

Lungs: Absurd Eco-Drama and a Sustainable Consumption Narrative

Rachel Nisbet

Can drama advance a narrative of sustainable consumption? Duncan Macmillan's play *Lungs* uses literary devices (auto-fiction and ironic detachment) that invite audiences to identify with characters' vulnerability when enacting inter-generational care in a changing climate.

Drama is associated with social transformation. Twentieth-century theatre practitioners, including Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, have used this form to challenge audiences to recognize their capacity to effect societal change. The question of how drama might further a sustainable consumption narrative motivated the public event I organized at CERN in the frame of the SAGW *Consumption (ir)responsible* series.¹ It centered on a rehearsed reading of excerpts from Duncan Macmillan's play *Lungs* (2011), using Séverine Magois' French translation (2017). Macmillan's play dramatizes a young couple, W and M, grappling with the moral obligation to reject the high environmental cost of a throw-away culture. Their desire to enact an alternative narrative is driven by a wish to start a family without compromising the capacity of future generations to thrive in a changing climate. The following pages discuss this eco-drama as a case study to suggest why drama has a unique capacity to further a sustainable consumption narrative.

Eco-drama can empower communities by representing environmental consciousness.² One principle of the eco-dramaturgy proposed by May is to reduce waste created by theatrical productions.³ *Lungs* adopts this principle, stipulating that no set, props or mime be used, as its characters question a narrative where wellbeing is synonymous with a utilitarian, growth-focused economics. While minimalist, the play affords audiences pleasure through its rich poetic dialogue. It employs kinesthetic, verbal, and pre-verbal rhetoric to persuade audiences to recognize the sustaining value of intergenerational care.

1 "Séisme – Parlons climat, parlons arbres," presentation of excerpts from Duncan Macmillan's play *Lungs* (translated by Séverine Magois) followed by a public debate on (ir)responsible consumption (CERN, Globe of Science and Innovation, 12 May 2022).

2 May (2020), p. xv.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The CERN Globe, a building evoking planetary and pregnant forms, provided an apt forum to hear excerpts from Magois' French translation of *Lungs*, and a presentation of CERN's biodiversity plan for its 415 hectares of woodland and meadow.⁴ The event's mix of fictional and factual narratives echoed MacMillan's blending of scientific reportage and invention in *Lungs*. His play, then, conforms with Nielsen et al.'s definition of auto-fiction.⁵ These narratologists propose that auto-fiction is an important technique in texts using fictionality; namely, where communicators deploy invention to focus a particular audience on outcomes relevant to them.⁶ *Lungs* uses fictionality and auto-fiction to invite a reevaluation of a narrative where societal wellbeing is associated with profit-driven, linear economics. Part one of this essay defines *Lungs* as an absurd eco-drama that demonstrates the limitations of verbal rhetoric in challenging this narrative. Part two focuses on *Lungs*' combined use of kinesthetic, verbal, and preverbal rhetoric to evince acts of intergenerational care that make an alternative, circular narrative of growth, death, and renewal bearable. Part three sketches the reception of Macmillan's play at CERN.

Absurd eco-drama

Lungs is an absurd eco-drama. Marin Esslin uses the term absurd to define a theatre genre dramatizing the irrationality of the human condition.⁷ I propose absurd eco-dramas, like *Lungs*, show an aspect of this irrationality; namely, the conviction that a desired harmony might be restored via an ideal, earth stewardship. Its characters struggle to invent a narrative where they remediate a distempered Earth-system for future generations' wellbeing. A humble acceptance of their vulnerability, and limited capacity to offer care on intergenerational timescales is represented in this process. Accordingly, the play partly supports Joseph Meeker's definition of literary ecology as using comedy to foreground self-limitation and represent humility as a problem-solving strategy.⁸ His definition deserves revisiting, however, to consider *Lungs*' use of ironic detachment techniques to represent the great emotional labor involved in accepting self-limitation and vulnerability in acts of care. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, in

4 I am grateful to the CERN Public Events Committee, Loraine Massarotti and the Globe team; to Matthieu Fontaine, head of CERN's Green Spaces unit; and to Maya Bringhen, Ulysse Goudal and Dorian Giauque of the Ecole Serge Martin, Geneva, for their expertise in aiding me to produce the rehearsed reading of *Séisme* and the debate at CERN.

5 Nielsen et al. (2015), pp. 102–105.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Esslin (1961).

8 Meeker (1997).

her contribution to this volume, discusses the use of ironic estrangement in novels. I use the term ironic detachment to delineate *Lungs'* representation of an irrational desire to invent a narrative of invulnerability in the face of climate change in its absurd eco-drama. Any sustainable consumption narrative will navigate this all too human tendency of denial.

The play foregrounds narrative as a necessary yet imperfect apparatus for creating an action plan focused on caring for future generations in a changing climate. As a contemporary young couple contemplates this task, *Lungs'* single act privileges extended confessional monologues. This narrative form is characteristic of much contemporary play writing.⁹ It suggests a live writing composition method, where emotionally intimate discourse is generated by recording embodied experiences, in situ; for instance, a playwright might note down dialogue, images, or text encountered that is pertinent to the topic of nurturing a family. Convincing dialogue that seemingly represents the characters' lived experience augments *Lungs'* auto-fictional quality, by incorporating multiple, contemporary cultural references. However, it also implies that a sustainable consumption narrative is a fictionality that involves a transcalar absurd. Imagining how to care for a future child involves blending past and present experience in an invented, decadal-scale narrative. Autobiographical experience becomes condensed to a high-speed skit of birth, growth, and death in such narratives of socio-environmental transformation. Moreover, vulnerability and intergenerational care become rationalized ideas, rather than felt experiences. Consequently, audiences are liable to become alienated from desires that motivate acts of care.

Magois' French translation of *Lungs* as *Séisme* (earthquake) implies that concerns about vulnerability motivate adaptative behaviors. The noun evokes being shaken or re-shaped, as if W and M are part of a planetary body, perturbed as human activities change climate system dynamics. While seismographs register plate tectonic motion, narrative can plot shifting emotions in response to the Great Acceleration of natural resource consumption. *Lungs'* dramatic monologues use verbal and preverbal rhetoric to this end, as Magois observes. In corresponding with her, I learned how listening to the characters' speech and transposing its rhythms and music define her practice as a translator.¹⁰ Stutters and pauses of stupefaction are among the preverbal expressions she renders in the *Séisme* script. Representing uncertainty through the materiality of language, these vocalizations imply a complex relationship between vulnerability and

9 Petitjean (2019).

10 Magois has translated scripts by playwrights including Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane, Harold Pinter, Terrance Rattigan and Amir Nizar Zuabi.

practical acts of care, which is occluded in a societal narrative that equates well-being with a utilitarian, throwaway culture in which possessions are a palliative. In giving pause, this preverbal rhetoric contributes to *Lungs*' eco-dramatic absurd.

***Lungs*' auto-fiction**

Lungs' auto-fiction situates its characters in a capitalist society. Its opening scene represents their IKEA shopping experience. Macmillan's target audience, urban theatergoers, will be familiar with this trip. In this setting, W cuts into M's monologue about having a baby. She uses repetition and negation to challenge M's opinion "in Ikea." Place deixis situates the characters within this bastion of liberal capitalism. Subsequently, it locates them in a car, then a bar, environments associated with a linear, consume-and-discard, economic model. Ironically, in these venues, W and M reject consumption as a wellbeing indicator. They invent an alternative scenario that associates wellbeing with intergenerational care that transcends cycles of growth, quiescence, death, mourning, and renewal. However, enacting a narrative of sustaining care exacerbates their vulnerabilities in the short term. It potentially jeopardizes W's growth as a career academic, "my PhD my prospects". Physiological limitations to growth must also be reckoned with, for instance, any children born to W and M will inherit their parents' genes, and perceived failings.

Navigating trade-offs between vulnerability and consumption, *Lungs*, characters display an ironic detachment using kinesthetic rhetoric. Guillemette Bolens shows that written narrative can represent sensorimotoricity, so audiences feel the characters' bodily experiences. Her findings draw on neuroscience research, demonstrating that the brain uses closely related neural networks to execute, imagine, and perceive physical actions.¹¹ *Lungs*' dialogue exploits this neurological cross-mapping. For instance, we learn that W was obliged to listen to M's future family fantasy, while sweating, "pushing a trolley and carrying a lamp" through IKEA. Thus, we feel why W is not receptive to a baby plan. This example uses ironic detachment to a humorous effect. Kinesthetic rhetoric can also foreground the fictionality of an intergenerational care narrative using black humor. Noses might wrinkle, knowing that W speaks stinking "of fags," as she aspires to be an eco-mama. Yet her character is nuanced. Bawdy slapstick shows her refusing to idealize motherhood. She associates childbirth with the absurd trope

11 Bolens (2021).

of pushing out the Eiffel Tower, the mass of the architectural structure (10,000 tons) that is reported to correspond to the “carbon footprint” of a child. The idea of birthing this pointed, metallic form suggests that a sustainable consumption narrative necessarily draws on a long-standing, dark comedy of survival, in which care has non-negligible personal cost. Kinesthetic rhetoric enables audiences to identify with the imperfect nature of care and repressed fears regarding our vulnerability in a changing climate.

The absurdity of an ideal sustainable consumption narrative, focused on restoring a lost harmony, is represented in *Lungs*' closing two minutes. The pace of life accelerates in this section of the play. Dialogue shows a desired child being born, attending school, leaving home, and checking his mother, W, into a retirement home. She subsequently mourns the disappearance of trees planted by M to mitigate a warming climate, at his graveside. Then, the play ends. This speeding up of the characters' narratives establishes an absurd, yet elegiac tone, acknowledging the imperfect nature of care.

This is evinced early in *Lungs* when W performs a four-minute monologue on motherhood. It is an auto-fiction, referencing popular children's books, “Beatrix Potter or Dr Seuss,” that she imagines reading to a future offspring (*Lungs*, p. 19). While reading together evokes intimacy and connection, W's preverbal rhetoric implies this invented narrative unnerves her. The stutter, “a a a a a,” foregrounds her difficulty in constructing a proleptic narrative that draws on autobiographical childhood experiences to create an ideal eco-mama persona for herself. The pre-linguistic expression is characteristic of an ecologically aware character's discourse in Caryl Churchill's *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*. In both plays, a stutter interrupts verbal rhetoric, leaving a gap in which audience members might register how these characters eco-narratives resonate.

***Lungs*' reception**

To assess the reception of *Lungs* at the CERN event in May 2022, the audience was invited to respond to a series of questions, posed using Mentimeter polling software, accessible from smartphones via a web link. Anonymous feedback gave the audience a second way to respond to *Lungs*, in addition to the public debate. Within audience studies, Caroline Heim proposes that theatergoers are performers and co-creators. Her audience-maker model is useful to consider whether *Lungs*' questioning of an irresponsible consumption narrative invites audience members to imagine alternative courses of action as potential

co-creators of sustainable consumption. The answers of thirty-six participants to an initial question, asking them to express their responses to the play in one word, are shown in the figure below:



Mentimeter poll responses at the public event "Séisme - Parlons climat, parlons arbres" (CERN, 12.05.2022; translated from French by R. Nisbet).

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They demonstrate strong affective responses, and critical reflection, in response to *Lungs*. The play's use of fictionality and auto-fiction leads audience members to identify with its characters, associating their vulnerability in performances of intergenerational care with the challenge of mitigating accelerated climate change through sustainable consumption habits. In a second poll, 36 respondents strongly identified with the characters (3,7/5); could imagine where these characters were physically, putting themselves in their place (4/5); and, agreed that climate change should be approached as an intergenerational issue (4,5/5). These audience responses indicate that eco-dramatic absurd techniques, as exemplified in *Lungs*, can create strong audience identification with a sustainable consumption narrative.

The *Lungs* case study shows that combining kinesthetic and verbal rhetoric can complicate ideals of harmonious earth stewardship, by staging flawed acts of care in its eco-dramatic absurd. Findings from textual close-reading and audience research conducted in this study suggest that compelling sustainable consumption narratives will represent feelings of vulnerability and humility as drivers of transformative action.

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Zusammenfassung

Kann Theater ein Narrativ über nachhaltigen Konsum fördern? Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie Duncan Macmillans Theaterstück «Lungs» Autofiktion und ironische Distanzierung zu diesem Zweck einsetzt. Es werden glaubwürdige Charaktere dargestellt, die sich mit der Notwendigkeit einer generationenübergreifenden Fürsorge in einem sich verändernden Klima auseinandersetzen. Die Verletzlichkeit, die mit der Akzeptanz der Selbstbeschränkung einhergeht, ist Teil dieses Prozesses. Beeindruckende und überzeugende Erzählungen über nachhaltigen Konsum, so die Schlussfolgerung der Autorin, laden das Publikum dazu ein, diese Charaktereigenschaft anzuerkennen.

Résumé

Le théâtre peut-il favoriser un narratif sur la consommation durable ? Cet article examine la manière dont la pièce de théâtre *Lungs* de Duncan Macmillan fait usage à cette fin de procédés tels que l'autofiction et le détachement ironique. Elle met en scène des personnages convaincants, aux prises avec la nécessité de promulguer des soins intergénérationnels dans un climat en mutation. La vulnérabilité, associée à l'acceptation de l'auto-limitation, fait partie de ce processus. L'auteure suggère que des narratifs convaincants sur la consommation durable peuvent inviter le public à reconnaître ce trait de caractère.