themes and include other social justice activisms, in the form of cultural projects, which encourage the reduction of the environmental impact and provide a backdrop against which *Melt* emerged. The approach to the play from these perspectives will lead to the conclusions, which aim to show why Mac an Bhaird's work offers and confirms new perspectives in contemporary Irish theatre. Furthermore, the study aims to contribute to the deserving scholarship for this play, which has not yet received much critical attention.

**Key Words.** Shane Mac an Bhaird, *Melt*, Anthropocene, social activism, environmental impact, contemporary Irish theatre.

**Resumen.** En *Melt* (2017), de Shane Mac an Bhaird, dos científicos irlandeses intentan alcanzar el éxito con su trabajo en la Antártida, mientras Veba, una criatura femenina que han descubierto bajo un lago glacial, cuestiona la realidad o fantasía del episodio. El estudio llevado a cabo en este artículo considera, en un primer término, el contexto de creación de la obra, a través de la presentación del concepto de nuevos teatros irlandeses en el nuevo milenio; esto implica la aparición de nuevas compañías y movimientos de activismo social que desafían el significado del teatro. A continuación, se presenta un análisis de Irlanda y el Antropoceno, para contextualizar la temática de la obra e introducir otros activismos de justicia social, en forma de proyectos culturales, que reclaman la reducción del impacto medioambiental y construyen un trasfondo para entender la aparición de *Melt*. El estudio de la obra desde estas perspectivas conducirá a las conclusiones, que pretenden mostrar por qué *Melt* ofrece y confirma nuevas perspectivas en el teatro irlandés contemporáneo. Además, el artículo se propone como contribución a la falta de atención crítica sobre la obra.

**Palabras clave.** Shane Mac an Bhaird, Melt, Antropoceno, activismo social, impacto medioambiental, teatro irlandés contemporáneo.

### **Irish Theatre(s) in The New Millennium**

The political and socioeconomic journey that the Republic of Ireland has taken since the turn of the millennium has been marked by economic crisis, societal debates about the recognition of traumas from the past and a demand of equal rights. This has been confirmed by scholars such as Lonergan, for whom in 2000 “Ireland was experiencing a newfound cultural confidence, but it entered the second decade of the century in a state of profound moral, economic and political crisis” (2019: 182). The re-election of Bertie Ahern as Taoiseach from 2002 to 2008 brought the first coalition with the Greens in 2007. He would be succeeded by Brian Cowen (2008-2011), in charge of dealing with the financial crisis which caused a deep recession. In 2009, the Irish voted in favour of the European Lisbon’s Treaty, and 2010 brought that the country’s government had to apply for a bailout from the International Monetary Fund, The European Central Bank, and the European Commission, a bailout that Ireland would exit in 2013. The relationship with the United Kingdom was marked by the visit of Queen Elizabeth in 2011, the first since the independence of the country; this was be corresponded with the official visit to Britain by President Michael D. Higgins in 2014.

The socio-economic crisis of the country, which had been preceded by the period of abundance of the Celtic Tiger, making Ireland one of the richest countries in the world, brought a time of austerity, and the subsequent entrance in recession in 2008. Consequences were, amongst others, new waves of emigration caused by the uncertain future of the island, as well as a feeling of mistrust. Concurrently, several reports were published in 2009 and 2013 denouncing child and women’s abuse in contexts related to religious-run institutions – like the Murphy and Ryan reports and the McAleese Report related to the Magdalene laundries. All these contributed to the erosion of the Church’s authority and the denounce of the situation of women. Equal rights were demanded through the publication of the report in 2009 about how the Irish Catholic Church mishandled the cases of child abuse that had been denounced in the country. In addition, in 2011, Taoiseach Enda Kenny formally apologised for the existence of the Magdalene Laundries that had existed in Ireland between 1922 and 1996, and where single mothers were mistreated; this would be reinforced by the announcement in 2014 of an investigation into these religious homes. The referenda carried out added to the picture: in 2015, same-sex marriage was legalised, and in 2018 abortion rights were recognised –laws had been passed in 2013 that allowed abortion under very specific circumstances. After Micheál Martin became the 15<sup>th</sup> Taoiseach in 2020, the country is ruled by a coalition between three parties: the Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party.

All these changes were reflected in theatre, and the new millennium has marked a moment where it can be argued that “there is no such thing as *the* (original emphasis) Irish theatre; there are Irish *theatres* (original emphasis), whose forms continue to multiply as they leave behind the fantasy of a single unifying image, origin or destiny” (Morash 2002: 271). This multiplication has been favoured by globalisation and European integration, and the new performances escape traditional naturalism, or the portrayal of the characteristic Irish landscapes of the bogs and domestic homes, in favour of, for instance, “curiously featureless, sterilized suburban nowhere” (Fitzpatrick 2007: 169), i.e., spaces which, apparently, might not have a relationship with the external real society, and thus depart from traditional Irish settings. The use of these conflicting and changing spaces coexists with the representation of new identities in modern contexts that speak to its moment: theatre in Ireland in the twenty-first century is marked by a “diversity of aesthetic and dramaturgical experimentation”

(Walsh 2013: 2) and, for instance, the post-recession theatre was marked by the emergence of new companies which challenged the very notion of what theatre meant as regards concepts such as form and location. This is the case of three companies – ANU, Brokentaklers and Willfredd – that gained international acclaim.

Brokentaklers based their working method in collaborative work and improvised writing, being one of their best acknowledged achievements *Silver Stars* (2008), a cycle of songs about gay men and their lives in Ireland when homosexuality was considered a crime. *Blue Boy* (2011) also brought the company international recognition: it constituted a denounce of child abuse in Ireland in the Catholic residential institutions. The play blended technology and live performance with documentary material. Also interested in the representation of societal issues and Irish traumas from the past, ANU productions presented its tetralogy, known as the Monto Cycle, between 2009 and 2014. The company define themselves as “devoted to an interdisciplinary approach to performance / installation that cross-pollinates visual art, dance and theatre in an intensely collaborative way” (ANU 2021). The four plays are set in Dublin and explore different controversial themes related to the history of the city. In *World’s End Lane* (2010) the audience are taken on a journey through the street to experience different situations related to the prolific world of prostitution that existed in the area back in the 1920s. *Laundry* (2011) explores the history behind the Gloucester Street Magdalene Convent, one of the businesses run by Catholic nuns in charge of hiding orphan girls or single mothers who were a shame for their families. The *Boys of Foley Street* (2012) is an exploration of the years 1971-1981, when unemployment coexisted in Dublin with thieving and drugs. Finally, *Vardo* (2014) closes the cycle, addressing the invisible economy created by undocumented workers in Dublin.

The third company that can exemplify this innovation in Irish theatre after the millennium, Willfredd, was created by one of the founding members of ANU, Sophie Motley, and it shares the interest towards the importance of building a relationship between the communities that were represented and the spectators. They portray societal issues in *Follow* (2011), where spoken text is combined with ISL (Irish Sign Language), to represent the collision of languages; *Farm* (2012), in which different environments evoke the daily life of Irish farming communities; and *Care* (2014), focused on the community of hospice care workers.

Simultaneously, movements such as Waking the Feminists signal the relevance of activism in Irish theatre from the end of 2015 onwards. Considered as “the campaign that revolutionised Irish theatre” (Meaney 2018), it was formed at the Abbey Theatre during the 2016 centenary anniversary, and denounced the public exclusion and discrimination of women artists. The constitutional referenda held in Ireland in 2015, about same-sex marriage, and 2018, concerning abortion rights, are related to this crucial moment. Examples of plays that emerged within this context, would be those represented at the Dublin’s Gate theatre after the appointment of artistic director Selina Carmell. From the inaugural 2017-18 season, *The Red Shoes* (2017), by Nancy Harris, presented a rewriting of Anderson’s fairy tale located in contemporary Ireland that talks about creative and sexual repression in women. *Asking for It* (2018), an adaptation of the novel by Louise O’Neill, rewritten by Meadhbh McHugh and Annabelle Comyn, deals with the story of an Irish teenager from Co. Cork who suffers social media violence after the gang rape she suffers goes viral. *Rathmines Road* (2018), by Deirdre Kinahan, addresses sexual assault too.

### **New Irish Theatres and The Anthropocene**

The concept of the Anthropocene and its influence is essential to understand these new theatres. Although debates continue as regards the starting point of this era – some of the

dates mentioned include the extinction of mammoths due to human intervention (Doughty *et al.* 2010), and more recent events such as the early stages of the Industrial revolution at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the explosion of the first nuclear bomb in 1945 (Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2015) – general agreement exists concerning the definition of the concept as:

a new planetary era: one in which humans have become the dominant force shaping Earth's bio-geophysical composition and processes. [...] the Anthropocene has been widely adopted across academia as a catch-all description of the overwhelming impact of human activity on the planet. Its key markers include climate change and its consequences (e.g. sea level rise), the effects of plastic pollution on marine and terrestrial processes, unprecedented rates of biodiversity loss and extinction, and the changing chemical composition of soils, oceans, and the atmosphere. (Chua and Fair 2019)

The Anthropocene's contribution to the humanities has been acknowledged in the fields of philosophy, history or arts, and how these have represented these human transformations of the earth and the environment. Authors such as Horn and Bergthaller (2020) addressed this and proposed that the earth has entered this era where globalisation and industrialisation caused catastrophic effects; thus, the consequences of this need to be analysed and contested by these artistic disciplines to fully understand their implications. The concept has reached several fields of study, amongst which are literary studies (Melina Pereira 2017). In a world marked by anthropogenic changes, the fields of ecocriticism, ecofeminism or posthumanism have engaged with the notion and debates related to the climate change, environmental destruction, the relevance of science and the effects of human actions on earth are present in literary texts. Literature then contributes to change and questions ethical values to face human-caused disasters, such as the ones exposed in *Melt*.

In Ireland, concerns about the climate change and the melting world have been expressed in contemporary poetry. This is the case of "The Solace of Artemis", by Paula Meehan, which evokes the ancestral ice age and connects it to present preoccupations:

I read that every polar bear alive has mitochondrial DNA  
from a common mother, an Irish brown bear who once  
roved out across the last ice age, and I am comforted.  
It has been a long hot morning with the children of the machine,

their talk of memory, of buying it, of buying it cheap, but I,  
memory keeper by trade, scan time coded in the golden hive mind  
of eternity. I burn my books, I burn my whole archive:  
a blaze that sears, synapses flaring cell to cell where

memory sleeps in the wax hexagonals of my doomed and melting comb.  
I see him loping towards me across the vast ice field  
to where I wait in the cave mouth, dreaming my cubs about the den,  
my honied ones, smelling of snow and sweet oblivion. (2015)

Irish Scholars have recently revised the concept of the Anthropocene in relation to theatre studies; this is the case of Patrick Lonergan, who delivered the lecture "Irish theatres for the Anthropocene: Druid Theatre, Lady Gregory and Coole Park"<sup>1</sup> during the latest IASIL

<sup>1</sup> The IASIL 2021 Conference was held online, due to COVID-19. It was organised by the University of Łódź, Poland, from 19 to 23 July 2021.

Conference. Lonergan mentioned works such as *Ireland and Ecocriticism* (2015), where interdisciplinary approaches are used to confirm the need to incorporate ecocriticism into Irish cultural studies; the studies presented in the volume – including the analysis of the poetry of Derek Mahon or Paula Meehan, the fiction of John McGahern or the travel literature about Ireland of Rebecca Solnit – constitute pioneering analysis that confirm the need to do the same from the perspective of theatre. For Lonergan, the knowledge of the writers and playwrights, related to nature, speaks to our present and to our future.

The relationship between Irish theatre and the Anthropocene must also consider social justice activisms, similar to the Corrib/Shell pipeline that appears in *Melt*, since these provide a background for other new performances that have emerged in the context; these would include projects such as Green Arts, an initiative that supports Irish arts organisations to reduce their environmental impact. The initiative is currently running a pilot project that involves venues such as Town Hall Theatre in Galway or Hawk's Well Theatre in Sligo. The collaboration between Trinity College Dublin, Dublin Theatre Festival and the company Brokentalkers in 2021 has fostered the creation of *Rising*, a public themed artwork about climate change which has just been presented – from 9 to 10 October – as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. Similarly, theatre companies interested in national and global reach, such as Fishamble, have worked with ESB – the Irish electricity company Electricity Supply Board – and have launched challenges such as *The Tiny Challenge – Tiny Plays for a Brighter Future* – through which writers are invited to write 600-word plays about the theme of climate, the environment, energy and sustainability and how these might affect Irish communities. Additionally, the Research Report *Engaging the Public on Climate Change through the Cultural and Creative Sectors* (2019), commissioned by The Creative Ireland Programme Office of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, presented the findings of a two-month research about cultural and creative sectors in Ireland and their involvement in climate change. The report sustains that:

Culture is a powerful conduit for public engagement, with artists, cultural and creative practitioners historically playing a crucial role in social and political transitions. Many forms of cultural expression seek to address complexity and confront challenges in ways that are provocative and engaging, often opening up dialogue and engagement with and about new social and political contexts and using creative forms of critical inquiry as opposed to seeking or presenting technical solutions. (Creative Ireland 2019: 6)

It includes a compilation of 41 projects and initiatives delivered between 2009 and 2019 in Ireland that were involved with these concerns and that included workshops, literary events, films, art research projects, and exhibitions such as *Our Plundered Planet*, about the effects of greenhouse gas emissions in the melting of polar glaciers. The conclusions of the report state the relationship between climate change and literature:

Climate change is one of the most pressing social and political challenges of this generation, and it cannot be addressed through policy and technology alone. It is through the medium of culture and creativity that the underlying ethical, cultural, political and economic questions will be deliberated on, and that new sustainable values and ways of living will be disseminated. (Creative Ireland 2019: 20)

### ***Melt* (2017)**

*Melt* was written for Rough Magic Theatre, a company well-known in Ireland for its concern to reinforce the relationship between the local and the global, representing themes of international concern. The depiction of these issues, which are not strictly Irish, has had a direct influence in the success of the company: its glocality was marked by the founders, Declan Hughes and Lynne Parker, in 1984, whose aim was “to position Irish theatre in the context of world culture, acting in the belief that a nation can better understand itself when its perspective is outward-looking” (Lonergan 2020: xi). Thus, the company started staging international work, such as British playwright Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* (1982), to move on to the representation of new Irish plays in Hughes’ *Digging for Fire* (1991). The volume *Rough Magic: First Plays* (1999) included *I Can’t Get Started* (1990) by Declan Hughes; *The Dogs* (1992) by Donal O’Kelly; *Down Onto Blue* (1994) by Pom Boyd; *Hidden Charges* by Arthur Riordan (1994); *Danti-Dan* (1995) by Gina Moxley and *Mrs Sweeney* (1997), by Paula Meehan. The company was also innovative in their revivals of Restoration comedies, such as William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1986) or Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1991), which challenged the audience and their idea of what an Irish play was.

Rough Magic’s evolution was linked to their aim to preserve these initial aspirations, and, by 2020, they had represented theatre about innovative themes, such as the Second World War, in *Improbable Frequency* (2004) or *Copenhagen* (2002), sex in *Is This About Sex?* (2007), *Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer* (2009) and *Jezebel* (2013); the story of a couple of women who fall in love and try to legalise the immigration status of one of them, in *How to Keep an Alien* (2014) and the restrictive laws of the Irish State in *The Train* (2015), focused on a moment in 1971 when some members from the Women’s Liberation Movement took a train to Belfast and come back to the Republic bringing with them forbidden contraceptives to foster their campaign; the company has also shown interest towards adaptations, for instance of Greek myths, such as Marina Carr’s *Hecuba*. In addition, Rough Magic has been acknowledged for including a considerable number of female playwrights within their authors’ list: Marina Carr, Sonya Kelly, Lucy Prebble, Hillary Fanin, Morna Regan, Laurent Gaudé, Pedra Calderon, Ionna Anderson, Elizabeth Kutu, Bell Helicopter, Laura Rouhonen, or Ellen Cranitch, are amongst these.

From this perspective, *Melt* has been described as “planetary in scope” (Lonergan 2020: xiii). The story of two scientists is told through a plot that challenges “our ideas of scientific objectivity and representational realism” (Lonergan 2020: xiv). Its themes are related to the damage that humans cause upon the earth, mass extinction, and the economic forces behind all this. The play was published in 2020, in the volume *Rough Magic Theatre Company New Irish Plays and Adaptations, 2010-2018*, edited by Patrick Lonergan, for whom *Melt* was part of the new emerging theatre that exists in Ireland “as a result of the deepening of Ireland’s international and intercultural bonds, pushing its theatre far beyond its established boundaries” (Lonergan 2020: xi). Mac an Bhaird’s account for the origin of the play confirms this:

It’s uncannily like a baby. Pink, for a start, with about eighteen arms or so, lying on its back, no eyes, and a healthy tubby roundness that would please an Irish grandmother that is in rude health.

It’s a year after the production of *Melt* in the 2017 Dublin Theatre festival. I’m idly browsing the internet and *The Guardian* has thrown up an astonishing image of a creature that’s been discovered in a sub-glacial lake in Antarctica. I get a little thrill of excitement, as the exploration of these ecosystems was what provided me with the spark to write *Melt*. For the briefest moment, looking at this bizarre, alien tardigrade, my synapses stir, flooding my soul with a smug sense of wonder [...] this was a creature that had emerged from the broiling darkness beyond human knowledge and

expectation, fallen straight out of the unimaginable and announced its living presence, opening its being and its life and its barmy biotechnics outward with an ancient insistence that has nothing to do with human intention or control. Look at what there is. (2020a: 289)

*Melt* constitutes an example of the Irish new theatres: it happens in a liminal space – the void of the Antarctica – attempts to reconceptualise identities in the contemporary stage and mirrors the real outside, where humans struggle to coexist with the new realities. Shane Mac an Bhaird, the playwright, is part of a new generation of Irish writing which have transcended the traditional themes of emigration, the weight of the past and the importance of history. Within the scope of this re-search, the worlds evoked in his play, distant and populated by bizarre creatures, represent contemporary concerns and reveal “new modes of expression [...] away from conventional venues” (Ettiene and Dubost 2017: 4), following the path of realism (Sternlicht 2010) and representing the twenty-first-century Ireland as “a nation in the making, moving forwards but still hung onto an uncomfortable past” (Ettiene and Dubost 2017: 4). The play is also representative of the relationship between Irish theatre and the Anthropocene in its depiction of the effects of humans on earth.

Mac an Bhaird represents a younger generation of dramatists – he was a recipient of the Arts Council of Ireland’s 2018 Next Generation Bursary and a participant in Rough Magic Seeds programme from 2014-2015. He has also published poetry and short fiction in *30 Under 30: A Selection of Short Fiction by Thirty Young Irish Writers* (2012), *The Irish Times*, the literary magazine *The Bastille*, the online literary journal *The Bohemyth* and the e-journal *The South Circular*, amongst others. In 2013, he won a prize in Doire Press’s International Poetry Competition. His first play was *Traitor* (2016), produced at the Dublin Fringe, a play that happens both in 2026 and 2016, and questions what happens when a left-wing leader starts the journey from activism to politics and has the possibility to reach government. After this, *Melt* was produced in the 2017 Dublin Theatre festival by Rough Magic and nominated for an Irish Writers’ Guild’s ZeBBie Award for Best New Play of 2017. His latest play, *The Mouth of the Birch*, received a Druid Debut in 2020. It tells the story of two siblings who, after inheriting a travel agency in Monaghan, try to boost their company by organising an event for the community. The story frames the theme of the changed rural Ireland and belonging sentiments. He has worked with theatre companies such as *Blood in the Alley*, *The West Cork Fit-Up Festival* and *Ouroboros*. Mac an Bhaird has been seen as “a playwright with an imagination as political as it is ludic [who] lets logic drift like snow” (Crawley 2017) – a reference to his interest in social debates and social activism representative of Irish new theatres.

For the playwright “Stories are an ecosystem, and the stage is a creature with uncountable arms” (Mac an Bhaird 2020a: 289). Directed by Lynne Parker, *Melt* was first premiered in the Dublin Theatre Festival of 2017. The play has four characters: two scientists, Samuel Boylan and Charlie Cook, Elaine Hansen, another researcher, who seems to have sold her soul to corporations on the grounds of economic benefit, and Veba, the creature they discover. There is an opposition between the two main characters: Boylan is a vocational senior investigator in ecology, while Cook is a young ambitious post-doctorate researcher who wants to improve his career. Boylan is the protagonist who “portrays a drive within humanity that is more baffling than any unexpected lurch of the play, the self-destructive urge to rush towards oblivion” (Crawley 2017). They coexist in a liminal space, a lab in Antarctica, where a hole has been drilled into the icecap, to symbolise the entrance into the unknown, into the ancient essence, as well as the relationship between the ancestral and the present time.

The relationship between the Anthropocene and the need to address the consequences of human activity on the planet are represented in the characters of the scientists. Cook’s

ambition is linked to the fact that he comes from a previous experience in an American lab which was quite different from the one he is in now, which he describes as primitive. His arrival is marked by his clumsy attempt to impress Boylan with his speech on the importance of ethical behaviour which is interrupted by Cook sarcastically: “You’re not going to be replaced unless you die of hypothermia” (Mac an Bhaird 2020a: 295). The Irish characters are abroad, but they are not exiles or part of the diaspora. The Irish emigration is reworked, and the experiences told are related to new realities where science, and the world around it, play a major role. Boylan’s first reference to the Antarctica – “we’re hunkered down in the most vicious landscape on earth” (*Ibid.*) – contrasts with Cook’s idealised vision of a continent “Stretching endlessly, glowing white” (*Ibid.*: 296). The liminality of the setting is also achieved through the hole that appears on stage and where this takes to: the lake of the eternal night. The lake is the object of their research, a research into the indefinite, into a space that has been hidden from the atmosphere for twenty-five million years, and the search that makes Boylan state that the humankind is lost in this era: “the man hasn’t the slightest notion what he’s looking for” (*Ibid.*: 297). The hole symbolises the entrance into a passage that initiates a journey that “tells us the story of everything [...] passes beyond our lives, beyond the lifespan of our countries, of our religions, our languages, our species” (*Ibid.*: 300), blurring, any differentiation marked by gender, nationality or belonging to a specific geographical space.

The ecological perspective, a key marker of the Anthropocene, is present through the preoccupation about the consequences of their research. These concerns highlight the discrepancy between the two protagonists: while Boyle considers the investigation could bring a mess, Cook dreams of the glory it would create – his participation in international conferences to deliver papers on the effects of global warming in front of big audiences. Cook is interested in tangible results, and quantifiable actions, while Boylan intends to follow his instincts. This divergence is stressed by the classification Boylan makes about the types of scientists that exist: those who want to really become a researcher and those who need to be one. Therefore, ambition is introduced to exemplify the traits that define the latter, in the form of vicious behaviours able to destroy anyone or anything that is in their way. Hansen represents the ambition of those who do research to obtain funding from companies like Shell – involved in controversies such as the Corrib Gas Project, which caused protests and the final withdrawal of the company from Ireland in 2018. Hansen rejects any personal involvement, despite the fact that she has had a strong emotional relationship with Boylan, and has the intention to report negatively about their project to the university board so that she can benefit.

Technologies are depicted as networks that confine: “I’m tired of the distance these machines have created for us [...]. Imprisoned in blips and beeps. Impotent. I have to go down. I remember what it was like before these screens grabbed a hold and squeezed the life out of us” (*Ibid.*: 301). This impossibility to accommodate in the scientific environment brings the necessity to go back to the heart of things to rediscover the lost essence: the deeper Boylan descends into the hole the more memories he brings into the surface in the form of those moments of his childhood where inner thoughts and feelings mattered. This metaphor of a rebirth process is also present when he evokes those moments when nature carried the meaning and names of things: “Knowing the names of things. That’s why I became an ecologist. When I was small I’d drag my mother around the garden asking her the names of everything I saw, the flowers, the trees, different types of grass, the stones, insects...” (*Ibid.*: 306), evoking the relevance of ecology.

The description of the hole echoes the dark cavities through which the heart of darkness is humanised to symbolise the earth as a dying being but also to suggest the primal claim to start from scratch: “The ice is hollowing...no, consuming is the correct word, it’s consuming a store of itself. All that climatic data, oxygenated isotopes, that subtle degradation



of the earth's flavour accumulated over millennia, it's all being eroded by the process of break-up. The earth is forgetting itself. Wiping the slate clean" (*Ibid.*: 309). The humanised earth is suffering from environmental amnesia caused by the trauma of humankind. The ice-crystals have veins and seams in their flesh and predictions on the impossibility that the Antarctic ice will never break are dismantled by Boylan who finds a new place where "Tall pillars of ice, like long bones, skeleton limbs reaching far, far up, disappearing into the darkness" (*Ibid.*: 318). These constructions precede a space with running water where the creature is found: a baby crying on the plateau, in the cave, which he decides to take to the surface since there is a moment of recognition: "I thought, that's familiar what's looking up at me" (*Ibid.*: 325). After analysing her, Veba, they observe it grows very rapidly, responds to external stimuli, bleeds and echoes the stock character of the "noble savage" (Crawley 2017). The scientists also discuss the consequences of their discovery: while for Cook this will bring crowds eager to hear them lecturing, Boylan had no interest and criticises again big corporations who "will want X-rays, MRI, swabbing and slicing samples of her until there's nothing left. They'll dissect her, make her into a sample" (Mac and Bhaired 2020a: 329).

Act one ends with Boylan leaving the lab in search for help and this introduces act two, where Cook is alone for the most part. This is the moment when the real and the surreal overlap in the play: Cook undergoes a transformation and stops being Boylan's antagonist to understand his vision of their work; he tries now to oppose economic interests and questions with Helen the university's decision to end their project, a "bureaucratic assassination. Polite. Rational. Savage" (*Ibid.*: 334). In the meanwhile, Veba, the creature, has also transformed into a girl who mimics the behaviour of those around her. Unable to cope with the strangeness of the situation, Cook enters a state of decadence and destruction, and his behaviour and irrational speeches suggest that the rest of the play is a hallucination of the characters, or a dream where their fears are revived. Veba mirrors and takes the characters to the recognition of their true self: "When you look at me, I don't feel any fear. I feel myself passing into you unfiltered, unjudged. You're drinking me, like you drink everything else, all at once, undivided, uncategorised. Compassionate. I don't feel ashamed" (*Ibid.*: 343). In the last scene, Boylan records a testament while he and Cook melt ice to survive and eat some eggs Veba has laid at the same time as the evoke the humanity immense capacity to destroy what surrounds them: "To humanity. To our unerring capacity for laying waste to the world while searching for impossible horizons. To destroying what we love" (*Ibid.*: 358). The destruction of Veba's eggs, also linked to the destruction of the earth, can be interpreted through mythology; the Pelagian creation myth, for instance, refers to the goddess Eurynome who laid a universal egg, out of which all forms of life sprang:

In the beginning, Eurynome, the Goddess of All Things, rose naked from Chaos, but found nothing substantial for her feet to rest upon, and therefore divided the sea from the sky, dancing lonely upon its waves. [...] Next, she assumed the form of a dove, brooding on the waves and, in due process of time, laid the Universal Egg. At her bidding, Ophion coiled seven times about this egg, until it hatched and split two. Out tumbled all things that exist, her children: sun, moon, planets, stars, the earth with its mountains and rivers, its trees, herbs, and living creatures. (Graves 2011, 27)

In this sense, the character of Veba connects to the supernatural: she emerges in the play from the darkness prompting the possibility of a reality beyond human existence and the imaginable space and time. The effects of mythological parallels can be extended to Cook and Boylan too: the Icarus-like scientists also evoke the mythical behaviour in their obsession with the success of his research; however, as Mac and Bhaired himself states, the ambition

described is closer to Daedalus and Minos', i.e. to the human endless ambition and capacity to destroy:

I love Icarus. He's a fool and an innocent really. Despite the catastrophe, I don't think our excess spirit is the issue, although it'll keep causing us to melt our wings in the face of some sun or other. It's the cold hubristic gamble of Daedalus, presuming we can set the spirit on a catastrophic knife-edge and rely upon it to act in a regulated way; the labyrinth making, the political machinations of Daedalus and Minos, the great calculated fix we're in and the gross superfluous power of Minos, that's the real problem. If there's some Icarian insight or other to be gleaned from *Melt*, it certainly isn't, you mustn't eat the egg or descend carelessly into the void, tut tut... However, it might be something closer to, once the circumstances have arrived at that point, it is hopeless for everything to rely upon the fact that we mightn't. (Mac an Bhaird 2020b)<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusions

*Melt* is part of the new theatres that emerged in post-millennium and post-recession Ireland. The context of creation of the play was marked by the changes in society that affected the economy, politics and societal debates about equal rights and the environment. New companies such as ANU, Brokentalkers, Willfredd and Rough Magic defend collaborative work, the representation of social diversity and the need to revisit and redeem the traumas from the past. They also favour the building of a strong relationship between the communities represented and the audience, the depiction of themes that evoke the local and the global and a deep interest to finish with the discrimination of women artists, through movements like Waking the Feminists.

The relationship between the Anthropocene and social justice activism in Ireland also frames the appearance of *Melt*. This can be seen in the creation of cultural projects and reports – Green Arts, Rising, The Tiny Challenge or Creative Ireland – that defend the reduction of the environmental impact and confirm that culture fosters public engagement and has an essential role to address challenges such as ecological concerns related to, for instance, the melting of polar glaciers.

*Melt* can be understood as a representation of the relationship between the Anthropocene and Irish contemporary theatre. The main characters, the Irish researchers, live outside Ireland but are not exiles, and are moved by a self-destructive drive. This is caused by their personal ambitions to enter the unknown, in the case of Boylan, and to enter the world of reputation and fame, in the case of Cook. The world of science and research coexist with the liminal space of the hole that symbolises the access to the ancient essence of nature. The overarching themes evoke Anthropocene concerns: research is depicted as potentially damaging the environment and human ambition is suggested as the force that triggers this damage. Within this same fashion, the use of technologies adds to the picture and metaphors networked prisons that confine and limit human existence; opposed to this, childhood is evoked as the age of freedom when ecological knowledge is gained in a natural way. Furthermore, the earth is portrayed as a dying being which is suffering from environmental amnesia due to human intervention; it is personified through the reference to its bones and veins and the suggestion that it gave life to Veba, the creature that cannot coexist with the human lot. The ending of the play, marked by a feeling of decadence, destruction, and the impossibility to revert the apocalyptic situation, strengthens its main argument about the consequences of the endless ambition of humans.

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Plays like *Melt* deserve more critical attention since they offer and confirm new perspectives in a contemporary Irish theatre that speaks to its time, and verify that the knowledge of the playwrights, related to nature, need to be considered since it speaks to the present but also to the future. The play takes us to the end of the world; it goes from reality to the surreal and it poses the question “If the polar ice caps are melting how solid are we?” (Crawley 2017). Characters melt while the unknown spaces where Veba is found, untouched by humans, are intact, until catastrophes, brought by the same humans, inevitably interfere. *Melt* is also part of Ireland’s new theatres, and it takes the audience, again, into a journey to the essence of things.

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