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## A Slow Unfolding “Fault Sequence”: Risk and Responsibility in Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children*

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**Abstract:** British playwright Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children* (2016) tackles the imaginative challenge of depicting environmental crisis, in particular the risks of nuclear destruction and climate change. With questions of intra- and intergenerational justice being at the heart of the dramatic text, this article draws on conceptions and insights from cultural risk theory to argue that human risk behaviour and decision-making is the play’s main focus and determines characterisation as well as structure. Interrogating the tension between aesthetic form and content, it shows how *The Children* naturalizes the (post-)apocalyptic condition and strives for a balance of scales with regard to collective and personal crisis. Characteristic of the rapidly growing corpus of contemporary “cli-fi” drama, and in accordance with many of the strategies proclaimed by climate communication theory, the play stages the catastrophic implications of environmental destruction predominantly as collective risk management and in a predominantly realist manner, discarding formal experimentation as well as futurist setting. Yet this article argues that it remains ambiguous what kind of risk management is proposed and whether we should read it as a call for action or as an imaginative means of accepting finitude.

**Keywords:** climate change, contemporary drama, crisis, finitude, intergenerational conflict, Lucy Kirkwood, responsibility, risk theory, post-apocalypse, *The Children*

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## Introduction

Premiered at the Royal Court in London in 2016, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* has won high critical acclaim in Europe and North America.<sup>1</sup> This is due, on the one hand, to the play's timely topic: environmental crisis, specifically the risks of nuclear destruction and anthropogenic climate change. With regard to aesthetics, on the other hand, it is a fairly conventional, realist domestic drama, fusing dark humour, suspense, and eeriness in equal – and successfully tried and tested – dramatic measures. It is a one-act play, covering a time span of two hours and consisting mainly of dialogue. The action takes place in a contained, shoe-box-type set – one room in a small cottage. Invoking the structural formula of “love triangles” and “unexpected guest plays,” such as Harold Pinter's *Old Times* (1971; cf. Kalb), it deals with the lives of three retired nuclear engineers in their 60s: the married couple Hazel and Robin, living in a British seaside cottage, who receive an unexpected visit from their former colleague Rose, whom they have not seen in nearly 40 years.

Kirkwood, when asked in an interview to explain her choice for the play's title, says: “[t]he idea you can do nothing because *the disaster is already too large* is an infantilizing one [. . .], and the play is about three people growing up into active agents” (qtd. in Sommer; emphasis added). Considering the characters' advanced age, questions about the human ability of “mature” decision-making and responsibility are raised from the onset. Meanwhile, children are absent from the stage. Rose is single with no children, but Hazel and Robin have four. Lauren, the eldest, who only has a presence through phone calls in the play, functions as the stand-in for the next generation. Despite being 38 years old, she is apparently troubled and very immature, suffering continuously from “a sort of general terror” (Kirkwood 38).

In the following, I take Kirkwood's statement about agency and the scale of the disaster as a cue for focusing on risk and responsibility as central concepts, which negotiate crisis in the play. *The Children* juxtaposes different scales of crisis, including individual, collective, interpersonal, and intergenerational manifestations, as well as different temporalities, that is, an enduring crisis with lasting effects, following from an accidental “fault sequence,” and including an

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<sup>1</sup> In 2018, following its successful run on Broadway, *The Children* was nominated for two Tony Awards, including Best Play and Best Performance by an Actress in a Featured Role in a Play for Deborah Findlay, who was also part of the original London cast. In the same year, the Australian co-production (Melbourne Theatre Company and Sydney Theatre Company) won the Helpmann Award for Best Play. Productions of the play also ran in Canada (Canadian Stage Theater Toronto, 2017) and Germany (English Theatre Frankfurt, 2019).

urgent new tipping point which calls for risk/crisis management. In the first part, the analysis will engage with the close connection between characterisation and multi-levelled negotiations of risk in the play, drawing in particular on cultural risk theory and studies on the relation between risk and fictional narratives. The second part addresses the question of genre and of how *The Children*, due to the play's surprise ending, can be read as a response to environmental crisis with regard to current discourse on climate change or, rather, climate emergency communication.

## Risk and Crisis in *The Children*

The play's plot-driving risk scenario and calamity, which make it a post-apocalyptic, eco-risk drama, is modelled on the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan in 2011, where a post-earthquake tsunami destroyed the cooling equipment stored in the basement. In *The Children*, the nuclear power plant is situated on the east coast of Britain and was flooded by a tidal wave 38 years earlier, causing radiation exposure. According to Kirkwood, her inspiration came from reading an article about a Japanese task force of retired volunteers, the so-called Skilled Veteran Corps, that went back to help manage the nuclear meltdown after Fukushima, thus taking a high risk of exposure to potentially fatal radiation. While the playwright utilizes the coastline nuclear power station as a metaphor for wider debates about rights and wrongs, expectations and responsibilities in the face of environmental disaster, and for highlighting the issue of intergenerational justice, she emphasises: "I have no desire to make lecturing theatre" (qtd. in Shechet Epstein). One might, of course, consider the telling names of the three characters (Hazel, Robin, Rose), which all reference (quintessentially British) nature, and their morally charged debates as counter-evidence for the playwright's claim; yet Kirkwood's play differs markedly from those contemporary science plays, and in particular climate science plays, that attempt to explain and negotiate scientific "facts" for a lay audience.

The play's main subject is "self-sacrifice for the sake of others," which one reviewer in this specific context termed "eco-altruism" (Kalb). It raises questions of entitlement and desire (of things we might take for granted but which are not guaranteed, such as youth, health, resources, and inhabitable environments), and suggests the necessity of accepting finitude, that is, death, and – perhaps even more radically – the obligation to make room for the next generation. In any case, as the play illustrates through its structural design and the annihilating final climax, it is too late for the current generation that has caused the damage; there is only regret and attempted compensation, but no full reparation. The negotiated

“fault sequence,” involving both the sudden destructive and unpredictable accident and the slow violence of its aftermath, thus literally refers to the particular scenario of building a nuclear plant near the sea and storing the cooling equipment in the basement. But it is also a metaphor for the destructive impact of the bundle of developments of modernity now commonly referred to as the Anthropocene, unfolding over time in sudden freak accidents as well as slowly building damage. I therefore agree with Jesse Green’s opinion that the play is really not about denuclearization, because “the ‘fault sequence’ [. . .] Kirkwood wants to explore is a great deal larger and, given human nature, more intractable.”

This exploration unfolds as follows: the titular children are the first topic of conversation, and Rose politely inquires: “[h]ow are the children?” (4). With the dialogue moving onto health issues and aging, the play proceeds, in fact, by uncovering and reactivating the hidden rivalry between the two women – for Rose once had an affair with Robin. The atmosphere turns increasingly aggressive, yet Rose’s reason for her visit remains unclear until very close to the end. From the beginning, however, there are unsettling signs: drinking water from the tap is not possible; Rose has a nosebleed; when Robin returns home and joins the two women, he brings in a children’s trike, but first needs to check it with a Geiger counter. The vague sense of a “precarious normality” (Billington) conveyed in the play is increased by the characters’ use of euphemisms for the accident and its lasting effects on the present situation. They only refer to “the disaster,” people being or not being “affected” (10), and “the exclusion zone” (11). However, when Hazel compares her visual recollection of the catastrophe to a household accident, she illustrates the struggle to verbally and imaginatively express a disaster of this scale: “the wave, only it didn’t look like a wave, it looked like the sea was boiling milk and it kept boiling and boiling” (11). The reader/spectator of the play then learns that Rose left the area immediately after the accident, while Hazel and Robin stayed close by, out of a sense of responsibility to the area and what happened there; at the same time, they decided to leave their old house behind:

ROSE: But it’s outside of the exclusion zone, isn’t it?

HAZEL: Yes but only just, and we didn’t feel like we could take the risk, I mean you can actually see it, the powerstation, from the house and the idea of it, I know that probably sounds, does that / sound? [. . .] And because the thought of leaving the area entirely felt somehow I don’t know it felt disloyal, to the land if that makes sense? (11–12)

The conversation introduces the very subjective sense of risk and safety displayed by the characters, which largely defies rational calculation; it is clearly framed by emotions and other social factors and values. Accordingly, Hazel feels reassured by “that little bit extra [. . .] [which] makes a world of difference to our peace of mind” (12), even though the dividing line between exclusion zone and ostensibly

safe territory is a relative and arbitrary one, albeit supposedly based on rational scientific risk calculations.

This is congruent with the cultural theory of risk, first developed by Mary Douglas, Aaron Wildavsky, Paul Slovic, and others (Loewenstein et al.), which is now commonly invoked in theorizations and framings of climate change as collective risk (Smith and Howe). As I have argued in detail elsewhere (*Risk and the English Novel*), cultural theories of risk – which also lend themselves to explain, from a literary and cultural studies perspective, the intrinsic link between fictional narratives and risk – emphasise the embeddedness of risk and fear in the sociocultural background and everyday life. Cultural patterns, such as traditions, beliefs, emotions, and trust, directly relate to risk perception and management, because they step in whenever knowledge is limited and influence human worldview, its attitude towards institutions (for example, the state), abstract systems (for instance, the sciences), or other people.<sup>2</sup> As such, cultural risk theory, stemming from the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, has forged a “countermove” (Luhmann 1) to the idea that people act rationally when faced with risk, or are able to calculate it objectively according to available statistical data (Hoydis, *Risk and the English Novel* 16–26).

The main points which need to be stressed with regard to risk and environmental crisis are the focus on human agency and the inherent imperative to “manage” it. Risk hinges on a secular worldview which perceives humans as being capable of and responsible for predicting probable events and of applying knowledge gained from the past to (rationally) influence choices, that is, decision-making in the present in order to control the future – or at least to hold onto the comforting illusion of such control. As such, risk perception needs to be distinguished from a more imminent, overwhelming sense of danger which leads to paralysis rather than agency. In addition, risk, having emerged as a governing principle in Western societies at the turn of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century and having been on the rise ever since, is inseparable from conceptualisations of the Anthropocene and its roots in capitalist expansion as well as civilizational and technological “progress.”

In *The Children*, there is an apparent shortage of resources: clean water, food, and electricity are precious commodities, as are other things one might consider essentials, such as flush toilets. Hazel does her best to play hostess despite everything; yet the situation brings to the fore the confrontation and the three characters’ argumentative disagreement over risk assessments and management on different levels. Some are humorous, for instance, the question regarding in which

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2 On the affective and cultural aspects of risk, see Dake, Lash, Rayner, and Tulloch.

bathroom it is safe to do a number two without causing flooding, others are more serious, such as where it is safe to go or what is safe to eat, what constitutes healthy nutrition in old age, what are suitable measures of cancer prevention or post-cancer living. Rose, currently in eight-months remission after breast cancer and a unilateral mastectomy, says:

ROSE: Personally I find salad deeply depressing.

HAZEL: Well you just become aware of the risks, don't you. Osteoporosis strokes diabetes – blood pressure, all the usual suspects –

ROSE: Cancer.

HAZEL: Well yes cancer naturally cancer! I do yoga you know. (14)

Obsessively health-conscious, Hazel propagates the obligation one has to fight against one's demise and death, insisting to Rose: “[p]eople of our age have to resist – you *have* to resist.” Rose replies: “[h]old back the tide” (15). Rose's allusion to the power of a destructive wave which cannot be stopped functions as commentary on Hazel's behaviour as being futile risk management but also foreshadows the play's ending. Robin similarly ridicules his wife for her quasi-religious belief in clean eating and exercise as a means to resist physical decay. He expresses this in a biting poem about extinction, one of the play's many instances of dark humour:

The earth may be irradiated  
 The seas may rise up and wash us away  
 The human race may eat itself  
 But may Hazel's sun always be saluted  
 And her dog always be downward! (43)

Meanwhile, and in stark opposition to his wife's way of tackling the risk of old age through discipline and through desperately seeking to maintain what one might call a relatively safe, middle-aged status quo, Robin visits a farm near their old house every day. He does so, allegedly, and as Hazel believes, to care for the cows left behind after the disaster – animals which have, against all odds, survived. However, among the dark revelations awaiting the spectator/reader is that the cows are, in fact, long dead, and Robin only returns there to dig graves for them, continually exposing himself to contamination – and that he too suffers from cancer. In this way, Kirkwood's play draws attention to anthropogenic climate change as a force which, as Una Chaudhuri puts it, “turns familiar sites into landscapes of risk and disaster, [and] also reminds us that we humans are one species among many [. . .], all equally contingent and threatened” (50). Though motivated by concern for the animals and the environment, Robin's way of defying death, while upholding a sense of normalcy, involves individual risk-taking as opposed

to Hazel’s extreme caution. An example is his explanation of his “game” of driving the tractor close to the edge of the cliff, which highlights that the crumbling coastline is coming a little closer every year:

ROBIN: I tell you, it’s a thrill.

HAZEL: It’s reckless is what it is.

ROBIN: [. . .] Our age, you have to show no fear to Death, it’s like bulls, you can’t run away or they’ll charge. You’ve got to keep grabbing him by the lapels, poking him in the eye and saying: not yet mate. [. . .] Else he’ll steal up behind you while you’re trying to get the lid off your Bingo pen and have you away. (26)

The different risk personalities and their inherent contradictions form the core of characterisation in the play. In the scene quoted above, Robin employs typical metaphors referencing risk-taking and games of chance, such as bull fighting and Bingo. But he also feels an obligation towards nonhuman Others (that is, the environment, the cows). Hazel, who is by contrast more cautious and risk-averse, also comes across as more self-centred. She defends her opinion that the unpredictable accident was not their fault and refuses to take responsibility for “clearing it up.” Her justification largely rests on this being a very unlikely, improbable (sequence of) event(s). Rose shares this perception of the improbability of the event, although, as is revealed later on, in her opinion this is no reason for exemption from responsibility:

HAZEL: We’d earned the right, on this one occasion, just to say: at our time of life, we simply cannot deal with this shit. [. . .]

ROSE: I still can’t believe it’s happened.

HAZEL: Yes well. It was a *one-in-ten-million-years fault sequence*. (21–22; emphasis added)

Noticeably, “this time of life” refers to the characters’ late twenties/early 30s, when the fault sequence happened. It is also important to consider that Hazel is the only character not yet destroyed by cancer and, thus, has more to lose than Rose and Robin with regard to acting in the present. Her stakes are higher when it comes to gambling with one’s physical integrity and projected longevity. Still, this sense of caution and entitlement is apparently deeply ingrained in her personality, for Rose remembers that Hazel, even when she was young, always used to wear sunscreen, even at night and in the middle of winter. Rose says: “[a]nd I wondered if maybe she was a bit mentally ill, but I did understand, in that moment, the fundamental difference between Hazel and me, and why you [Robin] might be more drawn to [. . .] the sort of woman who is cautious, and doesn’t make mistakes” (56). Their female rivalry is played out in terms of risk attitudes, which furthermore reads like a staging of the different opinions and behaviour patterns with regard to the climate crisis.

While there are no sceptics or deniers in the play (as one finds, for instance, in Richard Bean's *The Heretic*, 2011), Kirkwood's refusal to produce "lecture theatre" still translates into it being a moralizing satire. The recording of clashing risk perceptions and personalities offers a humorous meta-commentary on what this means for human behaviour and climate change, yet without placing the disagreement about climate science centre stage (this is a stronger focus, for instance, in Moira Buffini et al.'s *Greenland*, 2011). Comparable to the risk behaviour of the flawed "everyman" Michael Beard in Ian McEwan's canonical cli-fi novel *Solar* (2010; cf. Hoydis, *Risk and the English Novel 545–546*), Rose represents a similar sense of irresponsibility and inability to plan ahead and change her own actions, which she now, belatedly, regrets (a stage never reached by the protagonist in McEwan's novel):

ROSE: [. . .] I thought one day I'll be like Hazel. I won't smoke cigarettes and I'll wear sunscreen and plan the week's meals ahead and get a slow cooker and not just buy sandwiches from petrol stations and [. . .] I'll do exercise and have a really neat handbag [. . .] and most of all I'll know when I've had enough. But I never quite got there. And I think it's a bit late now. (73)

Through the character constellation, that is, the contrast between parents-of-four Hazel and Robin and the childless Rose, the play also tackles the question of what risk and responsibility mean with regard to global resources and the decision to have children.<sup>3</sup> It also illustrates the commonly invoked notion of balancing scales, which is, of course, doomed to fail when it comes to environmental justice:

ROSE: The resources are finite.

ROBIN: Well maybe people should be taught to use less of them then.

ROSE: Well maybe you shouldn't have had four children then. [. . .] it's fucking irresponsible. [. . .]

ROBIN: Because you don't have any. So if it makes you feel better, you could look at it like we just had your ration, and the balance books are still . . . (31–32)

The dialogue also reveals how, as Steve Rayner notes in his foreword to Mike Hulme's seminal study *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, climate change has become, and this is crucial, "the key narrative within which political issues

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<sup>3</sup> While the issue gains increasing media attention, for example, through the heavily contested proclamation of so-called birth strikes for climate, the decision to have children is frequently addressed in climate change plays, for example, in Mike Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London* (2010) and Ian Meadows's *Between Two Waves* (2012), but (to date) less commonly taken up in cli-fi novels or films. For a longer discussion, see Hoydis, "(In)Attention and Global Drama." (I thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for bringing Meadows's play to my attention.)



from the local to the global are framed," thus replacing "capital and social class as the organizing theme of political discourse in contemporary society" (xxiii). To give just one example for new us/them dichotomies formed along these lines:

ROSE: *You don't have a right to electricity.*

HAZEL: *What a thing to say.*

ROSE: *Half the developing world exists without it.*

HAZEL: *Well perhaps they should develop then, / (54; emphasis added)*

The (im)balance of power between rich and poor is at the heart of the debate about climate change, yet – at least up to about a decade ago – this issue has, according to Robert Butler, been comparatively rarely addressed explicitly in fiction dealing with environmental crisis. Butler suggests that this is due to the fact that "[t]he implications of climate change run up against the very powerful emotions that cluster around individualism, free markets, and rising personal consumption" (15); in other words, the capitalist-driven ideology and its inherent social Darwinism also have a strong hold on the fictional scientific imagination.<sup>4</sup> *The Children*, as needs acknowledging in this context, deals with risk and responsibility in a white, privileged middle-class setting, which inevitably determines what is perceived to be at stake. There is one brief reference to the global South when Hazel argues that as far as their precarious seaside location is concerned, "we're basically in the same boat as Bangladesh" (22). Yet the play's most important us/them binary refers to generational rather than economic difference.

This becomes clear when Rose finally announces why she has returned: "[t]o work at the power station" (47). She feels obliged to relieve the young generation of engineers, most of them in their 30s and with families, from the urgent task to manage the new leaks found in the plant – leaks which mean the imminent danger of contaminated water spilling out into the sea. Aiming to recruit a team of twenty people over the age of 65, set to start work the same night, Rose asks Hazel and Robin to join as the last two scientists, after out of a 100 people she has approached, only eighteen have agreed thus far: "[t]hese . . . *young people these children*," Rose says, "basically, actually with their whole lives ahead and it's not fair it's not right it seems wrong. Doesn't it? Because we built it, didn't we? We helped to, we're responsible, so I do, I feel the need to [. . .]" (48).

This is the turning point in the play when the true state of affairs, values, and self-interests are revealed. Rose's attitude, her felt duty, and the calculation that they will be dead anyway by the time this new radiation exposure will show fatal

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4 See Ghosh for the related argument that what needs literary recognition and thorough historical exploration are the relations between climate change and colonialism.

effects on them, clash directly with Hazel's repeated self-exculpations of already having done "my bit" (54). The underlying ethical question is about the hierarchy of values, of whether sacrifice and death for the greater good of the community should take priority over the (by comparison short-term) protection of one's own life. The crisis management and risk assessment are complicated by the openly displayed awareness of risk being manufactured, and as such hinging on political and personal agendas, emotions, and trust rather than on "real," objective probabilities. For example, it is now declared to be "safe" for the task force to go into the plant because, Rose explains, the radiation exposure limit has been raised from 100 to 250 millisieverts (47). This refers to the measure of the projected harmful biological impact of radiation on humans, plants, and animals over time, in other words the analysis of the risk of slow violence. Rob Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, [. . .] a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2). The effects of radiation poisoning qualify as invisible slow violence, because deaths from toxic aftermaths are typically only slowly staggering, as they are long in the making. The risk of radiation poisoning itself has not changed, but is now "played down," as is often the case in risk communication, for example, to push or disguise certain agendas.

The scene in which Rose tries to convince fellow scientists Hazel and Robin by saying, "I think if people knew you were there it would inspire confidence. [. . .] I think it would make them feel safe" (52) also illustrates the characters' awareness of a central insight of cultural risk research: trust in scientists is more important than deliberations about facts or probabilities, for debates about risk follow their own essentially cultural logic, possibly influenced but often largely untouched by statistics. Philip Smith and Nicolas Howe, for example, describe what they call "the social drama of climate change" and what they see as sharing central characteristics with risk perception, as "a story *about* trust" (46; cf. 23, 45).

Nearing its end, the play presents a sudden twist which leads to a questioning of the previously delineated motifs (that is, altruism, the cautionary principle, voluntary risk-taking) and returns the debate firmly to the personal level: Rose accuses Hazel of having used her first child deliberately as risk management in order to entrap Robin and stop him from leaving her for Rose. But she also confesses that, back then, she wished the child (Lauren) would die. This memory of her selfish interest makes her wonder if her current request is still influenced by wanting revenge: "I realize now, that part of my coming, [. . .] was to kill her, Hazel. [. . .] Where she'd understand, what it is. To die slowly" (57). Meanwhile, in the play's most ironic commentary on different scales of crisis and the lasting

affective impact of threats to immediate, personal desires which triumph over long-term communal ones, Robin’s true existential crisis and regret is revealed to consist not in concern for the environment or the loss of the cows, but in his unfulfilled sexual desire. Rose meets his confession with disbelief: “[o]h my God, you think that’s a crisis? You couldn’t get it up to shag the milkmaid, it’s hardly the endgame / of your life” (63).

However, eventually all three agree to go to the power station, though this reconciliation is not discussed any further. Waiting for the cab to take them there, the two women start to perform a yoga routine while Robin takes a call from Lauren; suddenly we hear:

[. . .] *the sound of a wave building.*  
*It grows and grows*  
*It crashes upon us.*  
*Silence.* (79)

Thus the end of the play and, possibly, the characters’ lives. Yet there is still the sound of church bells ringing in the distance, “[a]s if from under the water” (79). It affirms an uncanny sense of human agency – humanity’s footprint even palpable from underneath the destructive wave – or it ushers in its funeral.

So how do we read this ending? In terms of the characters’ joint risk management, it obviously fails, for it comes too late, or they are destroyed by an event that could not have been anticipated. Conversely, their choice to take action and responsibility, however small and however late, inspires hope. This is Ian Farnell’s reading of *The Children’s* ending, who argues that it is the characters’ “choice to act itself, [not its projected consequences . . .] that provides the prospect of salvation” (45). The act of choosing responsibility over dread and fear of the unknown is, for him, a sign of an “emergent utopia; these are small but important victories” (45). Though I do not fully agree with Farnell, the emphasis on the importance of scale, that is, the word *small*, is significant here. The focus on the hopeful albeit *small* call for action inherent in the play is very much in line with what has been postulated as being an effective narrative-aesthetic strategy of climate change communication through art and, as such, as a means of addressing a pertinent crisis. In accordance with cultural studies of climate change discourse (Butler et al.; Ereaut and Segnit; Smith, Tyszczyk, and Butler; Smith and Howe), Rose’s call in the play appears as an antidote to potentially paralysing doom and alarmism. Smith and Howe, for example, emphasise the need for a “stitching” together of doom and hope and a call for a “solidaristic emotional energy” (70); Ereaut and Segnit speak of the need for a “powerful myth for action” and “ordinary heroism” (26, 21); this is exactly what Rose seeks to achieve.

Similar to the approaches from the field of climate change communication studies, Chantal Bilodeau, arguing from the vantage point of an activist playwright, suggests that climate change fiction, in particular if resulting from collaborations between policy makers, artists, and scientists, can “model, on a small scale, the very behavior that is needed to address the same issues on a much larger scale” (65). Without going into too much detail about the widely proclaimed crisis of communication with regard to climate change, it is typically seen as a complex, multilevel crisis, which concerns in equal measure issues of temporality, values, imagination, and scale. As Jeanne Tiehen sums it up, it is thus “not simply a scientific crisis; it is also a pertinent crisis [. . .] for our culture that requires recognition and action” (cf. Chaudhuri 12). The challenge to translate comprehension, which is impaired by the complexity of the crisis, into action is omnipresent – the latter is further complicated by (lack of) motivation as well as by the key issues of debate surrounding perceived risk and responsibility.

Kirkwood’s play appears as an attempt to model this challenge within the settings of realist “kitchen sink” as well as post-/pre-disaster drama. It also illustrates how the current environmental crisis confronts us with moral questions without historical precedent, raising “[i]ssues of personal and collective responsibility, guilt, sacrifice and moral resignation” (Gottlieb 23). Slowly, one begins to hear more and more critical voices from literary scholars, such as Nassim Winnie Balestrini, who recognize this characteristic element and potential of contemporary cli-fi plays, arguing that many playwrights utilize and illustrate the same concerns and recommendations to awaken their audiences to activism as those that are voiced in climate communication manuals. One can only agree with Balestrini’s conclusion that it therefore “stands to reason that theater will become increasingly prominent in the realm of climate change communication” (259). There remains, however, the obvious danger of overemphasising an instrumental view of fiction and art that is hard to verify empirically, something that Balestrini is also conscious of.

Bearing this valid objection in mind, I therefore want to suggest another possible interpretation of *The Children* as a risk and eco-crisis play. Drawing on Pieter Vermeulen, who challenges the (ethical, political) function of (environmentally conscious) fiction in general, by turning it, to some extent at least, on its head, one might argue that one thing that fiction does, rather than inspire activism, is to register endings and risks of extinction. Similar to Roy Scranton’s provocative proposition that we have to “learn to die in the Anthropocene,” authors – perhaps against their best intentions – “make narrative available for coming to terms with finitude,” as Vermeulen claims (873). Extending Vermeulen’s argument from novels to drama, one can read *The Children* as “an affective, even therapeutic reckoning with species finitude” (877), especially our own. This suggests somewhat

darkly, however, that the acceptance of unmanageable risk and its consequences, even if not taking priority over small- or large-scale risk management, should at least be part of what a literary response to contemporary environmental crisis might entail.

## Conclusion

While one still finds criticism that theatre’s and drama studies’ responses to climate change and other environmental issues have been slow to develop, this has certainly changed in the last decade (Arons and May 1; Hudson 260–261; Johns-Putra). The crisis of the “belatedness” of drama to address the issue is surely past its tipping point, with the Climate Change Theater Action (CCTA)<sup>5</sup> initiative, having thus far commissioned 150 new short plays on the topic and starting to gain more and more attention across all five continents, just being one example. Though I prefer the descriptive term eco-risk drama, *The Children* is in many ways a typical cli-fi drama, at least according to how this relatively new genre has been theorized thus far: it is set in the aftermath of a disastrous event and explores psychological implications and anxieties of climate change, it has a strong focus on the theme of family, parenthood, intergenerational justice, and reproduction, and it also parallels decay on the planetary and personal level.<sup>6</sup>

The play is small in scale, but raises large issues, asking what price we will pay in the future for the past and the present. It manages to illustrate environmental destruction not as a commonly known disaster-movie scenario (Marvel), but, literally, as a “kitchen sink” drama – or, considering the ending, juxtaposing the two modes. In my opinion, it therefore successfully tackles the challenge that Ghosh raised with regard to prose fiction rather than drama, which is to imagine the catastrophic implications of climate change in a realist manner and to discard futuristic settings. *The Children* shows traces of influence from Caryl Churchill’s dystopian, post-apocalyptic plays, interweaving banality and atrocity. “With its realistic rooting in domestic life after a disaster” (De Ambrogio; cf. Billington) and its plot full of dark humour, it follows the structure of Pinteresque “unexpected guest plays,” arguably misleading the reader/spectator as to Rose’s reason for her visit for most of the play (Green; Kalb). It also points towards a shift in the tradition of British science plays, which often feature godlike scientist characters, whose egoistic hubris and the potential consequences of attaining and advancing

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5 For details, see the project website <<http://www.climatechangetheatreaction.com/>>.

6 See, for example, Hudson (260), Johns-Putra, Shepherd-Barr (286), and Smith (77).

scientific knowledge are critically assessed (Halpin 2, 7); contemporary climate change drama deals with a much wider scope and the much broader, complex fault lines in/of the Anthropocene. As Kirkwood's play does, these new science plays criticize collective scientific hubris and consequences of actions in addition to individual ones.

*The Children* stages the risks of slow violence as an ongoing crisis on various levels. Cancer, which all characters fear or suffer from, is a direct consequence of the contamination in the aftermath of a nuclear disaster, but it is also a metaphor for the slow violence that is presented by climate change itself (Chaudhuri and Enelow 24). On both scales, the individual (body) and the planetary, it equals a slow, yet ultimately deadly erosion, commonly without immediately catastrophic and visible signs, although it can also see violent, unpredictable flare-ups. Ultimately, whether one wants to see the depicted risk management of the environmental crisis as failure, suggesting acceptance of finitude, or as a call for action, Kirkwood's play signals the shift proclaimed throughout recent climate change communication theory, namely conceiving climate change primarily as a process of collective risk management (Smith 16; Garrard et al. 27–28) in the face of a multi-faceted crisis.

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