

■ Imagining the Future in the Anthropocene on the Taipei Stage: *What Colour is the Cloud?* (2016), *Taipei Notes* (2017), and *1984* (2017)

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Abstract

Given our reliance on planetary resources for survival, the worsening global environmental conditions are now becoming a source for artistic reflections. In theatre, curiosity is increasingly turned to the ecological impacts of modern society, especially in regard to the future of humanity. As a form of art that constantly prompts the audience to consider new problems and perspectives, theatre can become a significant vehicle for alerting the general public to our current anthropogenic environmental transformations. Addressing three theatre productions in Taipei, this paper explores how theatre artists in Taiwan have been grappling with planetary environmental crises. The first production is *Taipei Notes* (2017), the result of collaborations between the Japanese playwright Hirata Oriza and Taiwan's Voleur

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du Feu Theatre, which presented a revision of Hirata's award-winning *Tokyo Notes* (1995). Set at a future time that exhibits many similarities to our society, fragments of multiple stories were presented in the lobby at a gallery in Taipei, where famous paintings evacuated from a warring Europe were displayed. The production thus delved into a shifting world order in the aftermath of disruptive patterns of human activities. Next, I examine *1984, The Family Life of Three Sisters*, which was the collaborative work of Wang Chia-Ming (Shakespeare's Wild Sisters Group) and Kouhei Narumi (Seventh Theatre) staged in 2017. Evoking the omnipresent surveillance in George Orwell's *1984*, this production also paraphrased Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and explored a futuristic setting in which the scarcity of natural resources easily led to widespread military conflicts and pervasive social control. Finally, the focus turns to *What Colour is the Cloud?*, another production directed by Wang for the SWSG in 2016. Delivering an overwhelmingly pessimist message concerning the future of the world, this production depicted the survival and destruction of humanity on a damaged earth that had seen vortices of both natural and human-induced disasters. By pointing to a future profoundly unsettled by our ambitions and activities, all three productions offered different cues for viewers to critically consider the question of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: human extinction, contemporary theatre, Taiwanese theatre, Wang Chia-Ming, Voleur de Feu Theatre

The Anthropocene is the term now widely adopted in scholarly circles to describe the current and possibly future status of the world, because, as Anna Tsing and her coauthors explicitly claim in the title of their book, we are currently “living on a damaged planet” due to centuries of human-induced environmental changes. Given our reliance on planetary resources for our survival, the worsening global environmental conditions are fast becoming an inspiration for artistic reflections. According to Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, “art provides a polyarchic site of experimentation” where reflections on the Anthropocene, which is taken to denote the contemporary age, can be expressed in “a non-moral form of address that offers a range of discursive, visual, and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression” (4). As a form of art often utilizing dramatic presentations to challenge the audience with new perspectives, theatre can become a significant vehicle for alerting the general public to our current anthropogenic challenges. Although considerations of environmental crisis may have been less represented or even “repressed or ignored” in theatre studies (Lavery 229),¹ in recent times theatre scholars and practitioners have begun to join the “emerging field” and burgeoning debates on the Anthropocene that have spanned multiple disciplines (Kershaw 26).²

Arguably, theatrical attention is increasingly turned to the causes, phenomena and consequences of the Anthropocene. These new discussions in theory and practice have brought to light the impacts of human-induced global environment, a concern central to the notion of the Anthropocene that indicates “the geological period in which human activity exceeds the forces of nature” (Bubandt 122).³ Topics such as climate change, rising sea level, earthquakes, tsunamis, and nuclear disasters form the backbone of new dramatic works

¹ Given that new plays in British theatre has entered into what Aleks Sierz terms “a renaissance of new writing” (*In-yer-face Theater* vii), the number of plays dealing with environmental issues or climate change is surprisingly low. Kristin Shepherd-Barr has listed more than 80 “science” plays written between 1992 and 2004, only one of which indirectly discussed related topics. Ashden Trust has commissioned a complete survey during 2000-2014, focusing on performances with ecological or environmental aspects, and the result can be found in Heim and Margolis. In the USA, Erika Munk has noted “playwrights’ silence on the environment as a political issue and our critics’ neglect of the ecological implications of theatrical form” (5). This may originate in the “programmatically anti-ecological” humanist paradigm (Chaudhuri 23). See also May and Hudson.

² Baz Kershaw’s book is one of the earlier publications focusing on ecology and theatre. The relationship between humanity and the earth is further explored via discussions on site-specific performances (Bottoms et al.) and applied theatre (Heddon and Mackey). The discussion of the Anthropocene brought scholars’ attention to the function of theatre in regard to the future of humanity (for example: Angelaki; Diamond). Several recent call for papers focused on the theme of theatre and the Anthropocene, hence a wave of publications on this subject can be expected in the near future.

³ See also Steffen et al., 614.

including *The Heretics* (Bean), *Greenland* (Buffini et al), *Lungs* (Macmillan), *Oil* (Hickson), *The Children* (Kirkwood) and many more. Among these works, the success of *The Children*, shown on Broadway with the original cast and in receipt of two Tony Award Nominations, proves that eco-thrillers can effectively incite interest, polarize opinions, and encourage critical reflections on the future of humanity.⁴ The popularity of this production exemplifies what Timothy Morton describes the effects of art that “make us question reality” (8). As such, the theatrical art can become an impactful format through which human-environment interactions can be understood in new ways.

The interest in humanity’s future shown on the Anglophone stages, which has the lion’s share of the global theatre, is also shared by artists who reside and work in East Asian island countries, where the imminent impact of global warming is feared by the populace because of their geographic closeness to the seas, and frequent natural disasters, such as earthquakes, typhoons, and flooding. Focusing on three theatre productions recently seen in Taipei, including two international collaborations between artists in Taiwan and Japan, this paper discusses how theatrical works in Taiwan have been grappling with planetary crises. The first production to be considered is *Taipei Notes*, a result of the collaboration between the Japanese playwright Hirata Oriza and Taiwan’s Voleur du Feu Theatre based on Hirata’s award-winning *Tokyo Notes*.⁵ Set at a future time with many similarities to ours, fragments of multiple stories were presented in the lobby of a gallery, where famous paintings evacuated from a warring Europe were displayed. The production delves into a shifting world order in the aftermath of great disruption caused by patterns of human activities. Next, I examine *1984, the Family Life of Three Sisters*, the collaborative work of Wang Chia-Ming (Shakespeare’s Wild Sisters Group, SWSG hereafter) of Taiwan and Kouhei Narumi (Dainanagekijo) of Japan.⁶ Evoking the omnipresent surveillance in George Orwell’s *1984*, this production also paraphrased Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and explored a futuristic scenario where the scarcity of natural resources led to widespread military conflicts. Finally, the focus turns to *What Colour is the Cloud?*, a production written and directed by Wang for the

⁴ These Tony Award nominations are for the 2018 Best Play and Best Actress in a Play.

⁵ Voleur du Feu Theatre was founded by Hsieh Tung-Ning and his wife Tianya Liu in 2013. A young group it may seem, they have produced more than 20 productions by 2020.

⁶ Shakespeare’s Wild Sisters Group was founded by Wei Ying-Chuan in 1995, and has since established itself as one of the leading theatre companies in Taiwan with international exposure. Wang is the current Director of SWSG. Dainanagekijo (Seventh Theatre) was founded by Kouhei Narumi in 1999. Located in Tokyo, Dainanagekijo has become an internationally acclaimed theatre troupe, touring their performances in twenty-six cities in Japan and abroad.

SWSG. Delivering an overwhelmingly pessimist message concerning the future of the world, this production illustrated how humanity continues to survive on a damaged planet that has seen a series of both natural and human-induced disasters.

These three productions featured ensemble acting and each utilized more than one language or dialect. They were all set in an alternative near future, gesturing towards a world profoundly unsettled by human activities. These settings all hinted at the consequences of wars, which lurked in the background in these productions. Collectively, they offered interesting cues for the audience to critically consider the question of the Anthropocene from the perspectives of two East Asian island countries. My discussion will begin with the seemingly peaceful *Taipei Notes*, which appeared much like our own world, before moving on to a discussion of *1984*, where severe resource depletion led to the creation of a surveillance society. The third part of the article will focus on the post-apocalyptic barrenness shown in *What Colour is the Cloud?*. Rather than concentrating on theoretical discussion, the focus here is on how these works helped us to reconsider the imminent future of humanity and the Earth through the utilization of their unique spatial and temporal expressions. In urging the audience to ponder over the dire consequences of modern war on humanity and the environment, these three productions put the spotlight on our possible future in the age of the Anthropocene.

Taipei Notes (2017)

Previously, Oriza Hirata was invited to participate in the Taipei Arts Festival, where he presented *Three Sisters (Android Version)* and *La Métamorphose Version Android* as part of the initiatives of international collaboration and productions commissioned by the festival organizer in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Hirata was then commissioned again to work with Taiwan's Voleur du feu Theatre to put *Tokyo Notes* on stage in 2017.⁷ *Tokyo Notes*, Hirata's most famous work and winner of Japan's Kishida Kunio Drama Award in 1995, has been translated into fifteen languages. The play is inspired by Yasujiro Ozu's film *Tokyo Story*, and roughly follows the main storyline of an elder family

⁷ *Three Sisters (Android Version)* was part of the 2013 Taipei Art Festival, while *La Métamorphose Version Android* was seen in 2015. The former production was produced by Japan's Seinendan Theatre Company, the latter a co-production between Seinendan Theatre Company and Centre Dramatique National de Haute-Normandie in France, featuring the French actor Irène Jacob in its performances in Taiwan.

member's visit to her Tokyo relatives. Embodying Hirata's representative concept of "contemporary colloquial theatre," the play's Chekhovian style won critical acclaims and was described as "quiet drama" (Program for *Taipei Notes*).⁸ Set in 2004 (ten years later than the year of its premiere), characters chat away with their colleagues, friends of family members, while the play mediates on the contemporary world with reference to the Bosnian War (1992-1995), as well as Japan's political relations to countries such as Cambodia.

A mere translation of the play into Chinese was uninteresting to Hsieh Tung-Ning (1968-2019), the late artistic director of Voleur du Feu Theatre. Instead, Hsieh proposed a more intercultural approach, asking to adapt the play in consideration of Taiwan's social contexts.⁹ Through the conversations between several parties of Taiwanese characters, *Taipei Notes* succeeded in incorporating elements of Taiwanese culture into the revised play. Set in 2024 with an unspecified stage direction of "a major war waged in Europe" (Program for *Taipei Notes*), yet, there were allusions to recent terrorist attacks in Europe and the continuing wars in Syria in the production, making the fictional European war a cogent and pertinent backdrop.¹⁰ Because of the war, famous paintings were evacuated from prominent European museums and galleries and rehoused in art institutions in Taipei. This fictional backdrop thus rationalized the location of the production, in the lobby of a fine art museum featuring Johannes Vermeer's paintings.

Existing discussions of *Tokyo Notes* and *Taipei Notes* point to the use of Vermeer's aesthetics and the effects of realist acting and Hirata's contemporary colloquial theatre.¹¹ Yet *Taipei Notes* also raised the possibility of a different perspective on the future of our planet, in accordance with the curated theme of "City, and Its Future" for the Taipei Arts Festival 2017. The most intriguing

⁸ Texts quoted in this article are translated by the author, unless specified otherwise.

⁹ Hsieh's proposal was welcomed by Hirata, who was then working with a Korean team for a version renamed *Seoul Notes* as part of a cultural exchange program in 2013. *Taipei Notes* was premiered in Yokohama Museum in February 2017 for the Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama, before the Taipei performances in September. After the Taipei performances of *Taipei Notes*, Hirata subsequently revised it for the staging of *Bangkok Notes* in November 2017 (Japan Foundation Asia Center). The production was meant to form part of Hirata's plan to celebrate the 2020 Tokyo Olympics by working with artists from five Asian countries and bringing the collaborative results to Tokyo in 2020 (Liu and Xu), which was cancelled because of the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁰ In the UK alone, there were several occasions of terrorist attacks during the first half of 2017, including three cases of driving a vehicle as a way of random killing and a suicide bomber at Manchester Arena.

¹¹ See, for examples, reviews of the production via the online platform "Performing Arts Reviews" (Wu, Ye).

object onstage was a huge installation hung from the two-story high ceiling, made entirely out of plastic packaging for take-away meals bought from convenience stores, such as 7-Eleven and Family Mart. Visually and physically, the texture of the installation and its gray-green colour struck a contrast with the minimalist white decor of the gallery, and differed markedly from the artistic legacy left by Vermeer, the great Dutch painter whose works comprised the subject of discussion throughout the performance, even though no single image of his work is shown. Intriguingly, the contrast between a much talked-about artist and his invisible paintings, on the one hand, and an undefined but conspicuous massive onstage installation, on the other, helped create a dialogical space concerning the legacy of human activities, a recurring theme throughout the play. It would not be hard to register the irony that this long-lasting plastic compound, which constituted what Morton would term a “hyperobject” (130), would likely outlive fragile artefacts in the case of a global ecological emergency.

The Vermeer exhibition constituted a pretext for people’s gatherings in this space. Through the realistic conversations of multiple narrative threads delivered by an ensemble of twenty characters, connections between their daily life and the war in Europe were gradually revealed. Hirata’s initial intention is to present a far-away war in a dramatic work that highlights the complexity of human activities and social relations (Lin and Yu 174-75). Similar ideas can be found in British playwright Martin Crimp’s plays, which allude to the Bosnian War and the Global Wars on Terrorism from a “privileged distance from the death and dismemberment” in writings such as *Attempts on Her Life* and *The City* (Sierz, *Martin Crimp* 48). In these plays, dialogues are mixed with images of war that gradually “glaringly bring out the affects related to the War on Terror” (Liang 35).

In *Taipei Notes*, the “privileged distance” away from the violent conflicts engulfing Europe was tilting international geopolitical balance towards other parts of the globe and allowed Taipei to reposition itself as a cosmopolitan center where discussions of international wars took place along with chit-chat on personal trivia. In distinguishing itself from the war-torn European continent, the city of Taipei in this setting served as a cosmopolitan hub providing shelter for civilizational heritage. Holding off the cruel events taking place in the outside world, the gallery in Taipei became an oasis for the global art-loving public. Still, signs of discord, epitomized by the visible assemblage of plastic bags and the invisible painting by Vermeer, added a sense of tension and uncertainty to the situation. A changed relationship between human and the environment, such as the destructive war in Europe in the production, would force us to reconsider “the value of cosmopolitanism as a concept” (Colebrook, *Death*

98). According to the conversations between characters, refugees were being admitted, sharing social and educational resources with local residents in other corners of the city. The circumstances would prompted the audience to “recognize a call for justice, democracy, hospitality and cosmopolitanism but always in the deferred form of a ‘not yet’” (Colebrook, *Death* 104) amidst the shifting world order. For example, the arms industry set up headquarters in Taipei, hiring Russian refugees to manufacture military devices that were sold to those who could afford them. Debates on one’s responsibility for his/her family, country and indeed the world were heard in different groups, and diverging opinions about the distant war were expressed regularly.

Yet, the need for a new cosmopolitan city and the desire to carry on living a normal life was not as palpable as the onstage plastic compound. In this fictional world, these characters did not exactly have the luxury of watching the war from a distance. Under the mask of an ordinary and almost humdrum day, as a work of art *Taipei Notes* was quietly “tearing sensations from their composed forms to release new potentials” (Colebrook, “Work of Art” 40). Wars and the shifting geopolitics forced everyone to adjust to the new world. A different world and new mode of living was yet to emerge from the quiet and ordinary life these characters were living. Vermeer’s way of looking at the world, as seen in his paintings, presented a nostalgic gaze on the past of humanity, but it was the imposing plastic installation that became what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a line of flight or a deterritorialization, pointing towards an uncertain future still in formation and adjuring its audience to consider possibilities still yet to come. While *Taipei Notes* chose to mediate the future of human being through a scenario familiar to our own, the other two productions discussed below envisaged different paths for human beings and our planet with less prevarications, dealing directly with the consequences of natural resource diminution and the potential extinction threat posed to the human race.

1984, the Family Life of Three Sisters (2017)

SWSG and Dainanagekijo (Seventh Theatre) from Japan, led by Wang Chia-Ming and Kouhei Narumi respectively, have been collaborating since 2016. The two directors each bring a small team of actors and jointly produce bilingual works staged in both Japan and Taiwan. *1984, the Family Life of Three Sisters* is the result from the second year of their collaboration. In this work, Wang focused on adapting the play while Kouhei Narumi worked mainly as the director of the production. The title of the production suggests an adaptation

of Chekhov's play *Three Sisters* (1901) set in an Orwellian world under constant surveillance, and the Program Note further confirms this direction by metaphorically stating that "Time is at a standstill in 1984" (3). In the production, the futuristic costumes and the heavy dependency on advanced technology in the characters' daily life suggested a narrative of alternative history. One prominent feature was the use of digital communication, such as the indispensable simultaneous translator each character was equipped with. This setting enabled the ensemble of six Taiwanese actors and five Japanese actors to deliver their lines in their native tongue. Characters did not pretend to understand the other language, making explicit the instant cross-culture communication was only possible with the help of technology. It was also revealed at a later point though that the translating device carried a spyware unbeknown to most of the characters. The spyware continuously retrieved personal data, extending the surveillance abilities of the "Big Brother" fictionalized in Orwell's novel.

This alternative year of 1984 in fact had more commonalities with the early twenty-first century and the setting had similar geographical and social attributes to East Asian cities. For example, the program explains that the epoch of the production is set in an undefined post-apocalyptic new world, which bears resemblance to our contemporary situation:

The world had gone through a nuclear war, which induced serious ground rupture. Japan and Taiwan, two island countries, were both submerged by the ocean because of earthquakes and the rising sea level. Now there are no longer sovereign governments around the globe. Natural resources are monopolized and redistributed by three corporations: Apple Shell in America, GooBrother in Asia and Deep Monsanto in Africa. (8)

Perhaps appropriating names of major corporations whose business had been influential in the contemporary world presented a risk of over-simplification, yet, these references quickly guided the audience to take up the hint that the fictional world was depicting a plausible alternative history for Taiwan and Japan. The lack of sovereign power in this new world did not mean the absence of political rivalry. Quite the contrary, capitalistic powers doubled as political entities and dictated people's daily life. The populace of Japan and Taiwan, who survived unspecified disasters, were relocated by GooBrother to another locus in Asia, where a new form of governance guided their new life. People's daily routines would begin with a morning exercise, partaken by all members of a unit, then followed by the morning broadcast of daily news. Faith in the Company was demanded to be absolute and should be practiced with zeal. The audience soon learned that surveillance was not merely conducted by the Company but also being secretly done via friends and families.

Retaining Chekhov's realistic style, characters in *1984* conversed casually among themselves, and chilling information about this alternative world was gradually revealed. Daily life and personal experiences were heavily mediated in this new world, such that their perceptions of the reality of their world were constructed not via one's own agency but through an edited version provided by a body of authority. Memories of the past might be contradictory to the official account and hence could no longer be deemed as reliable. In this world, if a sequence of memory could not be retrieved from digital devices, it might as well have ceased to exist at all. The three sisters' dream of coming back to Moscow in Chekhov's play was adapted into a parallel and equally unattainable dream of learning about and going back to the good old days.

In this world, seemingly ordinary experiences from our perspective were rendered almost unattainable for the characters due to the great transformation of the global environment. Characters were frightfully experiencing the "shifting baseline syndrome" (Tsing et al. G6) when they no longer remembered the old world and the changed landscape became their new reality. Young people in the play were seriously dependent on the GooBrother database in their attempts to learn about the past. Even though the descriptions or explanations in the database might contradict the memory of someone who had actual experience of the old world, younger generations had few reservations about the authenticity and the accuracy of entries provided by GooBrother, since this was the only channel of information now available. For example, as presented in an early sequence of the work, we learned that it would not be possible to see cherry blossoms in person on land, where cherry trees were grown. Rather, cherry blossom had to be experienced through virtual reality glasses. Cherry blossom was introduced in its entry in the GooBrother database as "of *Rosaceae* family, used to be a floral emblem of a submerged country, mostly in light purple" (Wang, *1984* 4). For those who were old enough to have seen cherry blossom earlier in their lifetime, their recollection of the flower differed from the description provided by GooBrother, yet they would be denied an opportunity to offer corrective commentaries. Any account deviating from the official one, even with only slight differences, would be likely to be reported to the Authority by a friend or even a family member. The one with a different view would be considered a reactionary person who could not make positive contributions to society. In this thinking, a mere recollection of the disappeared past became a political act, defying this new fictional reality in comparison with the past, and should thus be prohibited and reported to the governing body.

The disappearance of cherry blossom and an altered "official" version created by GooBrother, as well as the flower's connection with "a submerged

country,” offered a clue about the changed natural and cultural environments where these characters found themselves. Tsing and her coauthors argue that the future challenge for the Anthropocene is to think “geological, biological, chemical, and cultural activity together, as a network of interactions with shared histories and unstable future” (G176). *1984* provided a fictional example of such interpretation. Worryingly, their future was also maneuvered by political forces. From an early moment, also in the same sequence, the audience came to the realization that the surveillance of people’s daily life was motivated by the scarcity of natural resources, and the control of people’s minds might be achieved through the negation of a word and its association. Commenting on *Flow: For Love of Water*, the documentary film of bottled water, Claire Colebrook argues that the restriction and management of water sales and supplies is “rendering this most basic of human elements into a key political weapon and structuring cause” (*Death* 112-13). In this production, this weaponization of natural resources was highlighted by GooBrother’s forceful discouragement of wasteful usage of water due to its scarcity. Rice, with its dependency on water for cultivation, was less likely to be grown for public consumption, making it a precious birthday gift for the youngest sister. While the sisters and their friends were chatting, their friend, the governing body’s official language officer, commented that the word “rice” could one day be erased from the official corpus, if water had to be reserved strictly for drinking and no rice would be produced again. Such a comment called attention to GooBrother’s cunning policy by eliminating arbitrarily a term or a phrase and its associations once deeply rooted in the history of humankind.

Although direct mentions of environmental concerns were few and far between in *1984*, the severe challenges posed by all-encompassing wars and global environmental degradation constituted a distinctive feature in the backdrop against which the production unfolded. Vital questions surfaced as the play progressed, echoing those raised by Colebrook: “How will we live on, into the future, if this most basic of elements becomes politicized, becomes a weapon or resource that is subject to plays of power among humans?” (*Death* 113). By the end of *1984*, following the original plotline in *Three Sisters*, Irina, the youngest sister, learned about the death of her fiancé in a duel, which shattered her dream to move to Moscow with him. She then proceeded to shoot several members of her family, before holding the baby of her brother and delivering her last lines, which were nearly the same as Irina’s last lines in Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*:

There will come a time when everybody will know why, for what purpose, there is all this suffering, and there will be no more mysteries. But now we must live . . . we

must work, just work! . . . [S]oon it will be winter, the snow will cover everything, and I shall be living (Wang, 1984 78) ¹²

Irina's disappointment was apparent, to which she responded by embracing a future without a past. At this chilling point the production ended, urging the audience to consider the grave consequences of global wars and environmental disasters in the age of the Anthropocene.

What Colour is the Cloud? (2016)

Of the three productions discussed in this paper, *What Colour is the Cloud?*, advertised on its program as “the most violent and darkest work by Wang Chia-Ming,” indeed offered the bleakest glimpse of the imagined future of the Earth. On the stage, dark blue light, tattered costumes, and a dilapidated set created a dystopian world barely suitable for the inhabitation of human beings. The production was performed primarily in two dialects of the Taiwanese Hakka. Since only a small percentage of Taiwanese people speak Hakka, many among the production's audience in Taipei would have needed the surtitles to understand what was being said. The performance also featured live musicians, with musical numbers delivered by four members of the family. The constant shift between the main storyline and the musical numbers constructed two different timelines in terms of book time and lyric time, if we follow Scott McMillin discussion in *Musical as Drama* (2006). These arrangements created space for the articulation of the characters' inexpressible moods and thoughts, as well as postdramatic moments for their memories and dreams.¹³

Set in 2033, the production presented a surviving family in a hazy, post-apocalyptic world after global nuclear wars. The Earth had changed beyond recognition because of radiation dust and extreme weather, which was either bitterly cold or unbearably hot. It would be unsafe to venture out into the open and heavily dusted space without protective measures. Being left without equipment made for such a purpose, characters had to cover themselves with improvised facial masks and protective clothing assembled from hyperobjects which had survived the global disaster, such as plastic bottles, raincoats or sport

¹² The version of *Three Sisters* quoted here is translated by Julius West, which is now in the public domain and could be accessed via Project Gutenberg. The last word is “working” in Chekhov's play.

¹³ Wang clarifies on his own Facebook page that this production was not a musical (Wang, “Facebook”). He suggests the audience to see it as a drama with music. Nevertheless, McMillin's discussion on musical time and book time offers a pertinent analytical framework to dissect this production.

jackets. While *Taipei Notes* installed a big plastic compound in a prominent position within the setting of an art gallery, allowing its audience to look at the art (or to ignore it) from the comfortable distance of the auditorium, *What Colour is the Cloud?* adopted an in-yr-face strategy to consider the relationship between human beings and their man-made long-lasting objects.

Five of the characters were in the same family, named merely as Father, Mother, Sister, Brother and Granny, as if jokingly paying tribute to Sigmund Freud. The only character with a name was the outsider A-Shan, a possible new member to the household and everyone's favourite. The production was arranged in reverse order. It opened with a family dinner that ended in 15 minutes with nearly all of the characters being gunned down by an unknown party, implying the near-extinction of the human race. The family had been careful whenever they needed to leave their home, yet, as Morton warily suggests, in "a global environmental emergency, there is no safe place" (49). The possible cause of the ambush was suggested after the interval, when the audience started to learn more about the secrets of these characters. The performance ended with the same family dinner, yet, adding an ambiguous twist to the scene, it invited open interpretations of the work.

Much like the scenarios in *1984*, there were many things unimaginable to younger characters in the fictional world of *What Colour is the Cloud?*, which highlighted the aforementioned "shifting baseline syndrome" (Tsing et al. G6). Their new reality with severe weather was a cloudless world, such that younger generations could only imagine the colour of clouds when they looked up at the sky. The depletion of natural resources was the norm of this world and basic necessities of sunshine, air and water for most living things could no longer be taken for granted. For example, there was no infrastructure to supply water, which had to be collected from melted snow then stored carefully for daily use. The rarity of water enabled the bartering for other life essentials, if extra amounts of water could be collected. Objects from our contemporary daily life, such as books, radios and lipsticks became treasured items that aroused nostalgic sentiments. At times, characters would sing about the mundane yet delightful past, such as recalling the texture of a forest, particular television programmes, or the variety of consumer electronics. Expressing their recollection of the long-gone past, often through musical numbers, was not merely a nostalgic act. Their songs also highlighted the contrast between characters' current landscape and the unattainable fabric of their previous life.

A good memory for tastes of disappearing cuisines, however, became the lifeline of the family. Crucial to the family was their business of making flavoured nutrition packets, which served as their daily meals because real food

would no longer be obtainable. The Father was a food chemist, constantly developing new formulae to emulate the flavours of representative dishes from the good old times, such as instant noodles, rare steaks, hamburgers and a variety of popular drinks. The business was thriving, yet a shortage of raw materials was also expected and created serious hardships. With fewer and fewer resources available to them, the family nearly reached an agreement to kill Granny in order to make space and to have a larger share of everything for everyone. It was during the intended last meal for Granny that A-Shan came to join the family, followed by the said ambush before the interval. While the opening sequence implied the extinction crisis of the human race, a baby cry was heard at the end of the production, suggesting that Granny had given birth, even though she had long since passed her childbearing period.¹⁴ The scene thus invited a more positive reading of the work. Yet, while the final ending provided a dark humor to the biological mechanism of reproduction, adaptability of human beings in this dark world and their chances of survival seemed to convey despair.

Even though the final moment hinted at the possibility of a newborn, central to the production was the extinction of the human race in three senses: the sixth great extinction, extinction by humans of other species, and self-extinction (Colebrook, *Death* 9). As revealed in the production, a possible climate-induced sixth great extinction event had caused submergence of several countries, the toxic air, and a scarcity of natural resources. At the same time, this new lifeless manmade landscape was exemplary of “extinction by humans of other species” (Colebrook, *Death* 9), leaving the surviving human beings without sources of livestock and real food. Furthermore, conversation in the production suggested that the act of self-extinction, “the capacity for us to destroy what makes us human” (Colebrook, *Death* 9), became a crucial aspect in the work. Rather than maintaining the moral conduct of humanity, a better strategy for survival might be relying upon the animal instinct of those who lived. It became apparent that the surviving family faced a pressing issue of procreation. In order to produce their own offspring, incestuous relationships were practiced. With Father raping Sister and Mother and Father encouraging their son and daughter to have sex, the symbolic nuclear family thus collapsed before the crisis of extinction.

Politics indeed seemed trivial before the crisis of extinction and the death of humanity, yet, *What Colour is the Cloud?* carried more political messages

¹⁴ Granny, who had dementia, was said to have a pulse indicating her pregnancy at a point of the production. It is hinted that the father of the child was A-Shan, who was the emotion outlet for each member of the family. A slight hope for the humankind was thus planted.

than the two productions discussed previously. If political wrangling was made explicit through the naming of three major corporate entities in 1984, or by the shifting of cosmopolitan centers in *Taipei Notes, What Colour is the Cloud?* foregrounded the political forces through the conversations between family members, languages and dialects they used, and their varying affective association with the only outsider A-Shan. A-Shan was a one-handed man. In place of his original left hand was an assemblage of wire and plastic bottles. A-Shan acted as an agent or a middleman for the family, trading nutrition packets for other essentials for them. It would be revealed that he was playing the role of an intermediary on behalf of people from “that place,” yet no details were given. It was later suggested that his final decision to join force with the family by visiting them for the first time led to the tragic death of all but Granny, the only character who spoke Taiwanese Hokkien among all other Taiwanese Hakka speakers. In a metaphorical manner, the use of different dialects and each character’s relationship with A-Shan all pointed to political struggles these characters were facing. When the husband and wife used different Hakka dialects, daily bantering became political negotiations in disguise, echoing Mother’s comment: “Every marriage is merely the prelude to familial infighting. Every unity of a nation is merely the initiating of civil war” (Wang, *Cloud* 5). Mother chose to communicate with the family in Sixian dialect, the dominant dialect in Taiwanese Hakka, but switches to the Hailu dialect when she met up with A-Shan or alone with her son. If the naming of these characters implied a universal structure in human society, then linguistic choices of siding with a particular character would certainly be political.

To consider further: If the symbolic naming of these characters implicated a style of prophecy, perhaps Father’s earlier lines to Granny, delivered during the opening act after Mother and Brother running out after Sister in a hope to get her back, reflected our deeper fear when we faced the possible end of the humanity: “All people regard themselves as being on the right side, but how has it turned out like this?” (Wang, *Cloud* 3). By the second time when Sister dashed out without any protection, the audience would learn that the first part of the production was the reprise of the family’s last meal. Sister was angry because she only learned about the planned murder of Granny during the meal. None of these characters were aware of the ambush, and the next moment, all but one were dead. In *Art in the Anthropocene*, Davis and Turpin ask about “what imaginaries might be possible under the sign of the Anthropocene, and how they could be constructed to refuse both false hope and the apocalyptic foreclosure of possible futures” (6). While each production discussed in this paper was not attempting to answer this question, they all called for a closer look at how

we, as the collective entity of human being, might reconsider our relationships with the Earth.

Conclusion

Given its ability to produce convincing depictions of a fictional world, theatre is a powerful form of art able to compel its audience to consider the possible future paths of humanity from new angles. For all of the three productions discussed in this article, setting stories in the near future enabled these works to reflect upon scenarios of living on our damaged earth in the aftermath of ecological disasters or all-encompassing wars. Each of these productions presented a distinct dystopia, which could be considered as a telltale that would “act as salutary cautions against us following the course of our current actions to the nightmarish conclusions that would follow” (Colebrook, *Death* 205). In *Taipei Notes* and *1984*, people in these fictional worlds were trying to recover from planetary crises caused by humanity. They maintained their daily life in civilized societies, while enabling their audience to relate their stories to our contemporary world and consider the end of the Anthropocene in the imminent future. The apocalyptic world of *1984* presented a surveillance society in which the greater good for the Company trumped varying sorts of humane connections, further implying the disappearance of humanity. *What Colour is the Cloud?* portrayed an unambiguous and politically charged post-apocalyptic landscape that might happen to humankind if we collectively fail to take notice of and act upon the consequences of our follies on a global scale.

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在台北舞台上想像人類世的未來： 《雲係麼个色？》（2016），《台北筆記》 （2017）與《1984》（2017）

摘要

有鑑於地球的自然資源對於人類社會的生存至關緊要，不斷惡化的全球環境條件正逐漸引發更多的藝術反思。在戲劇界，已有許多製作開始注意到現代社會對於自然環境造成的衝擊，並深入探討了環境變遷對於人類未來的影響。作為一種時常鼓勵觀賞者用不同觀點思考新問題的藝術形式，戲劇已成為讓公眾警覺人類社會所引發之當代環境變遷的一種重要途徑。以此趨勢作為脈絡，本篇論文將聚焦於近年來在台北演出的三個劇作，探索製作群如何針對全球環境危機提出探問。本文首先分析由日本劇作家平田織佐和台灣的盜火劇團根據平田織佐得獎作品《東京筆記》所改編的《台北筆記》（2017），該劇的時間設定雖在未來，卻與我們現處的社會有許多近似之處，場景為台北某畫廊之中，展出著處於戰亂之中的歐洲移送來台北安置的著名畫作，隨著劇情推展而昭顯人類活動如何擾動世界秩序。接著探討在2017年上演，由台灣導演的王嘉明（莎士比亞的妹妹們的劇團）和日本導演鳴海康平（第七劇場）於2017年共同製作的《1984，三姐妹一家子的日子》，該劇援引喬治·歐威爾的小說《1984》中無所不在的社會監視，並改編契可夫的劇作《三姐妹》，探討在未來情境裡，由於自然資源逐漸稀缺而導致頻繁的大規模武裝衝突和普遍的社會控制。最後，我將討論王嘉明為莎士比亞的妹妹們的劇團於2016年所執導的《雲係麼个色？》，該劇描繪了在經歷了許多自然和人為災難的全球環境裡，人類社會力圖生存卻幾乎遭到毀滅的故事，藉此傳達了關於人類未來的悲觀訊息。這三個劇作皆指向了一個因為人類的野心和行為而遭到徹底改變的未來，也提供了觀眾對於人類世議題的不同觀點。

關鍵字：人類滅絕、當代劇場、台灣劇場、王嘉明、盜火劇團