Ecology and the Ethical Milieu: A Levinasian Ecological Reading of Joe White's Mayfly

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Abstract

Combining ecological and ethical perspectives, this article first traces an argument concerning the co-dependency of ethics and ecology and then transfers it to the context of the stage in a reading of Joe White's 2018 debut play Mayfly. While Emmanuel Levinas's ethics is clearly humanist and hence almost by necessity anthropocentric, his existential philosophy opens up an avenue to engage with ecology by redirecting the moment of transcendence that in Levinas's thought is key to any ethical encounter towards the milieu, or medium, in which such encounters take place. Its mediating role in ethical encounters makes the preservation of the milieu, which appears as the concretised environment, or stage, of the encounter, an ethical responsibility that is at the same time an ecological one. The practical implications of this theoretical discussion can be seen in Mayfly. Although "the environment" is not the centrepiece of the play's action, the play and its production at the Orange Tree Theatre are full of moments that foreground the background against which interactions take place. In this way, the play's milieu becomes a disruptive force that forms the basis for a new-found ethical togetherness among the characters and by implication ecological preservation becomes an ethical imperative.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, Joe White, Mayfly, ecology, ethics, milieu

Recent years have seen theatre and drama studies take an increased interest not just in ecology (see, for example, Angelaki; Lavery; May; Woynarski; Middeke and Riedelsheimer) but also in ethical questions, frequently with a focus on Levinasian ethics (see, for example, Grehan; Aragay and Monforte; Aragay and Middeke). This article hopes to combine these two critically productive angles in an eco-ethical reading of Joe White's 2018 play *Mayfly*.

While Emmanuel Levinas's ethics and ecology are not obviously compatible, Dave Boothroyd has argued that ecology may be reconciled with Levinas's ethics via his existential philosophy: the transcendent moment that demands an ethical response would then be directed "downward" to the materiality of existence itself, to the *milieu* in which ethical encounters take place and on which they are hence to some extent dependent. Inevitably, and somewhat paradoxically, this approach entails a foregrounding of the background, or of the mediation of these encounters, whilst maintaining its status as background.

All of this can be traced in *Mayfly*. White's play is not overtly concerned with ecology, but rather with the effects of bereavement on its four characters, who all struggle with the loss of a beloved person. However, despite this focus, *Mayfly* is shot through with moments during which the natural surroundings of the characters' interactions are foregrounded. The play places this natural environment, which is then also an ethical environment, centre stage through its use of recurring motives that are interwoven with the play's setting and realised, for example, in ambient sound effects.

In *Mayfly*, nature itself becomes a force that disrupts the characters' grief, which seems to be an all-encompassing totality that dominates their lives. It is their concrete surroundings that bring the mourning characters together and energise them, providing the basis for a new-found togetherness. As embodied by the play's eponymous mayflies, although this environment can then unfold a regenerative power, it is also extremely fragile. From this follows the ethical imperative of preserving the *milieu*, because it is the "stage" on which human encounters take place and hence a necessary precondition for any ethical action to become concrete.

Ecological Thinking and Levinasian Ethics

Although Emmanuel Levinas is not known as a particularly "green" philosopher, his ethics seems in some sense predestined for ecological thinking: just like our relation with nature is not one built on a contract or on a form of rational reciprocity, so the ethical relation in Levinas is always an asymmetrical, non-reciprocal relation with an unknowable Other (see, for example, "Time and the Other" 48 and *Ethics and Infinity* 98). However, any attempt at "ecologising" Levinas comes with two major problems: first, it would appear that there is no place for non-human nature in Levinas's ethics, which is why it has been called "unabashedly anthropocentric" (Atterton, "Levinas's Humanism" 709)—so, to a certain extent, any such approach is reading Levinas against Levinas. Second, this leads to a question about transcendence, a notion crucial to Levinas: can the ethical transcendence of infinity, which exceeds ontological categories and so breaks up totality, be found anywhere else but in what Levinas terms the epiphany of the face of the Other? In other words, is it possible that "responsibility ultimately involves not only that singular face lying before me but also the living world lying beyond that face" (Edelglass, Hatley and Diehm 5)?

Scholarly discussion of Levinas and ecology has so far mostly pursued two approaches to "ecologising" Levinasian thought, both of which seem to bear on theatre and drama's own ecologies: first, a number of scholars have sought to extend to the human relationship with non-human nature the ethical responsibility that for Levinas arises from the encounter with the face of another human being (see, for example, Diehm's "Gaia" and "Alterity"; Martin; and, for a discussion of the Levinasian "face" in animals, Atterton's "Facing Animals" and "Levinas's Humanism"). Broadly speaking, this is an approach that contests and expands Levinas's somewhat narrowly human-centred ethics to find in non-human nature (traces of) the transcendence of infinite alterity that for Levinas imposes responsibility on us.[1] Such a move is in line with thinking about our relationship with the non-human world as inscrutably complex. Timothy Morton, for example, has described

the interconnection of all life forms and non-life forms (such as stones) on Earth as "the mesh," a form of entanglement that is "infinite and beyond concept—unthinkable as such" ("The Mesh" 24). The mesh, then, would seem to possess alterity that inherently resists ontological categories—just like the alterity of the human Other in the ethical relation.[2] This would suggest that it is possible to go beyond Levinas and recognise our responsibility towards the mesh. As, inevitably, theatrical performance takes place in a non-human, "natural" environment, it creates a space in which encounters with/in the mesh are ubiquitous—and in which our ethical obligations towards the mesh are hence staged.

The focus of this article, however, will be on the second way in which Levinas's philosophy and ecology may coalesce. Boothroyd has suggested that rather than seeking the infinite transcendence of the face in nature, turning towards Levinas's thought on the materiality of existence itself in what can be described as "trans*de*scendence" may be a more fruitful way of opening up Levinas for ecology. This is in line with a central strand in Levinas's thought that is directed against (Heidegger's) ontology, which for Levinas has a totalitarian impetus. Rather than ontology's "impersonal" Being, Levinas places the existent[3] at the centre of his philosophy (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 45; see Boothroyd 776). For this reason, he also rejects any "ontology of nature" in which nature becomes a "faceless generous mother" (*Totality and Infinity* 47) synonymous with Being.[4] The *transdescending* perspective in Levinas's work, as suggested by Boothroyd, is directed against this faceless ontology and instead aims at "the materiality of the sensate life of the existent" (Boothroyd 775) and at disrupting totality by reducing it to the fundamentals of existing. It seeks transcendence not in the infinite height of the face of the human Other, but in the materiality of existents.

In Levinas's phenomenological account, existents form into subjects out of a neutral "background noise," which he calls the *il y a*. The *il y a* is an "anonymous rumbling of existence" (Critchley 20) that Levinas describes as "atmosphere of presence, . . . the impersonal, non-substantive event of the night and the *there is*," which "is like a density of the void, like a murmur of silence" (*Existence and Existents* 63–64). Out of this background murmur, existents materialize in a process called individuation or separation. Indeed, Boothroyd sees this as "the existential condition necessary for the 'earthly' dimension of the face-to-face" (776) and hence for the ethical relation to the human Other. In other words, any such relation must take place in the concreteness of existents —both of the human existents and of their surroundings, all of which have separated from the *il y a* prior to the face-to-face encounter. It is in this context that non-human nature has its place in Levinas's philosophy of existence: it is "any localized ecology of such existents, which together constitute a *milieu*" (Boothroyd 777). Nature, in this sense, is then a precarious, impermanent and momentary constellation of interrelated existents.[5] This means that, crucially, it does not exist as a totality anterior to existents but coincides with the individuation of the existent, which must have implications for the role of nature in the ethical relation: as Simon Critchley stresses, for Levinas, "ethics is lived in the sensibility of an embodied exposure to the other" (21). It is always the encounter with a

concrete, flesh-and-blood Other. As a consequence, it can never take place in the space of abstraction—it can only exist in a concrete, material environment, in the immanence of the *milieu* that resists totality, in "nature."

As such, a subject's natural surroundings are the "framework" without which ethics is not possible. Indeed, this *milieu* really is the "medium" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 130) in which the ethical relation takes place and, therefore, the "primal scene of totality's breach" (Boothroyd 783). This means that there is a close connection between the natural environment in which we interact and ethics. As the medium of the ethical encounter, it is "irreducible to . . . operational references" (Sallis 157), but, rather, writes Levinas, "a common fund or terrain, essentially non-possessable, 'nobody's': earth, sea, light, city," or, as he goes on to call it, "the elemental" (*Totality and Infinity* 131). We experience the elemental with the immediacy of "*mediation itself*" (Boothroyd 783). It is the terrain in which individuation and any ethical encounter come to pass: as it were, the elemental is the theatre in which ethics plays out—like the theatre, the *milieu* is both a physical space and a moment of mediation; and like the theatre, or a theatrical performance, it is impermanent, contingent and beyond the fixity of totality.

Overall, then, in Levinas's philosophy of existence, nature, as the elemental or the *milieu*, is constituted through individuation and, as such, only exists in the instance of separation of an existent from existence, which means that it can only ever be accessed in its concrete particularity, never as a totality. Boothroyd adds that this notion of nature also resists any anthropocentrism because the human existent and the elemental are co-dependent, from which he derives human responsibility for nature and the need for "ethical respect" towards nature (784). This is, then, ultimately how a Levinasian eco-ethics may be envisaged: as an obligation towards nature as the *milieu* in which the ethical relation unfolds. This obligation is derived from nature's separation from the *il y a* as a concrete "ecology of existence," a "mesh" in Morton's sense, that is accessible only in its particularity and that is the medium of ethics itself. As the medium of the ethical encounter, the
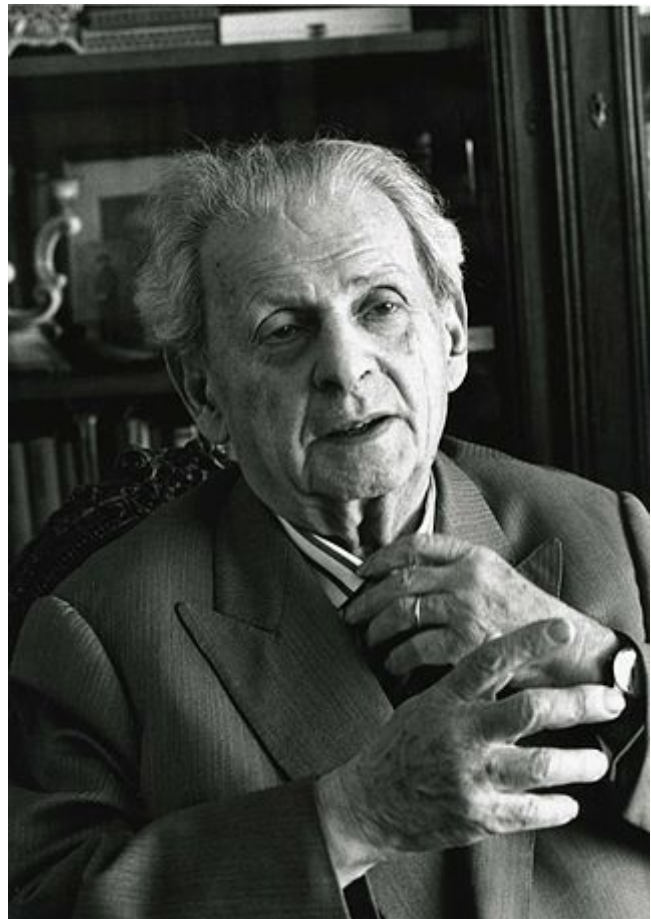
A Levinasian eco-ethics may be envisaged as an obligation towards nature as the *milieu* in which the ethical relation unfolds. Photo (Emmanuel Levinas): <u>Wikimedia Foundation</u>. Bracha L. Ettinger. Accessed 27 Nov. 2022

milieu must be preserved to make ethics possible in the first place, and the obligation to do so is itself an ethical one.

The Ethical *Milieu* in *Mayfly*

Joe White's *Mayfly*, which premiered at the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, London, in 2018, is a play that showcases how ethics, understood in a Levinasian sense, and our obligation towards nature are closely interlinked. In many ways, it can be considered to only ever implicitly address questions of ecology. In *Mayfly*, the middle-aged couple Ben and Cat and their daughter Loops are struggling with the loss of their son/brother Adam to suicide. The play is set on the first anniversary of his death and explores various configurations and interrelations in which the characters attempt to come to terms with their grief. *Mayfly* begins with Ben being rescued from a river, in which he attempted to drown himself, by a young man called Harry, who emerges out of the blue. Over the course of the play, Harry establishes close connections with all three family members, each of whom he meets separately at first. In the last scene, all four of them come together for a family dinner. This is when Harry realizes that Loops, who had asked him out on a date, and her parents need Harry as a replacement for Adam. Taken aback, he wants to leave but is stopped by Loops, who makes him realize that she feels a genuine connection between them. The play ends with Harry and Loops kissing. *Mayfly* is thus an enquiry into grief and the way it affects relations between survivors but also, as the blurb on the cover of the play has it, an exploration of "rebirth in the aftermath of tragedy." As such, it presents ethical encounters in Levinas's sense, perhaps most prominently in the opening scene—Ben being saved from drowning—and in the closing moments—a speechless encounter between Loops and Harry that makes Harry change his mind and stay.

What permeates the entire play, however, is a strong ecological undercurrent: in many ways, the secret protagonist in *Mayfly* is the *milieu* in Levinas's sense; that is, the environment in which the encounters between the characters take place. The way nature is woven into the fabric of the play serves to disrupt the totality of grief that engulfs its protagonists. This is why its regenerative impulse attains an ethical dimension, through which *Mayfly* implies both the ethical power of the *milieu* and our obligations towards it.

From the very beginning, the characters are, quite literally, steeped in, and struggling with, their natural surroundings that emerge as a force of disruption to their lives. After the play opens with Harry pulling Ben out of a river, their subsequent dialogue reveals that, although Ben initially claims he slipped and fell in, it was, in fact, a suicide attempt that Harry prevented. Interestingly, it is not the moment of ethical decision making—the moment when Harry decides to jump into the river himself to rescue Ben—that is foregrounded here but its immediate aftermath. While Harry's rescuing act certainly is in line with the self-sacrificing obligation towards the Other in their extreme vulnerability that Levinas's ethics requires, the focus here is on the awkward exchange that follows. After warning Ben that there is a danger of drowning on dry land after swallowing too much water, Harry suggests they sit down by the river to recover and observes the scenery, commenting on the swarms of what Ben tells him are mayflies. When Harry finds out

about their short one-day lifespan, in an attempt to uplift Ben, he tries to interpret this transience as positive: "Just. Amazing what can happen in a day. Ennit. In *one* day. 'Mazing. How much can change -" (White 12). This marks the first instance in the play where nature is portrayed as a disruptive force of change. As the dialogue continues, this is reinforced when Ben tries to explain what made him wade into the water and he claims "it's just this place" (14), which apparently never changes—only later does the audience find out that it is the first anniversary of Adam's suicide and that Adam hanged himself on that very spot (80). Harry, oblivious to all of this, counters by quoting Heraclitus's famous "No man ever steps in the same river twice. For it's not the same river. And he's not the same man" (14). Harry here repeats the motif of change: nature, the scenery in which the play's encounters take place, is not a uniform totality—rather, the implication is, it is the *milieu* in which humans interact. As such, it is, as Harry points out, impermanent and open to change.

This mutability is above all contrasted with the grieving family's perception of time and memory. While the action of the play spans just one day—the life span of a mayfly—the way Ben, Cat and Loops have experienced time since Adam's suicide is uniform and totalising. Their loss has estranged them from each other and tied them up in their memories of Adam. For a year, Loops has worn nothing else but her dead brother's military camouflage clothes; Cat is still calling Adam's voicemail every day and spends her time watching old home videos of her children and her own youth with Ben; Ben wants to kill himself; and they all barely talk to each other. None of them seems to have found a way to come to terms with their loss; they are "consumed by misery" (Gardner), as they are engulfed in these repetitive grieving patterns: "'One day at a time…' that's what they all say," exclaims Cat exasperatedly, "In all my (magazines). Idiots. Every day's the same. Ennit" (White 27).

Pitched against this totality is nature's mutability. The structure of the play is held together by the recurring motifs of the mayflies and the river, part of an ecosystem that stands for change, renewal and disruption: the sounds of mayflies buzzing and swarming and the river gurgling repeatedly puncture the play, particularly in key scenes (White 56, 57, 58, 81, 83). Crucially, this does not mean that nature is portrayed as a monolithic force, that is, as the "faceless generous mother" Levinas rejects (*Totality and Infinity* 47). Rather, it remains the *milieu*, the scenery against which ethical encounters are enacted. While *Mayfly* begins with Harry asserting his somewhat esoteric belief in a higher power that made him take a different way to work and so save Ben from drowning—"like something is looking out for you" (White 13)—this notion of the supernatural is questioned as a human projection as the play progresses. In particular, Loops rejects the existence of any higher power or of the afterlife; for example, when she tells Harry, "I thought I saw a ghost once, but it was just a bin bag in a tree . . ." (45).

Rather than as a force that actively shapes human lives, nature appears as impassive to human grief and suffering. Thus, on their date collecting magic mushrooms on Clee Hill, Loops and Harry observe the sheep there. While Loops complains about their blank

stares, Harry likens the scene to a well-known painting, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*:

> Reminds me of that painting. You know, with the boy in the water. He's been flying, or something, and he fell, and it's the moment after he hit the sea, and you see his little leg, there, disappearing in—and all these blokes, these farmers and that, and all these sheep are just carrying on, staring blank, like nothing happened… which, I guess, it didn't, to them.
>
> *42*

There is no intent, benign or otherwise, to the *milieu*. As the "primal scene of totality's breach," it is not an "interested party."

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1560). As Icarus is drowning (bottom right corner), the farmers and sheep carry on "like nothing happened." Photo: Wikimedia commons. Accessed 26 Nov. 2022

However, for the theatrical ecology of *Mayfly* the role of the mayflies and the river clearly is more than just that of metaphors signifying change. They are, in fact, part of the *milieu* in which the ethical encounters between the protagonists take place and that makes any disruption of their grief possible in the first place. The river is not just the biosphere in which the mayflies spend their brief lives; it is also the river in which Ben tries to drown himself and so, at the same time, the location of his "rebirth" when he is saved. It is the space in and with which the human protagonists interact—necessarily, the river is part of the interconnectedness of what Morton calls the mesh, which includes human existence and, by definition, can only be encountered from within—but it is also the very mediation

between them, the stuff that energises them and resists totality. Again, it is Harry who explains this, in a speech that seems to come uncannily close to describing the Levinasian separation of the existent from existence:

> There's a lot that happens. We just can't ever know it. . . . First rule of thermodynamics, right, says the energy in the universe will always be a constant. Forever. Whatever happens. The same. It won't change when people die, or stars get sucked into black holes… So, so, so when we… die… that energy inside us, inside everything, just… Finds somewhere else to go… cos energy is like this… this river, right. Flowing on and on, forever, this giant invisible river, through everything, and every now and then, something leaps out of it and becomes something for a bit, solid, has a… little life… before it… falls back in… becomes the river again. Carries on flowing… And that's it.
>
> *55*

This is the "energy" of the river or the mayflies: it is the mediation of the *milieu* in which individuation and ethical encounters take place. In keeping with the play's frequently ironic detachment, Harry comes to this insight whilst under the influence of magic mushrooms that he and Loops have sampled, and it is probably a combination of his words and the effects of the mushrooms that leads Loops to have an increasingly frantic flash of memory in which, for the first time, she opens up about the loss of her brother, whose dead body she was the first to find. She acknowledges the all-encompassing grief impacting on her and her family: "[A]ll of us just stopped for a very long time for a very long time until today until—" (56). As Loops breaks down after admitting this, mayflies are swarming. Now a physical presence on stage, as indicated by the stage directions, rather than merely observed by Ben and Harry at the beginning of the play, the mayflies embody the very disruption of Loops, Ben and Cat's grief: as much as this disruption is brought about through their encounters with Harry, these encounters depend on their *milieu* and the possibility for change it affords.

Evelyn Hoskins as Loops in the 2018 production of Joe White's
Mayfly at Orange Tree Theatre. Photo: Helen Murray

This becomes clear in the play's long concluding scene. Here, the swarming noise of the mayflies, together with the gurgling of the river, also forms the backdrop, or perhaps "background murmur," against which all four characters come together for the first time. At the beginning of the scene, stage directions indicate that "*[w]e can hear the river in the distance—the mayflies falling back into it*" (White 58), which links back to the insects' birth in the first scene and so closes a circle, embodied in the mayflies' life cycle. It is only in this final scene that Harry finds out about Adam's suicide. After Cat asks him to take Adam's phone and call her on it to say "Bye, Mum" (75–76), Harry himself reveals his own grief after his mother suddenly left him and his father without saying goodbye several years earlier. As he describes his loss and how he only gradually learned to live with it, the sound of insects again is audible (79, 81).

The mayflies, like the river, thus form an integral part of the soundscape the play constructs: their swarming repeatedly intrudes upon the play's action in moments that foreground the background and highlight the surroundings in which the protagonists come

together in the first place.[6] This serves as a reminder of the otherwise unacknowledged presence of the *milieu*, of mediation itself, in which these exchanges unfold and which allows for the breaking up of totality in the characters' experience. When Harry suspects that the family see him as a replacement for their dead son, he is unnerved and wants to leave, not without revealing first that the entire episode has made it possible for him for the first time in a long time to remember his vanished mother's face. In a final wordless face-to-face encounter, Loops prevents him from doing so by touching him with what may be described in Levinas's terms as "caress," an ethical opening up of lovers directed at a pure futurity (Levinas, "Time and the Other" 51). As Loops and Harry kiss, *Mayfly* fittingly ends by again foregrounding the *milieu* and so highlighting its necessary presence as background scenery to the ethical encounters and disruption of totality the play presents: it concludes with the break of dawn and "*the sound of new mayflies*" (White 83).

However, while, or perhaps because, the characters' surroundings are instrumental to disrupting their grief, there is also a sense pervading the play that this very *milieu* is under threat and itself needs to be protected. On Clee Hill, Loops observes a "[f]ucking mess everywhere, ennit. Plastic and shit" (White 46) and worries the sheep might choke on the plastic. Although this is one of very few hints at environmental pollution in the play, it nevertheless highlights the fragility of the world the characters inhabit. This goes beyond nature and includes forms of human interaction: the pub where Harry works is closing down to be transformed into an art retreat, a sign of gentrification. As a meeting place with a central function not only for the play's action (it is where Harry first encounters Loops and Cat) but also beyond that, for its characters (Cat and Ben courted there, and Cat reveals that "[e]very man, I ever loved, was here" [36]), it is a site of mediation between them, a place where ethical encounters potentially take place. The effect of the pub's closure is that, as one reviewer puts it, the entire village seems to be "grieving for its own extinction" (Jenner). This implies a need to preserve these sites of mediation and coming together, whether they are non-human nature or human-made gathering places: they are both vital to the ecologies that make up the mesh and the medium of ethics itself.

Joe White's *Mayfly* has thus found a productive way of engaging with ecology and ethics at the same time. Read from a Levinasian perspective, it productively shows the way ethics and the surroundings in which we move depend on each other. By repeatedly foregrounding the presence of the mayflies or the river in their physicality, through noises and stage presence, *Mayfly* draws attention to the imperative of respecting and preserving this *milieu*. In this way, the play moves downward toward what Boothroyd calls "the materiality of the sensate life of the existent" (775). At the level of the play's action, it is the disruptive power of their environs that allows Loops and her parents to finally overcome the totality of their grief, and so it attains vital importance as an ethical force. At the same time, it becomes clear that these "localised ecologies" are persistently under threat, and by implication, it is a matter of ethical urgency to preserve the existents that form the *milieu*—this is perhaps the central proposition of the play, even though it seems to be addressed only indirectly: *Mayfly* is saturated with the presence of the natural, of a living environment, down to its very title, and yet it does not explicitly thematise it but lets it "simmer" below the surface. Only every now and then does awareness of this *milieu*

leap out and become solid for a bit before it re-enters the flow of the play. This is how Joe White's play "pays ethical respect" to the *milieu* and makes it an integral part of the ethical encounters it stages.

Endnotes

[1] The connection drawn by Christian Diehm ("Gaia") to the Gaia hypothesis that sees the entire planet as one living body to which, Diehm argues, we owe responsibility seems particularly promising here and might be fruitfully further discussed in light of Bruno Latour's more recent work on Gaia.

[2] Although Levinas insists that only the human Other may have a face and that an ethical relation ensues from the encounter with the enigmatic face of the Other, there is a structural parallel here between the encountering of absolute alterity in the ethical relation and encountering the unthinkable alterity of the mesh, which really is a term used by Morton to abolish distinctions between different life forms, and even between life and non-life forms ("The Mesh" 24), whilst maintaining their plurality. For an overview of the ethical encounter in Levinas, see Riedelsheimer (67–71).

[3] In Levinas's phenomenology, the existent is simply "that which exists," where existence "is antecedent to the world" (*Existence and Existents* 17, 21) and hence outside any ontological categories of understanding.

[4] "Nature" is a fraught term that is often used almost synonymously with "ontology," in phrases like "the nature of things." Such an understanding of nature is fundamentally at odds with Levinas's ethics. As it also obscures the role humans play in the construction of what is "natural" Morton has argued for an "ecology without nature" (*Ecology Without Nature* and *The Ecological Thought* 1–19). In view of Morton's arguments any use of the term "nature" here is provisional, a term to indicate the more-than-human world surrounding us and depending on us but one that is precariously set off against any natural ontology.

[5] In thinking about nature as a *milieu* in Levinas's sense, inevitably a foreground/background problem ensues: once a focus is placed on the background, it ceases to be the background. In terms of representation, highlighting the *milieu* without turning it into something different is then impossible. For a discussion of the foreground-background dilemma in terms of ecological thinking, see Morton ("Deconstruction and/as Ecology").

[6] The effect can be heard in the short trailer for the 2018 production at Orange Tree Theatre (youtu.be/W0YefFHEJAU). Although this trailer does not use footage from the actual theatre performance, the way in which "natural" background noise by birds and insects is getting louder, and by the end of the trailer is clearly the most prominent feature of the trailer, exemplifies this foregrounding of the background soundscape.

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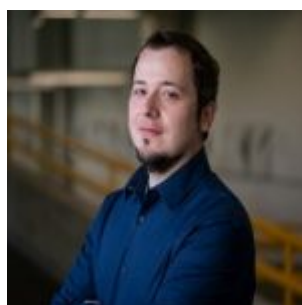
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