DIVE-IN **2023**, **3**(**2**): 69–91
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2785-3233/19136

DIVE-IN
An International Journal on Diversity & Inclusion

A speculative fjord: The global and the planetary in the depiction of Killary Harbour in *Notes from a Coma* (2005) by Mike McCormack and *The Fjord of Killary* (2012) by Kevin Barry

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Abstract The present paper aims at analyzing two works of contemporary Irish fiction, namely, *Notes from a Coma* (2005) by Mike McCormack and *The Fjord of Killary* (2012) by Kevin Barry. I argue that both works not only mirror what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the 'global' and the 'planetary', but also reflect the non-human space and time scales that Timothy Morton identifies as one of the properties of hyperobjects. Moreover, the two novels are deeply rooted in the history of Ireland, and especially in the semi-peripheral position occupied by the country within the capitalist world system. The intermingling of various narrative layers together with speculative and realistic tropes conveys the epiphenomenality of our lived experience, characterized by the not-yet predictable consequences of planetary climate crisis and the ever-shifting demands of global capitalism.

Keywords Irish literature; speculative fiction; global; planetary; capitalist world-ecology

1. Introduction

When you drive along Killary harbour from the village of Leenaun to the townland of Foher, you can see a great deal of Ireland's deep and recorded history unfolding. Geologists read the rugged sides of the bay as a litmus test of Ireland's ice-age; historians still hear the echo of Oliver Cromwell screaming: "To hell or to Connaught!", and retrace the origins of Ireland's most tragic event, The Great Famine, in the famine walls running at the southern sides of the valley. On the other hand, some experts on world-capitalism and globalization would interpret the sailing boat tours as a sign of mass tourism and of the recent Irish strive to attract more visitors to the island. All these

threads merge in their unfolding, becoming strictly interlinked and mutually influential. In this respect, the fjord of Killary becomes an insightful geographical space when it comes to analyze the conjuncture of geological and planetary processes with the spatial and time scales of the modern capitalist world system in Ireland. The present paper aims at exploring this conjuncture within two works of contemporary fiction which display the fjord of Killary as their main spatial setting, namely: *Notes from a Coma* (2005) by Mike McCormack and *The Fjord of Killary* (2012) by Kevin Barry. After a brief recollection of recent criticism dealing with the concepts of the 'global' and the 'planetary', and their scalar conjuncture, we will analyze how they play out within the Irish context, and how they shape the narrative of the two literary texts I consider.

2. Scalar quakes in the Anthropocene: A condensed methodological framework

In May 2000 geologists Crutzen and Stoermer published a short article in *The Global Change Newsletter n.41* of The International Geosphere–Biosphere Programme (IGBP) titled *The Anthropocene*, in which they argued that human beings through their industrial, fossil fuel powered activities pushed the Earth into a new geological era, namely the Anthropocene. Therefore, according to the two scholars, human beings have become geological agents. The idea of Anthropocene fuelled numerous discussions within the theoretical and philosophical debate. In fact, the new (proposed) geological era poses extremely complex epistemological problems for it blurs the boundaries between the longstanding binary Nature – Culture. As Bruno Latour puts it, where we thought we would find Nature, namely geological and planetary history, we now find something traditionally belonging to the realm of Culture: the *anthropos* (2017: 185-219). More specifically, with the word *anthropos* we are not referring to a vague idea of the human species, but to the specific history of capitalist modernity (Latour 2017: 185-219). In this context, Zach Horton in his article *Composing a Cosmic View: Three Alternatives for Thinking Scale in the Anthropocene* (2017), considers the Anthropocene as primarily a problem of scale. That is to say, the tension between planetary and geological time, and the global history of capitalism.

The latest work by Dipesh Chakrabarty works through this friction and tries to hold together the history of capitalism and the history of the planet by constantly moving and zooming between different scales: "climate crisis

compels us to think, in the same moment, on different time scales, with different resolutions and details" (Chakrabarty 2021: 29). In fact, while the history of capital is, according to Chakrabarty, a good enough framework when it comes to explaining the processes of domain, power, and inequality, it proves insufficient when trying to face global warming. The latter, in fact, shows and makes explicit the enmeshing relationship between the recorded life of humans – and of capital - with the history of the planet. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his 2021 book *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* explores the idea whereby human history not only needs to take into account a time frame which far exceeds the 500 years of world capitalism, but also to expand its mostly humanist focus onto non-human (both living and not living) forms of agency. In this respect the planetary dimension comes to the fore resituating the position of human beings in the world:

> That is the 'shock of the Anthropocene', signaling a breach in the structure of human-historical time and in the structure of mutuality and compelling an engagement with deep time and the history of life on this planet. (Chakrabarty 2021: 191-192)

Another crucial contribution to the debate was given by Timothy Morton's theory of hyperobjects. In his 2013 book, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, he defines our times as governed by what he calls "hyperobjects", non-local, massively distributed, viscous objects:

> They are viscous, which means that they "stick" to beings that are involved with them. They are nonlocal; in other words, any "local manifestation" of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to. (Morton 2013: 1)

Hyperobjects have brought forward what Morton calls "the end of the world" (2013: 2) inasmuch as they undermine concepts of background and foreground which the modern idea of 'world' is based upon. Hyperobjects make clear that there is no 'beyond' where we can hide the consequences of anthropic actions:

> Hyperobjects are genuinely apocalyptic (from the Greek term apocaluptō) in the sense that they lift the veil of prejudice—but in so doing they do not catapult us into a beyond. Rather they fix us more firmly to the spot, which is no longer an embeddedness in a world. (Morton 2013: 144)

While things like the Solar System or the biosphere can be considered as hyperobjects, others surface as the consequences of anthropic activities, such as global warming and capitalism. Hyperobjects compel us to think on completely different time and spatial scales and to reimagine the *anthropos*, human beings, within the interobjective space we live in. In fact, another property of hyperobjects is their "interobjectivity" (2013: 81). Interobjectivity stands for the way in which "all entities whatsoever are interconnected in an interobjective system that elsewhere I call the mesh" (2013: 83). In this respect, interobjectivity (together with the other properties of hyperobjects), undermines the importance, centrality, and accuracy of concepts such as intersubjectivity, causality and the present.

Moreover, if we want to look at the specific historical trajectory, namely capitalist modernity, which brought forward the current planetary crisis, the work of the environmental historian Jason Moore becomes crucial. In this respect, and against the idea of *anthropos* as a unified whole, Moore theorized what was defined by Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin (2018: 219) as the first political theory of the Anthropocene. Moore roots the current global and planetary crises at the origin of the capitalist world system and thus, at the beginning of Western colonialism. Consequently, it is necessary to consider not only the impact of capitalism on nature, which implies separating Nature from Society, but we should also focus on capitalism-in-nature and nature-in-capitalism (Moore 2015: 13). More specifically, Moore defines capitalism as a 'world-ecology' which:

> (…) expands over the planet thorough its frontiers, driven by forces of endless accumulation. To say world-ecology is not, therefore, to invoke the "ecology of the world" but to suggest an analysis that shows how relations of power, production, and reproduction work through the web of life. (Moore & Patel 2018: 38)

When reimagining scalar thinking in the scope of literature, we must hold in mind Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of the pivotal importance played by the conjuncture of global and planetary. Contextually – so as to avoid a static depiction of scale – it's also crucial to keep our reading practice tied to a constant zooming between local cultural references, the global interference of commodities, finance, and economic-driven practices, as well as geological time and deep history. In 2012, Clark published an article called *Derangements of Scale*, in which, by analysing the short story *Elephant* by Raymond Carver, he

showed how a single text could be read as an entanglement of scales, in which local and interpersonal relationships are shaped and modified not only by global and transnational events, but also by planetary phenomena. In the face of climate change, Clark argues, many of our resolutions for social justice, or environmental justice turn out to be not only extremely anthropocentric, but also dramatically misleading: "As a result of scale effects what is self-evident or rational at one scale may well be destructive or unjust at another" (Clark 2015: 150) and also "climate change disrupts the scale at which one must think, skews categories of internal and external and resists inherited closed economies of accounting or explanation"(Clark 2015: 153).

In the next section we will look at how the various concepts and nomenclatures explored so far could be applied to the geographical space and history of Ireland. And afterwards we will analyse how they play out into two contemporary works of Irish fiction.

3. Zooming on the West: Ireland and the fjord of Killary as a planetary and global space

The renowned landscape writer Tim Robinson started the second volume of his Connemara Trilogy, *Connemara, The Last Pool of Darkness* (2008), with a vertiginous recollection of the geological history of the area around the fjord of Killary. The same vision of the bay, in fact, has the power to drag the witness down deep into its million years-long geological history. Tim Robinson, supposedly bewitched by the same estranging yet sublime feeling, asked geologist Kieran Ryan to guide him through the geological history of the fjord. Killary Harbour, whose name derives from the anglicized version of *An Caoláire Rua*, meaning 'the red sea inlet/fjord', was formed during the end of the Quaternary, when the glaciers that covered the island retreated leaving behind a narrow valley which was afterwards filled up with water. In order to be considered a fjord, the water inside the inlet needs to be higher than the water that flows within it from the sea. Although the most evident features of the site have been shaped around the time of the last ice age, their origin precedes this period by millions of years:

> That time was almost half a billion years ago, in the geological period known as the Ordovician (…) There was at that time an ocean comparable to the present-day Atlantic, the Iapetus; (…) Ireland was not yet a whole; what is now the north-western portion of it was a sector of the Laurentian

> shores of Iapetus, while the south-eastern portion on the other side of Iapetus formed part of Eastern Avalonia, a minor continental fragment close to Baltica. (Robinson 2008: 10)

From this moment on, Tim Robinson together with Kieran Ryan embarked on a contemplative journey through the deep history of Connemara. At the end of their "day's travels across abyssal time and clashing continents" (2008: 10), Tim and Kieran reemerged from "their strata-deep cogitations" (2008: 10) onto the sight of a privately owned salmon farm, whose supposedly anthropic familiarity starts to appear as profoundly uncanny and illogical when looked against the million-year long history of the area. This recollection of Ireland's deep history brings forth something of the scalar friction between the global and the planetary which we talked about in the previous section. In this respect Robinson says:

> I shall have much to write about the intensity of feelings, the conflicts of interest and the small daily struggles of saints against the father of evil that humanize such phenomena as the Salrock fault, the Rosroe formation and the rest of the stark and stony features, from Killary Harbour to Slyne Head in the extreme south-west, that make up Connemara's Atlantic face. (Robinson 2008: 14).

Tim and Kieran in this way are pushed from the scalar level of the planetary onto the global. In this context, and flash forward by a few thousands of years, it is worth looking at how Ireland became strictly tied to the creation of the modern capitalist world system during the early stages of British colonialism. More specifically, Ireland became "a laboratory, conveniently proximate to expanding Britain, in which to trial techniques of privatization and expropriation" (Deckard 2016: 150) and the place where the idea of "the savage and the civilized" was first set out as a tool for conquest (Moore & Patel 2018: 43). From then on, both the Irish people and the Irish landscape were subjugated under British protestant rule, whose first consequences were visible in the extreme simplification of nature at the time of the plantations (Deckard 2016: 150). This resulted in dramatic changes in the Irish landscape, most prominently in the massive deforestation of the Irish forestry which served the needs for cheap wood as a building material for the English navy, and as fuel for its nascent industry. The process was pushed to the extent that in 1906 only 1.5% of Ireland's original forestry was still left intact (Shokouhi 2019: 20). Moreover, as masterly explained in Maurice Coakley's volume *Ireland in the*

World Order, a History of Uneven Development (2012) under the British rule, and within the unevenly developing capitalist world system, Ireland's economy was deeply underdeveloped, inasmuch as it was characterized by profound under-industrialization and reliance on export-bound agrarian monoculture. Maurice Coakley's book puts under scrutiny the same idea of underdevelopment in Ireland, shaping his thinking on Wallerstein's pivotal intuition of the systemic and necessary unevenness of the capitalist world system. The volume not only traces a parallelism between Ireland's position in the Atlantic trade and other sites of the global division of labour, such as India, but it also sets the foundation to interpret and read Ireland's position within today's global neoliberal regime.

The entrance of Ireland in the neoliberal[1] regime could be dated in the year 1959, where the world's first tax-free zone was created in Shannon Airport, in county Limerick. According to sociologist Kieran Keohane, the event marked a pivotal moment in the mythical account of neoliberal globalization: "the tax-free zone was an Irish invention. Shannon was the world's first. But the model quickly proliferated and metastasized. Mimicked and emulated, it spread worldwide" (Keohane 2017: 208). Since the 60s "the Irish state has assumed 'the role of 'hunter and gatherer' of foreign direct investment (FDI)" (Ó Riain & O'Connell 2000: 315, as qtd. in Kirby 2010: 36). This state policy continued through the 70s and the 80s, and reached a peak in around 1994, when the country started to experience its 14-year long economic boom known as the 'Celtic Tiger'. Sharae Deckard in her pivotal article *World-Ecology and Ireland: The Neoliberal Ecological Regime* (2016) sheds a clear light on the matter by saying:

> Ireland's integration into the neoliberal ecological regime has been characterized by peripheral dependency on foreign capital investment, the tendency towards financialization and housing speculation rather than industrial production, the intensification of earlier monocultures formed under colonialism (such as the beef and dairy economies), the formation of new monocultures organized around new commodity frontiers in biocommodities, and the drive to enclose remaining commons (as in water, oil and gas). (Deckard 2016: 156)

[1] For a deeper understanding of the recent discussion on the term "neoliberalism" consult: *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent* (2019), edited by Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro. Moreover, Mary McGlynn's text *Broken Irelands* (2022), gives a pivotal insight into the specific manifestation of neoliberalism in Ireland.

The Celtic Tiger can be divided in two periods (Kitchin et al. 2012: 1033). The first one which lasted until the dot.com crash in 2001 was based on FDI (foreign direct investments) from multinationals belonging to the 3Cs sector, namely: "computers, chemicals and cola concentrates" (Murphy, as qtd. in McCann 2013: 106). And a second phase characterized by "involving a property boom mainly consisting of Irish developers capitalised by Irish banks who, in turn, were borrowing from European banks" (Kitchin et al. 2012: 1033). During the Celtic Tiger, Ireland became the poster child of neoliberal globalization (Fagan 2002) and was seen as a model for the future growth of other peripheral and semi-peripheral countries (Kirby 2010). Nonetheless, when the crisis arrived in 2008, its effects were felt in Ireland in a way that no other European country experienced, which showed the unsustainability of its economic model based on the extreme reliance on FDI and volatile bank loans.

Deckard also shows how the Irish State has been adapting environmental policies to satisfy the needs of foreign multinationals seeking to relocate the environmental costs of their actions in a country with low regulation standards:

> is crucial to a macro-ecological understanding of Ireland's role in the world-ecology is the inextricability of its financial role as a tax haven and secrecy jurisdiction zone from its environmental function as a semi-peripheral pollution and water haven. (Deckard 2016: 148)

Moreover, Deckard places under the spotlight another two aspects which clarify the environmental costs of the Celtic Tiger in the context of "the nexus of climate change, petroleum consumption, and pollution" (Deckard 2016: 159), namely: the cheap appropriation of water resources by multinational corporations, and the over-polluting grazier economy (Deckard 2016: 158-161). The latter has been a key element of the Irish economy ever since before the twentieth century, and it should not be analyzed as either a sign of backwardness or as idyllic pastoralism. The over reliance on export bound cattle industry in Ireland is instead a sign of the uneven development of the country within the capitalist world system (Deckard 2016: 161). Moreover, Ireland's economic policy didn't change after the crash, and it was instead characterized by a series of short-term actions still strictly bound to the neoliberal logic (Kitchin et al. 2012). Similarly, Ireland's environmental policy didn't turn into a more sustainable one, and it was instead redirected towards the opening of new ecological frontiers:

> water via the privatization of domestic water provision; oil via the sale of offshore petroleum exploration licenses to transnational oil companies; natural gas through onshore hydraulic fracturing; fish through the development of mass aquaculture and intensification of salmon-farming; and bio-commodities through the development of biotechnology industries in pharma, food, and energy. (Deckard 2016: 164)

Within the context of the Irish Celtic Tiger and after the economic crash, Ireland's semi-peripheral position within world capitalism was reaffirmed, as well as the logic of profitable frontier expansion and neoliberal ecology. It is at that point then, when humans interfere with planetary dynamics that they encounter not the globe, and neither the Earth in Heideggerian terms, but the planet, whose internal processes do not respond to anthropocentric logics: "what you encounter when you spoil the Earth is the Planet. The Planet, in contrast to the Earth, is indifferent to us" (Chakrabarty 2023: 38). In the next paragraph, the theoretical concepts outlined in the first section together with the historical coordinates just delineated, will be applied to the analysis of two works of contemporary Irish fiction, namely: *Notes from a Coma* (2005) by Mike McCormack and *The Fjord of Killary* (2012) by Kevin Barry.

4. Killary harbour in *Notes from a Coma* by Mike McCormack and *The Fjord of Killary* by Kevin Barry

The Celtic Tiger and the subsequent economic crash produced (although belatedly according to some) a vast response in terms of literary production. The literary texts from the period could be ascribed to a wide variety of narrative genres. Although, in the context of our discussion it is important to underscore how one of the main features of the period is the profound link that the texts produce between a sense of realism and 'irreality'. The idea of 'irrealism'[2] was developed by the Warwick Collective in 2015 to analyze a wide set of narratives of varied geographical provenance, whose set of features could be shortly listed as: multiple narrative layers, unreliable narrators, and the influence of multiple literary traditions, especially culture-specific literary forms, gothic, sci-fi tropes as well as non-literary productions (Warwick

[2] The idea of irrealism as conceived by the WReC expanded the concept of critical irrealism theorized by Michaël Löwy (2009).

Collective 2015: 51-52). More specifically, they consider irrealism as proper of (semi)-peripheral countries in the world system. It is in fact in the (semi-) peripheral conjuncture of fictitious capital and extractivism that the formal features of irrealism are rooted (2015: 70). In recent critical studies, many scholars such as Eoin Flannery (2022), Mary McGlynn (2022), Sharae Deckard (2014), and Adam Kelly (2020) noticed the presence of irrealistic features in the texts written during and especially after the crash of the Celtic Tiger.

The novel and the short story I set out to analyse were written just before, as in *Notes from a Coma* (2005), and after, for *The Fjord of Killary* (2012), the crash of the Celtic Tiger. I argue that the geographical and temporal setting of the texts enables not only the use of irrealist and speculative features to display the Irish neoliberal ecological regime, but also the peculiar scalar quake produced by the conjuncture between the global and the planetary. This scalar conjuncture is conveyed through not only the constant zooming-in zooming-out movement which Chakrabarty refers to, but also through the creation of images where different scales merge together as one inseparable unit. Moreover, the speculative aspects of the texts engender crucial critical reflections about our future as both human beings and a living species. Both the theory discussed in the first section and the brief recollection of Irish history which we looked at in the second paragraph, will prove to be crucial analytic tools for the reading of the texts.

4.1 Brains, fjords, and uncanny experiments: *Notes from a Coma*, by Mike McCormack

Notes from a Coma (2005) by Mike McCormack tells the story of JJ O'Malley who was bought when still a toddler in a Romanian orphanage for 2000 dollars by his dad to be, Anthony O'Malley. Anthony, a farmer from Louisburgh in county Mayo, decided to buy himself a child when his herd of cows was destroyed due to the nation-wide spread of mad cow disease. JJ O'Malley grows up in Louisburgh surrounded by the love and care of the town community, and since his early childhood shows signs of exceptional intelligence. His logical capacity and ability to draw things together will later in his life be called "mindrot meditations" (McCormack 2005: 42) which could be seen as his personal tension to understand the mechanisms of the world around him, to see how things are connected and how he himself – as a young man and commodity object – is part of this network. In *Notes from a Coma*, Killary becomes the selected place for the evaluation of the Somnos Project, a penal experiment

consisting in putting four volunteers into a deep coma on a ship off the coast of the harbour to test an innovative form of imprisonment in the EU. Nonetheless, the four volunteers, other than being tested for the official Somnos Project, seem to be the non-consensual test subjects for a non-identified neurological experiment. JJ decides to partake in the project as a volunteer after the death of his best friend Owen. He justifies his decision by expressing his need to "take my mind off my mind for a while" (2005: 103).

In terms of form, the novel displays an unreliable and fragmented narration divided in two main parts. In the main body of the narrative, the story of JJ is chorally mediated by five different narrators, four belonging to the town community and one who is a politician. They interpret and retell the protagonist's story, whose voice is never directly heard. The plot is then further developed in a series of footnotes which are called Event Horizon.

'Event Horizon' is a word borrowed from astrophysics which signals the boundary defining the region of space around a black hole. The Event Horizon meshes several linguistic registers: scientific, journalistic, dream-like, science fictional. It changes our perspective on the story, it leads us into the narrative through other temporal and spatial coordinates:

> Event Horizon
> †…because he is now both stimulus and qualia. His name, blurting through the nation's print and electronic media, is also one of those synapses at which the nation's consciousness forms itself. (McCormack 2005: 1)

This sentence, which is taken from the Event Horizon, opens the novel. The reader is lead into the narrative through a feeling of estrangement, where the conjunction of the words 'stimulus and qualia' not only reduce JJ to his cerebral activity, but also blur the line between cause and effect, between 'stimuli', an event that provokes a certain reaction, and 'qualia' which are instead the subjective feelings perceived by a person as a result of a certain event. This idea echoes Timothy Morton's intuition whereby in the age of hyperobjects the line between cause and sign is disrupted:

> Hyperobjects are so big that they compel us toward this counterintuitive view. Interobjectivity eliminates the difference between cause and sign (…) idea that causality is the machinery in the basement and the aesthetic is the candy on top (…) is now obsolete. (Morton 2013: 89-90)

Therefore, the novel, right from the start, compels us to abandon the time-space, cause-effect coordinates which have shaped our understanding of reality until now. In this respect, the Event Horizon comes to signify the network of events, facts, situations, ideas, and hypothesis whose consequences we can't fully grasp by means of our cognitive capacities, either because they are too complicated to comprehend/connect, or because we are simply unaware of them. It is within the Event Horizon that the first site for the conjuncture of the global and the planetary is created. The same expression Event Horizon, with its direct reference to black holes, addresses the idea whereby objects, events and mechanisms exist beyond, and regardless of our comprehension. In this respect, the juxtaposition of the main body narrative and the footnotes convey a feeling of irreality which echoes Morton when he says:

> Antirealism appropriates quantum theory, since quantum theory supposedly shows reality is fuzzy or deeply correlated with perception and so forth. Quantum theory is the only existing theory to establish firmly that things really do exist beyond our mind (or any mind). (Morton 2013: 39)

The Event Horizon could be considered as the site where events on various scales happen and then reflect onto the micronarrative of the Louisburgh community, which then appears as an epiphenomenal cluster of events shaped by the bigger picture of planetary, transnational and profit driven dynamics conveyed in the footnotes.

Firstly, in the novel we witness the dramatic intrusion of the global scale, into what could be considered as a local, semi-traditional community. In this respect, Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling's idea of Collision Culture becomes a crucial perspective when it comes to analysing the implications of the Celtic Tiger on a sociological level:

> collisions between the vestiges of traditional community and accelerated modern society, between the rural and the urban, the local and the global; collisions that impact traumatically on the life histories of individuals. (Keohane & Kuhling 2004: 56)

Especially, individual agency is in this context extremely weakened. Timothy Clark in this respect highlights the epiphenomenality of human actions in the bigger picture of world capitalism, technosphere, and non-human and planetary forces:

> We can no longer sustain the fiction that significant historical agency is the preserve of intentional human action alone. (…) Technology and infrastructures emerge not only as inherently political but as doubly and unpredictably politicized in scale effects that deride the intentions of their users or builders. (Clark 2015: 104)

Moreover, in the Event Horizon we also learn that it's a non-human agent which puts in motion the entire story, namely BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) caused by a protein called prion. In this respect, this is JJ's answer to his girlfriend Sarah who tells him that he was lucky to be saved from the orphanage: "For the umpteenth time, Sarah, I was bought, I wasn't saved. A herd of cattle went to the sword – well, the humane killer – for me. In the beginning was bovine spongiform encephalopathy" (McCormack 2005: 49). Undoubtedly, BSE spreading was also fuelled, accelerated, and made more dangerous by the deep economic reliance on cattle industry in the country. Since the beginning, when JJ arrives to the town of Louisburgh as the substitute of Anthony's herd of cows, a strong parallelism is traced between JJ as a commodity object, cheap life, and site of surplus extraction: "We were easy meat, Sarah, it was a free-for-all in those orphanages, like the new year sales" (McCormack 2005: 49). Here I quote a series of questions that JJ would ask to Anthony during his mindrot meditations about the day he was bought in the orphanage:

> "A consumer durable, Anthony, wasn't that how it was?" (McCormack 2005: 4)

> (…) "And what was the asking price, Anthony, what was the reserve? Was it stamped across my forehead of was there a little tag dangling from my toe?" (McCormack 2005: 5)

> (…) "Of course it wasn't like that but it's the truth, isn't it? And a seller market's too, wasn't it? They couldn't keep up with the demand. All of us there up on top on one another in our slatted house" (McCormack 2005: 7)

JJ does not only recognize himself as a market durable, but through his extraordinary logical and associative capacities he manages to connect human recorded history with the deep history of the species and of the planet. One scene underscores this aspect. JJ and Sarah are talking about the bones and skulls that are being washed out at sea from the Killeen, one of Ireland's burial

sites for stillborn and unbaptized babies. JJ argues that the babies are being brought back to the original site where we all came from, the sea, and that they might find a new life by reconnecting with the planet's biological, mineral, and geological matter:

> Maybe those kids want to go back to the sea. That's where we all come from in the first place, isn't it? Maybe they want to start all over again. Washed out to sea and broken down by the sand and water, then rising up into the clouds and falling as rain all over this green and pleasant land. Rising up again as grass and trees and nettles and briars, maybe that's what they want. (McCormack 2005: 52)

On the other hand, in the novel, the regenerative hope in a both material and conceptual reconnection with the planet is undermined by the simplification of nature brought forward by Ireland's neoliberal ecological regime. In *Notes from a Coma*, the decision to place the Somnos ship in the fjord could be read as the choice to escape strict regulation in other European countries by locating the experiment in the Irish semi-periphery where under-regulation was one of the main reasons for multinational industries' relocation in the country. The same geographical space of the bay, at the extreme end of non-continental Europe underscores the intention to hide and distance commodity frontier expansion far from the core. In the Event Horizon, McCormack introduces the fjord of Killary as a place where the global and the planetary meet, and where nature is simplified to accommodate the shifting needs of the market:

> Running six kilometers west-east through Ordovician sandstone and Silurian quartzite it forms part of the Mayo-Galway border. At one time its steep sides and sheltered waters called out for mineral prospecting, cheap holiday accommodation, mussel farming and marine leisure activities. (McCormack 2005: 5)

In the novel, the fjord is used to experiment the Somnos project, whose outcome could be the development of franchise penal ships in the EU, in which the convicts are put into a deep coma. The project therefore both simplifies and exploits nature, namely the fjord and potentially many more coastal areas, and the life of volunteers, and potentially many more convicts in the future. For what concerns the simplification and exploitation of nature, coastal areas have often been used as sites for fracking gas and oil, as in the case of the Corrib gas

project in County Mayo, whose development stretched between 1996 and 2015.[3]

Moreover, within the experiment, JJ and the other volunteers are reconfigured as the cheap site of new capitalist frontier expansion. This reconnects to the idea whereby the neoliberal shift in capitalism is marked by the dramatic exhaustion of the four cheaps: "labor-power, food, energy, and raw materials" (Moore 2015: 27), which according to Sharae Deckard pushed the restructuring of profit frontiers into non-material commodities, such as the information industry and finance. According to Moore: "As capitalism evolves and restructures, so do the terms of the double internality. Every phase of capitalism has woven together new and old strands of the *oikeios*" (Moore 2015: 27). In this respect, although the project Somnos could be considered as the main speculative aspect of the plot, its mechanisms and subjacent policies are perfectly explicable within the neoliberal ecological predicate, and more specifically in the same appropriation of planetary resources by market needs. In *Notes from a Coma*, we can see then how the pharmaceutical and information industries are feeding into each other through the Somnos experiment. This is even more true considering Ireland's leading position in the global bio-pharmaceutical market in which "people's very bodies and affects acquire economic and political value" (Deckard 2016: 170). In the Event Horizon we read:

> Somewhere within the clints and grikes of this new world glittered the real prize: consciousness. (…) What at first glance appeared a heroic scientific enterprise had, in fact its origins in an economic imperative. (McCormack 2005: 155)

Consequently, similar to how the oil and gas industry draw on fossil fuels which formed over the course of millions of years, the neural experiment lead on the ship in based of the commodification of the human brain, whose extremely complex features developed over the course of millennia (Smail 2007). Timothy Morton in the section dedicated to the fifth property of hyperobjects, namely interobjectivity, shows how the human mind is an effect surfacing from the interobjective space where all entities interconnect called "the mesh". He argues:

[3] For further information on the Corrib gas project and controversy, look at Slevin (2019).

> This would mean that an account of hyperobjects was among other things an account of the fabric of the human mind. My thinking is thus a mental translation of the hyperobject—of climate, biosphere, evolution—not just figuratively, but literally. (Morton 2013: 85)

In this context, JJ's EEG is not only being appropriated as a source of cheap nature for presumably pharmaceutical and IT market needs, but it's also projected onto big screens all over the country as the saviour-symbol, celebrity God-like figure for the neoliberal shift in Ireland's economy. In this respect, JJ is both guineapig and God, and therefore situating both at the bottom and at the top of the social pyramid. JJ's brain is detached from his subjectivity and personality, and it is resemantized to fulfil the current needs of the market. In this context JJ's desire to "take my mind off my mind" (2005: 103) is conceptually satisfied. The Event Horizon makes all of this clear:

> Mapping the cortical and subcortical regions of the brain, tagging the neural correlates – none of this has brought us any closer than a distant telemetry which refuses to arc across the meat to mental gulf… (McCormack 2005: 117)
> No less here than there but like the Divine equally present every-where, the subjects have now taken their place in the weak polytheism of contemporary celebrity. (McCormack 2005: 92)

In conclusion, the conjuncture of the global and the planetary in the novel is firstly conveyed through the formal structure of the text, and especially the juxtaposition of the Event Horizon and the main body narrative. Secondly, both the geological dimension of the fjord and the evolutionary history of JJ's body and brain are reconfigured as sites of new extractive frontiers which dig deeper and deeper into planetary resources.

4.2 "It's end-of-the-fucking-world-stuff": Massive floods and localized apocalypses in *The Fjord of Killary* by Kevin Barry

The Fjord of Killary[4] (2012) by Kevin Barry narrates the story of a bored and uninspired poet who decides to buy an old hotel on the harbour to give his life a fresh start. But one night, while the bar is crammed with drunken locals, a

[4] The short story was first published on the 24th of January 2010 in the *New Yorker* and afterwards became part of the collection titled *Dark Lies the Island* (2012). In the essay I make reference to this last edition.

suspected storm turns into an apocalyptic wave that floods the hotel. The text reflects both the delirious excess of the Tiger and speculates about the catastrophic effects of global warming.

The main setting of the story is the bar of the hotel which "was set hard by the harbour wall, with Mweelrea mountain across the water, and disgracefully grey skies above" (Barry 2012: 27). From the beginning it is clear how the landscape surrounding the hotel it's both seen as a background for what is happening inside but is also characterized by an eerie hunting power. We learn that the protagonist, and narrator, who defines himself as a "townie" (Barry 2012: 37), has decided to buy the hotel to escape the hustle and bustle of the city, to find peace in what he thought would be a pastoral, traditional area:

> But I was thinking, the west of Ireland… the murmurous ocean…the rocky hills hard-founded in a greenish light…the cleansing air…the stoats peeping shyly from little gaps in the drystone walls… (…) Of course I hadn't counted on having to listen to my summer stuff, a pack of energetic Belarusians fucking each other at all angles of the clock. (2012: 30)

In this passage two symptoms of Ireland's accelerated modernization (Keohane & Kuhling 2004), and position within world capitalism could be traced. Firstly, the protagonist represents the typical post-modern identity which "experiences a sense of fragmentation, a loss of a sense of identity and discontinuity within the past" (Keohane & Kuhling 2004: 123). At the same time, he projects his tourist gaze onto the west of Ireland, hoping to find himself in that 'primigenial' site. In this respect Keohane and Kuhling also say:

> [d]espite the coexistence of modernity and tradition in Ireland, the Irish countryside has often been identified as the site of traditional, communitarian values, as a locus of authenticity, and has thus been an object of the "romantic gaze" by both urbanized Irish and non-Irish people. (2004: 124)

In this respect he complies with the logic of touristic commodification of the Irish landscape. It is not a case that he is captivated by the accent and expressions of the locals' peculiar use of Hiberno English. Moreover, he decided to buy the hotel also because of the traditional and old-fashioned look of its bar. In this respect Keohane and Kuhling stress "the deliberate commodification of landscapes, heritage centers and other tourist sites, but also in the cultivation of 'stage authenticity' and the 'commodification of craic' in

Irish pubs" (2004: 124). The other side of the wonders promised by the Irish tourist industry is occupied by people that the narrator shamelessly calls "my Belarusians" (Barry 2012: 32), a group of young emigrants working at the hotel for the minimum wage. The workers, who represent cheap imported labor, are both invisibilized and sexualized, especially the female workers.

During the short story, the characters seem to ignore the increasing intensity of the rain. They are mostly busy drinking and aimlessly talking about distances between places in Ireland, and the time it would take to go from one place to another. In this respect, the characters are stuck at the level of the global, where time and space and measured on the locally specific characteristics of the technosphere. At the same time, their knowledge of global processes appears deeply superficial and populistic as shown by statements such as "these bastards from the back end of nowhere decide they can move in whenever they like and take our funkin' jobs?" (Barry 2012: 38).

Seemingly every time someone mentions the increasing violence of the storm outside, none of the others seem to pay attention. Consequently, they only start to worry when it is too late to escape, and when the storm starts to look like an apocalyptic wave which is sucking up the hotel into the depths of the ocean. It is at this point, following Chakrabarty, that the planetary breaks in with all its power: "What we took as the immobile—in human time—background to human action is now changing because of human action and endangering humanity" (Chakrabarty 2021: 183). Despite this, the characters not only keep on drinking, but when the hotel is almost completely flooded the entire situation turns into an actual disco party at the top floor of the building. In this respect, the characters turn a blind eye on the emergency showing a dramatic lack of awareness and alternative solutions.

On the one hand, the flood could both be seen as the indifference showed by the public towards the evident flaws and unreality of the Tiger boom, which therefore lead to an outstanding economic crash. In this respect, the excitement at the bar echoes the final lines of a pre-crash poem by the spoken-word artist Colm Keegan which goes: "dying, and dying and dying, but it all so fucking electrifying 'cause we are fumbling blind, we are no idea what we are doing, we have no idea where we are going, and we are almost there, we are almost there" (Keegan 2018). On the other hand, the flood addresses the current climate crisis, which has been ignored by global and local politics, that are not stepping back in their neoliberal ecological policies. The flood at the Killary embodies what Timothy Morton calls local manifestation of the hyperobject global warming:

> The worst of the news was that the emergency appeared to be localised. The fjord of Killary was flooding then no other place was flooding. The rest of the country was going about its humdrum Monday-night business – watching football matches or Dan Brown adaptations, putting out the bins, or putting up with their marriages – while the people in our vicinity prepared for watery graves. (Barry 2012: 41)

In this respect, the short story contrasts mainstream apocalyptic narratives which see one big dramatic event wiping out the entirety of human civilization (Malvestio 2022). On the other hand, it represents one localized event, which mirrors the idea whereby Anthropocene "Rather than a single phenomenon, it is to be understood as a wide variety of phenomena, whose causes and effects are not always immediately discernible" (Malvestio 2022: 15). Moreover, the indifference of the people towards the flooding of the fjord echoes Bruno Latour when he argues that:

> Telling Westerners – or those who have recently become Westernized, more or less violently – that the time has come, that their world has ended, that they have to change their way of life, can only produce a feeling of total incomprehension, because, for them, the Apocalypse has already taken place. They have already gone over to the other side. The world of the beyond has been achieved – in any case for those who have become wealthy. They have already crossed the threshold that puts an end to historicity. (Latour 2017: 206)

This seems particularly apt in respect to Ireland's accelerated modernity, and collision culture at the time of the Tiger.

Moreover, the hotel by the fjord seems to have been the witness of many disasters since its opening: "1648 was a year shy of Cromwell's landing in Ireland, and already the inn at Killary fjord was in business – it would see out this disaster, too" (Barry 2012: 45). The excerpt clearly refers to Oliver Cromwell's arrival and subsequent conquest of Ireland. Cromwell forced the relocation of the Irish Catholics to the West of the country where the scarcity of fertile land tied the peasantry to a potato-based diet. The over reliance on the potato crop, and the indifference of the British colonial regime are at the basis of the massive disaster known as *An Gorta Mór*, the great Irish Famine[5],

[5] For a deeper understanding of the Irish Great Famine from a *longue durée* perspective, look at Kelleher (2022).

which over the years 1845-1851 saw the death of over one million people and the subsequent emigration of other two million (Ó Murchadha 2013: 179-180). The sentence, therefore, connects the flood to the history of Capitalocene, and with other localized apocalypses caused by it. Notwithstanding, not just the evident disaster they are finding themselves in – the flood – and its inherit link to the history of Capitalocene, the characters show a sort of quiet acceptance of their situations, and a lasting reliance on the logic of progress and modernity. In fact, instead of following what Latour calls facing the planet or, Gaia, and situating themselves in the present (2017: 219), the protagonist projects himself onto the future, "I know that they would come in sequence soon enough, their predestined rhythms would assert" (Barry 2012: 45), by leaving the past behind "the gloom of youth had at last lifted" (Barry 2012: 45). In this respect, similarly to how the inn at Killary kept on being in business despite the many disasters it witnessed, he finds solace in the solipsistic hope of a renewed literary career. Contextually, he completely ignores the planetary forces which are colliding and dismantling the logics and dynamics of modernity and progress.

In conclusion, in *The Fjord of Killary* the planetary breaks into the modern (or modernizing) world, while the characters not only show dramatic indifference and blindness in front of their present situation but also perpetuate in their progress-driven aspirations.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Notes from a Coma* and *The Fjord of Killary* prove to be two interesting case studies when it comes to analyzing the conjuncture between the global and the planetary in their specific Irish manifestation. In this respect, the first two parts of the essay not only gave an insight into the recent theoretical debate on the concepts of global and planetary, but also delineated some crucial historical coordinates. Both aspects proved to be insightful analytic tools for the reading of the texts.

In *Notes from a Coma* both JJ's brain and the fjord are reconfigured as sites of neoliberal frontier expansion. Whereas in Kevin Barry, the planetary irrupts into the lives of humans which are too rooted in their modern habits to try to cope with the local apocalypse they are experiencing.

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Finanziato dall'Unione europea
NextGenerationEU

Financed by the European Union - NextGenerationEU through the Italian Ministry of University and Research under PNRR - Mission 4 Component 2, Investment 1.1.