

# Capitalist Realism is Dead. Long Live Utopian Realism!

A Sociological Exegesis of Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*  
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# Capitalist realism is dead. Long live utopian realism! A sociological exegesis of Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

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## Abstract

Can utopian realism constitute an antidote to today's 'pervasive atmosphere of capitalist realism', as defined by the late critical theorist Mark Fisher? Through this article, a collaboration between a sociologist and a literary scholar, we argue that the answer to this question is a resounding yes. To substantiate our thesis, we conduct a 'sociological exegesis' of the best-selling science fiction book *The Ministry for the Future* written by the prolific US author Kim Stanley Robinson. The book, set in a quasi-present future, describes a multiplicity of successful transformative strategies implemented to address the ongoing climate crisis and, as the title of the novel suggests, preserve the future of human and non-human life on planet Earth. While still a fictional recount, we claim that the novel possesses a sociological quality since it showcases a unique approach to societal change that we label 'utopian realism'. This approach combines top-down strategies with grassroots organising, technological solutions with back-to-nature projects, and ecomodernism with eco-spiritualism. We analyse the novel through the lens of contemporary sociological debates on the transformative power of utopianism as found in many science fiction books, movies and TV series. We are especially inspired by the work of Ruth Levitas, Mathias Thaler, McKenzie Wark, Lisa Garforth and Erik Olin Wright. Our conclusion is that *The Ministry for the Future* represents an attempt to move beyond the dystopian pervasiveness of capitalist realism and thus constitutes a much needed, albeit far from unproblematic, contribution to envisioning just and sustainable alternative futures.

## Keywords

capitalist realism, climate change, future, Kim Stanley Robinson, Ruth Levitas, *The Ministry for the Future*, utopia, utopian realism

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## Introduction: Can utopian realism constitute an antidote to capitalist realism?

‘Our present reality’, writes historian Aaron Benanav (2020) in *Automation and the Future of Work*, ‘is better described by near-future science fiction dystopias than by standard economic analysis; ours is a hot planet, with micro-drones flying over the heads of street hawkers and rickshaw pullers, where the rich live in guarded climate-controlled communities while the rest of us while away our time in dead-end jobs’ (pp. 12–13). To this scenario, we could have added, at the height of the pandemic: masks everywhere, hand sanitisers, lockdown. We may also bring the reader’s attention to the summers of the last couple of years, marked by record-high scorching temperatures. It seems unreal but it is not. It seems as if dystopia has become part of our political present, but it is worse than that: dystopia *is* our political present. Just as the ongoing ecological collapse is not something that is looming in the future; it is now.

The argument of this article is that – while dystopias (whether sociological, literary, political or economic) might caution us that things cannot go on like this any further and fuel our willingness to react to the status quo (Thaler, 2019, 2022, p. 42) – it is utopias that we need today. A wide range of contemporary utopian thinkers and theorists already insist and agree on ‘the vital . . . function utopia still has to play today’ (Jameson, 2005, p. 21). This contribution endeavours to draw attention to and discuss the sociological function of a specific type of utopianism: *utopian realism*. As a matter of fact, if according to Mark Fisher (2009) capitalist realism is a ‘pervasive atmosphere . . . a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action that is based on the naturalisation of a series of political and ideological determinations’ (pp. 16–18), the only way to de-naturalise it is to unveil the fact that opposing alternative ontologies can exist. And these can be as real, if not more real, than the pervasive atmosphere of capitalist realism. Throughout this article we ponder a series of interconnected questions. What if utopia is not a possibility belonging to the past, but an ecological and existential necessity in the present? What if utopia is not doomed to fail, but the remedy to doom? And what if – even when utopia turns out to be unsatisfactory, biased, incomplete and paradoxical – its failure could still teach useful lessons (Thaler, 2019, 2022)? We contend that such an enquiry is inherently sociological.

In his 1906 essay ‘The so-called science of sociology’ prepared for the annual Meeting of the Sociological Society and published in *The Sociological Review*, Herbert George Wells claims that ‘the creation of utopias . . . is the proper and distinctive method of sociology’ (p. 367). According to Wells, while analysing and dissecting the past and present of human civilisation, sociologists cannot help but envision how an ideal, future society *ought* to be. More than a century later, in the midst of a global ‘polycrisis’ (Lawrence et al., 2023), debates on the role of utopianism in and for sociology are thriving. Science and speculative fiction – the outlets par excellence for accessing and envisioning utopian imaginaries – can thus be considered as essential elements of a *sociological toolbox* that can be referenced to observe, interpret and challenge the social world in which we live (Hirshman et al., 2018, pp. 13–14). Along these lines, Brian Stableford (1987), author of *The Sociology of Science Fiction*, argues that sci-fi

literature performs a crucial communicative ‘directive function’ by conveying information with the implicit purpose of affecting, directing and questioning our worldviews.

The empirical material referenced in this article is Kim Stanley Robinson’s (2020) most recent best-selling novel, *The Ministry for the Future*. As we will describe throughout our ‘sociological exegesis’, the novel is not the stereotypical sci-fi story describing an elusive utopian future. It is a *utopian realist* novel in which the author portrays a quasi-present future characterised by a messy variety of transformative agents and strategies that somehow succeed in circumventing the unfolding climate apocalypse. The idea that utopia could and *should* be realistic might seem a contradiction in terms, but as Robinson (2018) writes, ‘The situation is bad, yes, okay, enough of that; we know that already. Dystopia has done its job, it’s old news now, perhaps it’s self-indulgence to stay stuck in that place anymore. Next thought: utopia. Realistic or not, and perhaps especially if not. Besides, it is realistic: things could be better.’

This resonates with Young’s (2011) definition of utopian realism as a ‘political framework that extends what are generally perceived to be the practical limits of politics but does so in a manner that is compatible with our existing political and social condition’ (p. 930). In the following sections, we draw insights from the scholarly contributions of prominent sociologists and social theorists who, in recent years and in their respective ways, have contributed to enlivening the debate regarding the role of utopianism for envisioning more just and desirable societies. By doing so, we argue that utopian realism is a key concept for contemporary social sciences, and more specifically, for contemporary sociology. The overarching question guiding this article is:

Can utopian realism, as deployed by Kim Stanley Robinson in the novel *The Ministry for the Future*, constitute an antidote to today’s ‘pervasive atmosphere’ of capitalist realism?

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of the evolution of the concept of utopia from Thomas More’s writings (More, 1516/2016) to its most contemporary uses in the social sciences and humanities, with a specific focus on sociology. We will also introduce the definition of utopian realism, which is pivotal for our analysis and discussion of *The Ministry for the Future*. The third section describes the novel’s plot and its main characters, while the fourth highlights the multiplicity of transformative strategies at play in the novel. We analyse these strategies in light of the above-mentioned literature to highlight Robinson’s distinctive use of utopian realism. The fifth section zooms in on the stylistic and narrative techniques deployed to push the boundaries of a predominantly anthropocentric storyline. Finally, the conclusion returns to the research question to reflect on the potential of utopian realism as a counterbalance to the pervasiveness of capitalist realism.

A final but necessary remark about this article: just as this situation, however urgent, requires a great deal of criticism and self-criticism, it also demands a high degree of interdisciplinarity. Written collaboratively by two researchers – one who is trained as a

sociologist and the other as a literary scholar – this article intervenes by drawing from various, partially overlapping fields of research: sociology, utopian studies, literary and cultural studies, science fiction studies and environmental humanities. As such, our article is an attempt to bridge the social sciences and the humanities by exploring *The Ministry for the Future* as a kind of laboratory in which experiments with speculative, imaginary and, indeed, sociological utopian alternatives take place.

## Utopian realism: A realism of the possible

Since H. G. Wells' inaugural speech in 1906, and for much of the first half of the twentieth century, sociological investigations have predominantly focused on developing causal explanations of the social world, while advocates of utopia, like Ernst Bloch (1986/1995), remained marginal figures within the discipline (Levitas, 2010a). It was only after the atrocities of the Second World War and the political, social and cultural mobilisations of the late 1960s and 1970s that the emancipatory and imaginative potential of utopian thinking gained new prominence. The slogan 'power to the imagination' and the vast array of radical prefigurative practices of those years seeped through the walls of academic institutions and ended up influencing scholarly and cultural production. In 1974 Ursula Le Guin's influential novel *The Dispossessed* came out, portraying life on the anarcho-syndicalist moon Anarres. One year later, in 1975, Ernst Callenbach published his environmentally conscious sci-fi book *Ecotopia*, which was largely inspired by Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962). In the same year, the interdisciplinary Society for Utopian Studies was established to explore 'utopianism in all its forms with a particular emphasis on literary and experimental utopias' (Society for Utopian Studies, 2023). One member of this community, the sociologist Ruth Levitas (2000, 2007, 2008, 2010a, 1990/2010b, 2013a, 2013b, 2017) reintroduced to the fore Wells' and Bloch's theories by describing utopianism as a sociological *method* for the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society (IROS). For Levitas (2007), utopia is not a goal to be achieved per se. The goal is to shape, create and implement the envisioned utopian society in the *real* world (p. 300). IROS, then, is a process that comes necessarily before the creation of a 'good society', a holistic enterprise that requires the 'ability to think about a different way of organising the production of our livelihoods and our social relationships' (p. 302).

Fast forward to the 2007–2008 North Atlantic financial crisis, we witnessed a moment of societal reckoning with the unsustainability of the status quo that fostered another much-welcomed 'rapprochement' between the discipline of sociology and the field of utopian studies (Levitas, 2013a, p. 45). In this context, Levitas's contribution, together with the work of other scholars such as Lyman Tower Sargent (2010, 2022), Lucy Sargisson (1996, 2002, 2012) and Tom Moylan (1986/2014, 2000/2018, 2020), paved the way for the rehabilitation of debates concerning the usefulness of utopian thinking for envisioning desirable solutions for the most pressing societal issues. This reconciliation is perhaps epitomised by the intellectual shift of late sociologist Erik Olin Wright (2010) from anti-utopian Marxist class analysis to his Real Utopias project. Departing from the orthodox strands of Marxism that have traditionally rejected views and proposals for a utopian socialism à la Charles Fourier, Wright's book *Envisioning Real Utopias*

sets out to combine the analysis of a ‘radically different kind of institutions and social relations’ together with ‘more speculative . . . theoretical proposals that have not yet been implemented’ (p. 1). These *real* pragmatic utopias are inspired by pre-existing forms of prefigurative practices, such as the worker-owned cooperative model of Mondragón in the Basque region of Spain, open-source online repositories such as Wikipedia and unconditional basic income schemes (on prefigurative politics, see Monticelli, 2021, 2022; Raekstad & Gradin, 2020).

While *Envisioning Real Utopias* constitutes one of the most influential sociological contributions within this renewed debate, Levitas (2013a) aptly cautions that ‘different ways of thinking about utopia’ still remain (p. 42). On one hand, her IROS strives to reimagine society *holistically* to overcome the ‘parameters of the existing system of global capitalism’ (p. 46). The underlying question behind her utopias is, ‘What needs to change for this [utopia] to be possible?’ (p. 47). On the other hand, Wright’s (2010) real utopias must be implemented *within* the pre-existing capitalist system and the state–economy–civil society triad. In other words, Wright’s real utopias must not only be desirable, but must, most importantly, be ‘viable and achievable’ within (and despite) the constraints posed by the status quo (p. 20). Levitas and Wright’s conceptualisations of utopia and its functions thus differ slightly.

Levitas (2008) rejects the epistemological tension between pragmatism and utopia, condemning the thinkers who ‘co-opt the terminology of utopia to positions that are antagonistic to radical alterity’ (p. 45). Utopia primarily functions to educate desire – i.e. Bloch’s (1986/1995) ‘docta spes’ – while estranging and ‘defamiliarizing’ socio-economic arrangements, values and beliefs that are otherwise taken for granted and left unquestioned. In Levitas’s (2008) words, imagining alternatives is not unrealistic, ‘for the real is not limited to the actual’ (p. 57) and imagining these alternatives should be a process rather than the pursuit of a fixed blueprint (2000, p. 35). Moreover, in alignment with utopian thinkers such as Miguel Abensour (2000/2017), she claims that contemporary utopianism has evolved with respect to the nineteenth century to become more exploratory, pluralist and self-reflexive, arguing, ‘there is a process of self-interrogation within the [contemporary] utopian society so that its values and institutions are less unequivocally endorsed’ (Levitas, 2000, pp. 36–37).

Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno (Bloch, 1988), in an essay published posthumously, had already described this shift as ‘a transformation of the topos [of utopia], from space into time’ (p. 3). In fact, Thomas More’s (1516/2016) island of Utopia is described as an actual place, with its social world chronicled in detail and its borders demarcated spatially by the ocean. In contrast, contemporary utopias are not so thoroughly characterised, but are conceived as possibilities yet to be realised in a near or distant future. These changes in the conceptualisation of utopia translate into a fuzzier distinction between utopia and dystopia. Alternative societies in sci-fi books such as Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974/2015) and, as we shall see in the following sections, Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future*, appear ambiguous, problematic, conflicted and contested (Levitas, 2000); in other words, less unequivocally and indisputably utopian.

Reflections on the historical evolution of utopian thought and literature seem to have inspired recent debates on the climate crisis and the necessity to envision more sustainable futures. In her book, *Green Utopias: Environmental Hope Before and After Nature*,

sociologist Lisa Garforth (2018) suggests that the ‘revival of utopian thought’ and the emergence of environmental social movements in the 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of utopianism that she dubs ‘environmental utopianism’ (p. 13). Over the last 40 years – a time span marked by the increasingly catastrophic effects of human-driven activities on climate and the environment – changes in Western socio-economic, political and cultural landscapes have influenced imaginaries of what an ecological future should look like (Garforth, 2018, 2019). These imaginaries have been shaped by philosophical currents such as ‘deep ecology’ (Naess, 1973), books like Rachel Carson’s (1962) *Silent Spring* and sci-fi novels such as Ernst Callenbach’s (1975) *Ecotopia*, and even by official policy documents such as *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) and reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which were published for the first time in 1990.<sup>1</sup> What all of these imaginaries have in common is a more or less explicit proposition to ‘unsettle capitalist models of value and create alternative ways of understanding how we produce and consume nature’ (Garforth, 2018, p. 25).

Among the green utopias described by Garforth (2005, 2018, 2019) and Garforth and Iossifidis (2021), we find ecotopian literary fiction. Its most recent wave, which began in the early 2000s, is called Anthropocene science fiction – with Robinson as one of its most prominent representatives – and has the peculiar characteristic of ‘reworking dystopian narratives . . . to dwell in the parts of the climate projections that both science policy and sociology have avoided’ (Garforth, 2018, p. 27). In this genre, the environmental crisis becomes the focus of speculative science fictional recounts, where data-driven, technocratic and gradualist scenarios such as those portrayed in the IPCC reports are combined with more radical and uncanny trajectories of transformation (Garforth, 2019; Garforth & Iossifidis, 2021). This literary subgenre, in other words, offers the possibility of keeping an ‘oppositional space for open-ended estrangement and desire’ alive (Garforth, 2005, p. 418), and envisioning a variety of transformative strategies that are usually ignored by mainstream political and policymaking institutions. As we shall establish in our discussion of *The Ministry for the Future*, these strategies involve a multiplicity of bottom-up and self-organised groups, social movements and ‘diverse communities’ (Garforth, 2019, p. 254): for example the eco-terrorist group Children of Kali, which is a transnational network of ecological communities, various local regenerative initiatives and even a global movement advocating for the establishment of a new ecological religion (Robinson, 2020).

Another scholar who has contributed significantly to the debate on utopias and climate-changing/climate-changed futures is political theorist Mathias Thaler (2022), whose book *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-changed World* builds a comprehensive analytical framework for the study of utopianism in the Anthropocene. Referencing the late sci-fi author Octavia Butler (1998), Thaler distinguishes between estranging, galvanising and cautioning ‘modes of social dreaming’ (p. 38). Estranging narratives help us imagine far-fetched fantastic futures, *what-if* futures. In contrast, galvanising narratives allow the reader to envision *if-only* futures, which are usually ‘worldly utopias’ grounded in realistic and relatable ecological, socio-economic and political contexts. Robinson calls this narrative technique ‘proleptic realism’, defining it as ‘an attempt to model the near future, which looks only slightly different than the

current moment' (cited in Thaler, 2022, p. 38). *The Ministry for the Future* is indeed an example of proleptic realism, where the reader is constantly enthralled by the undergirding question: *if only* there were such an organisation – a UN agency aimed to preserve human and non-human life on the planet – would humanity be able to avoid mass extinction and climate catastrophe? Finally, we find *if-this-goes-on* narratives depicting futures in which the irresponsible behaviour of humans has not changed at all or changed too late. For instance, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) cautions the reader by portraying an ultra-conservative, religiously fanatic and totalitarian society, whereas her *MaddAddam* trilogy (2014) tells the story of a small group of humans who manage to survive a global pandemic and build a new life in community with other species.

According to Thaler (2002), all these narratives, regardless of whether they are estranging, galvanising or cautioning, are 'anti-perfectionist utopias' (p. 43); they are neither fully eutopian (portraying the *eu-topos*, i.e. the good place) nor fully dystopian (portraying the *dys-topos*, i.e. the bad place). Instead, they reflect a procedural, conflictual and open-ended appreciation of what utopia should help us grapple with today. We posit that an apt label for this type of contemporary utopianism is *utopian realism*. Utopian realism might sound like a contradiction in terms. Within the limits of this article, it is extremely difficult to clarify the relationship between realism, utopianism and science fiction. For our purposes, Fisher's (2009) work and his notion of capitalist realism – the widespread sense that capitalism is not only the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it (p. 5) – remain highly relevant because they are located at the intersection of politics and culture. We also follow thinkers like Anna Kornbluh (2020) and Stefania Barca (2020), who have adapted the idea of capitalist realism to the context of the climate crisis, leading to concepts such as climate realism (Kornbluh) and eco-capitalist realism (Barca), i.e. the widespread idea that the climate crisis is just another externality, an obstacle to the continuous development and growth of capitalism, to which there is no alternative. The genre of ecotopian fiction, and particularly Anthropocene science fiction, points out that there are indeed (or can be) alternatives to eco-capitalist realism, what Barca (2020) would call a 'counter-hegemonic narrative' to the dominant narrative of Western ecological modernisation and green capitalism. This is also what McKenzie Wark (2015) draws attention to in *Molecular Red*, which describes a speculative form of fiction that is located between capitalist realism and capitalist romance, and thus has not only to be regarded as an alternative form of utopianism, but also an *alternative form of realism*. Referring to Robinson's (2004, 2005, 2007) Mars trilogy, Wark (2015) writes:

Robinson offers a mode of writing that really does confront this era of metabolic rift with a renewal of utopian thought, in which strangely enough science fiction turns out to be a kind of realism of the possible. . . . What Robinson offers is something like a meta-utopia, a kind of writerly problem-solving practice for combining different visions of an endurable future. (p. 9)

While it is debatable whether Garforth's (2018) observation that 'very few studies . . . have focused exclusively on environmental utopian fiction' (p. 75) is true anymore, our focus is on Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* as an example of ecotopian fiction, in

the sense indicated previously. Our interest, in fact, lies in its simultaneous depiction of the world as it is *and* the world as it could be, i.e. in this science fiction novel as a utopian realist *alternative to eco-capitalist realism*. The multiplicity of micro- and macro-utopias that Robinson illustrates in the book is embedded within and constrained by capitalist structures, mechanisms and values. These utopias can, at times, contradict one another, or even move in ideologically opposing directions, mimicking the messiness of real life and the fluctuating trajectories of social change. Some of the initiatives described already exist in the real world, echoing Wright's (2010) real utopias, with geo-engineering; worker-owned cooperatives; permaculture; cryptocurrencies; and environmental, social and governance finance (see later section). Others have a more spiritual and mystical aspiration, i.e. the establishment of a new eco-spiritual religion at the end of the novel. The latter resonates with Levitas's (1990/2010b, 2013b) conditions for IROS and opens up our imaginations through a *what-if* type of innuendo: what if we radically changed our values, affects, emotions and beliefs?

Overall, *The Ministry for the Future* presents an assemblage of 'plausible alterities', a constant 'negotiation' between a variety of utopias rather than a 'synthesis' between them (Wark, 2014). As we will discuss in the following sections, this tension between future and present, between what is desirable and what is achievable, between the utopian and the real(istic) and between radical and reformist strategies is a key feature of Robinson's novel that makes it, in our view, worth analysing through the prism of the aforementioned scholarship. Before delving into the analysis though, it will be useful to share an overview of the novel's storyline.

### ***The Ministry for the Future*: Storyline and main characters**

*The Ministry for the Future* is structurally a polyvocal and polyfocal book, including multiple plots, locations, narrating voices, perspectives and continuous movement back and forth in the timeline, which mark a kaleidoscopic and estranging, almost 600-page tour de force. However, the choice of this novel as the focus for our article is not linked to the complexity of its storyline, rather to the unique kind of utopianism the author employs (Kornbluh, 2020). In contrast to most mainstream science and speculative fiction literature depicting distant futures, post-apocalyptic scenarios or 'catastrophe without event' (Horn, 2018), Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* portrays a *real* utopia as a response to a *real* catastrophic event. The author is known for frequently affirming that 'science fiction is the realism of our time' (Long Now Foundation, 2020). *The Ministry for the Future* also provides a description of a near future scenario that feels like a depiction of a possible alternative present: the transition from the Trembling Twenties – referencing the second decade of the twenty-first century, when the novel begins – and the following decades of transformation, when the Great Turn takes shape (Figure 1). In this sense, as Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013/2020) reminds us, a story must not only be regarded as 'an artefact from the past' but also (and perhaps above all) as 'instructions for the future' (p. 9). *The Ministry for the Future* is not (entirely) 'subsumed by, and subjected to, the speculative time of finance' (Shaviro, 2018); it does not partake in the all-too-familiar link between colonialism and capitalism or the equally well-known affective and ideological atmosphere of capitalist realism.

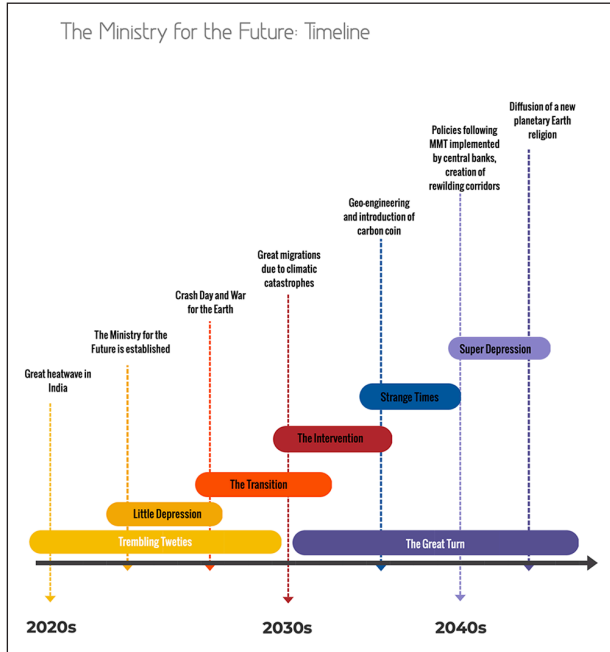


Figure 1. *The Ministry for the Future* timeline.

The title of the book refers to a subsidiary body of the United Nations created in 2024 (which was an almost-present future at the time of its publication) in Zurich, Switzerland with the specific purpose of fostering the implementation of the (too-often ignored) Paris Agreement<sup>2</sup> and preserving ‘all living creatures present and future who cannot speak for themselves, by promoting their legal standing and physical protection’ (Robinson, 2020, p. 26). Because of its distinctive mission, this UN agency is nicknamed ‘the ministry for the future’. The head of this special ministry is Mary Murphy, a woman of Irish descent, whose presence is one of the few narrative points of reference throughout the book, together with her chief of staff, Badim Bahadur, and the chief of the legal office, Tatiana Voznesenkaya. Albeit working within the same team, each of these characters presents a variety of perspectives on (and possibilities of) transformation. Mary represents discourses that are typical of a liberal social democrat who is aware of realpolitik’s shortcomings and paradoxes but is nonetheless ready to compromise. Often in disagreement with Mary, Badim brings to the fore a decolonial consciousness and a vision of social change that contemplates the deployment of violence and radical direct actions, if necessary. In contrast, Tatiana believes in the rule of law to protect the legal standing of future generations of human and non-human beings, claiming, ‘rule of law is all we’ve got’ (p. 36) during a conversation with Mary early on in the book.

The book opens with the description of a dramatic heatwave in the region of Uttar Pradesh, India. Millions are dead, and international aid is not fast or effective enough. Countries of the Global North blame the unsustainable development patterns of the

emerging economies of the Global South, while the wealthy countries of the Global North are (now) reducing carbon emissions and absorbing existing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere through innovative carbon capture technologies. After the heatwave, something begins to change in the Indian political landscape: a new political party, Avasthana (Sanskrit word for survival) wins the federal elections and takes power to end the 'long post-colonial subalternity' of India (Robinson, 2020, p. 26). The project for a New India translates into an effort to abolish the caste system, close coal plants, switch to wind and solar energy, develop a regenerative organic agricultural system, democratise decision-making processes at all levels of government and, ultimately, challenge the hypocrisy of Western countries. To prevent further deadly heatwaves, the new political coalition also deploys geo-engineering solutions, such as pumping aerosol gases in the air to deflect excess sunlight. Alongside this progressive and ecomodernist political turn, a radical and rebellious faction emerges, the eco-terrorist group Children of Kali. These changes in the geopolitical landscape, combined with India's newfound leading role in the fight against climate change, represent the juncture that kicks off the novel's plot.

Mary and her team decide to travel to India to learn from the regenerative revolution going on there and step up the role of the Ministry, which, thus far, has functioned as a marginal agency within the slow-moving bureaucratic machinery of the United Nations. The plot accelerates when Mary, who has been almost exclusively exposed to the comfortable and safe environment of the Zurich headquarters and the politeness of her collaborators, is kidnapped by Frank May, a former medical volunteer in India and now a traumatised survivor of the deadly heatwave. As Gerry Canavan (2020) describes in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, this moment 'explodes the narrative into an entirely new energy state'. Frank is an aspiring member of the Children of Kali and challenges Mary's neoliberal bureaucratic mindset, declaring, 'It's *not enough*. Your efforts aren't slowing the damage fast enough. They aren't creating fixes fast enough. You can see that because everyone can see it. Things don't change, we're still on track for a mass extinction event, we're in extinctions already. That's what I mean by not enough. So why don't you do something more?' (Robinson, 2020, p. 98). This encounter is significant because it represents the clash between two ways of understanding how political change is achieved: Mary, through traditional policy and law making, and Frank through mutual help, grassroots organising and direct action. The dialogue between Mary and Frank also embodies the clashing perspectives of two generations, with Frank screaming 'You are not doing enough!' resonating all too well with Greta Thunberg's 'How dare you?' speech at the UN Climate Summit in New York City in 2019.<sup>3</sup>

The following (many) chapters of the book present a crescendo of transformations: the multifaceted recounting of how humanity manages to survive the Trembling Twenties and transition to a new global order. While the activities of Mary and her team at the Ministry constitute the book's main narrative scaffolding (and a much-welcomed compass for the reader), what renders the book so noteworthy is the variety of transformative strategies to which the reader is exposed. Robinson does not deliver a unilateral and normative version of change, nor does the author depict an unrealistic distant future. Each agent of change, whether a single individual (Frank), a self-organised movement (the Children of Kali) or an institution (the US Federal Reserve), is lobbying for and acting according to a specific agenda. Sometimes in stark contrast, sometimes reinforcing

each other, these strategies are woven together through the novel to form a giant, colourful tapestry. While it is beyond the scope of this article to chronicle all of them, the next section presents the strategies that we deem most significant in relation to the scholarly literature on utopia described earlier.

## **A tapestry of strategies: ‘The best plan B will emerge from the multitudes’**

Robinson (2020) seems to be quite conscious that he’s advocating for a messy all-hands-on-deck strategy; one that will inevitably entail many failures, chaotic outcomes and unforeseen consequences. For example, in one of the many decontextualised pages within the novel, the vast array of solutions implemented is described as ‘success made of failures . . . a cobbling-together from less-than-satisfactory parts. A slurry, a bricolage. An unholy mess’ (p. 505). The description of these strategies constitutes, de facto, the novel’s narrative drive: transformations happen in different parts of the world, in different (and constantly shifting) historical moments – the Heatwave, Crash Day, the Little Depression, the Transition, the Intervention, the Strange Times and the Super Depression (Figure 1).

A great number of these strategies can be interpreted as a vivid depiction of how Wright’s (2010, 2019) overall strategy of the erosion of capitalism – combining ruptural, symbiotic and interstitial logics of transformation – could, not without any controversy, be implemented. Nowhere in the book can we find an example of a Bolshevik or French style of revolution to subvert the dominant socio-economic system using violence. Instead, Robinson presents examples of *micro-ruptures* such as the actions of the eco-terrorist group Children of Kali, which immediately bring to mind Andreas Malm’s (2021) *How to Blow up a Pipeline*. In his best-selling book, Malm emphasises the critical importance of strategically disrupting the infrastructure of fossil capital through industrial sabotage. The novel introduces an even more radical version of Malm’s strategy, Crash Day: ‘A day came that sixty passenger jets crashed in a matter of hours. All over the world, flights of all kinds, although when the analyses were done it became clear that a disproportionate number of these flights had been private or business jets’ (Robinson, 2020, p. 228). This event marks the beginning of what Robinson calls the War for the Earth. And indeed, the sequence of dramatic events the writer describes has all the characteristics of a war: flights and container ships attacked, fishing boats exploiting modern slaves in the Atlantic bombed and sunk, ‘the guilty’ ones – CEOs, billionaires and managers of big oil companies – kidnapped and assassinated by members of the Children of Kali.

In a 2022 talk at Stanford, Robinson expressed regret that he had not been able to engage more directly with *How to Blow up a Pipeline* (cf. Wray, 2022). In the book, which was turned into a feature film directed by Daniel Goldhaber in 2022, Malm (2021) insists that there is a difference between violence against property and violence against people (pp. 102–103). While Robinson’s novel does not fully explore this difference, it does examine what Malm calls the Lanchester’s paradox, i.e. that climate activists have not committed *more* acts of terrorism in response to the continued violence of the fossil fuel industry (Lanchester, 2007, quoted in Malm, 2021, pp. 11–12). In *The Ministry for the Future*, this is precisely what the Children of Kali do, based on a radicalised form of

Fanonian logic: ‘They killed us so we killed them’ (Robinson, 2020, p. 135). Violent micro-ruptures such as Crash Day constitute only a small aspect of the plot but are fundamental in triggering a chain reaction among other societal actors.

Indeed, Mary and her colleagues are either involved in or witness a vast assortment of what Wright (2010) would call ‘symbiotic transformations’ that stem from the acknowledgement that ‘forms of social empowerment are likely to be much more durable and to become more deeply institutionalised, and thus harder to reverse, when . . . they also serve some important interests of dominant groups, solve real problems faced by the system as a whole’ (p. 361). Robinson’s tapestry of transformative strategies includes, and significantly so, transnational economic and political elites, central banks and monetary institutions, which function as a reminder that we are still operating and embedded within the context of capitalist structures of power. The word money appears 88 times across the almost 600-page novel. An entire chapter is dedicated to explaining the key principles of modern monetary theory (MMT), which is a neo-Keynesian economic model applied to a global climate crisis scenario: ‘A move to a new political economy, rather than merely *adjusting* capitalism’ (emphasis added) (Robinson, 2020, p. 366). The sources of inspiration for this post-capitalist political economy are clear: ‘Mondragón, Kerala, MMT, blockchain, Denmark, Cuba, and so on: all the elements had been out there working all along’ (Robinson, 2020, p. 380). And the historical moment to implement and experiment with this range of Plan Bs is the financial crash of 2034, the year when citizens across the world get together and organise a coordinated financial default by refusing to pay their debts:

So now things have broken. We broke them; we broke them on purpose! Riot, occupation, non-compliance, general strike: breakdown. Now it’s time for Plan B. Time to act – as in, act of parliament. It will be legislation that does it in the end, creating a new legal regime that is fair, just, sustainable, and secure. . . . The best Plan B will emerge from the multitudes. (Robinson, 2020, p. 411)

Part of this grand plan for a new political economy entails the implementation of the carbon coin; an idea generated by Mary’s team and eventually backed by some of the world’s most powerful central banks: ‘A digital currency, disbursed on proof of carbon sequestration to provide carrot as well as stick, thus enticing loose global capital into virtuous actions on carbon burn reduction’ (Robinson, 2020, p. 172). And this is not too far-fetched. Michael Sheren, former advisor to the Bank of England, said during COP27 in Egypt, ‘Carbon is moving very quickly into a system where it’s going to be very close to a currency’.<sup>4</sup> In a subsequent chapter of the book, Robinson offers an entertaining example of how this carbon coin works in practice when a farmer’s wife recounts how they turned a ‘triangle of dirt hard as a marble floor’ to a fertile piece of land able to feed them and capture carbon. They did this by planting trees and perennials and avoiding tractors, pesticides and fertilisers. In other words, by allowing nature to go through its own healing processes (see this paper’s next section). When the district office team comes to evaluate their achievements, the couple is rewarded with 23 carbon coins, which seems to be very little, but corresponds to 70,000 in ‘their currency’ – which is unnamed in the chapter – representing ‘more than we spent per year on everything, by a long shot’ (Robinson, 2020, p. 401).

The ‘unholy mess’ (p. 505) of solutions Robinson proposes is so widely encompassing as to include a so-called ‘Red Plenty solution’, which is an artificial intelligence (AI) computer-assisted, hyper-efficient and centrally planned production of everything needed that is able to ‘work better than the market’ (Robinson, 2020, p. 172). And, echoing the arguments of many critics of surveillance and platform capitalism, such as Shoshanna Zuboff (2019), Cathy O’Neil (2016), Jaron Lanier (2014) and Christian Fuchs (2021), just to name a few, he presents an entire vision for a democratic, transparent and collectively owned Internet 3.0. He does so based on the ingenious ideas of Janus Athena, a gender-fluid, Mr. Robot-esque<sup>5</sup> collaborator at the Ministry who specialises in cyber security and AI. The big idea, this time, is called YourLock, which is ‘organised as a co-op owned by its users, after which you had secured your data in a quantum-encrypted cage and could use it as a negotiable asset in the global data economy, agreeing to sell your data or not to data-mining operations’ (Robinson, 2020, p. 282).

The experimentations throughout the book also involve the conservation and rewilding of natural habitats. One of these, the California Forward project, entails the creation of water commons, which, by deploying groundwater basins under the California Central Valley, are able to respond to fluctuations in water supply while establishing a series of protected habitat corridors (Robinson, 2020, p. 186). Through grassroots and bottom-up initiatives, organisations and movements around the globe promote rewilding and ecological projects to implement changes in the cracks of contemporary capitalism. Wright (2010, 2019) calls such organisations and movements ‘agents of interstitial transformation’. Chapter 85 (Robinson, 2020) is nothing less than a four-page, über-realistic list of grassroots organisations: permaculture groups, ecovillages, transition towns, reforestation and afforestation projects, participatory mapping groups and sustainable and regenerative agriculture cooperatives. The closing sentence of the chapter encapsulates the prefigurative nature of these initiatives: ‘We are already out there working hard, everywhere around this Earth. Healing the Earth is our sacred work, our duty to the seven generations’ (p. 425). We will delve into what Robinson means by the idea of healing the Earth in a later section.

The tapestry of actions to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change is not limited to bottom-up and grassroots initiatives. *The Ministry for the Future* also presents a series of top-down, ecomodernist solutions. The novel starts with the newly installed Indian government pumping special gases into the atmosphere to refract UV sun rays, and a special taskforce of top scientists and engineers financed by ‘a Russian billionaire from Silicon Valley’ experimenting with a massive pipeline project to pump water under the Antarctic ice sheet to prevent sea levels from rising. This reflects Robinson’s ‘peculiar version of the ecomodernist wager’ (Thaler, 2022, p. 177), a tendency that can already be found in some of his previous books, e.g. the *Science in the Capital* trilogy (Robinson 2004, 2005, 2007) and *Antarctica* (Robinson, 1999). This faith in science and technology is a defining feature of Robinson’s *if-only* type of utopianism, in which scientific discoveries, techno-fixes, bottom-up and top-down politics and spirituality all coexist and are all equally essential for transitioning to a ‘good Anthropocene’ (Thaler, 2022, pp. 216–221).

While this section alone cannot possibly do justice to the myriad strategies Robinson describes throughout the novel, we would like to close with what is probably the most

fascinating one because of its resonance with Levitas's definition of IROS: the creation of a planetary 'new structure of feeling. A different hegemony' (Robinson, 2020, p. 358); in other words, a secular, but for this reason not less spiritual, Earth religion. Notably, the introduction of YourLock provokes a generalised exodus from corporate-owned platforms and – due to its global, unifying and publicly owned nature – ends up fostering something deeply meaningful: a sense of 'patriotism now directed to the planet itself' (p. 358). Once more, Robinson's knowledge of trailblazing academic debates inspires his creative process. In the last few years, debates on eco-theology and eco-spirituality have become increasingly central in the fields of environmental humanities and political ecology (for an overview, see Deanne-Drummond, 2017; Morton, 2018).

The description of a new ecological religion at the end of the novel reflects the author's willingness to add to the anthropocentric, ecomodernist and 'bureaucratic' utopianism that dominates the plot (Trexler, 2015, p. 155). By introducing elements of eco-spirituality, the Earth and all its inhabitants – human and non-human – become co-dependent entities. One of the final chapters in *The Ministry for the Future* portrays a planetary ceremony that is attended simultaneously by billions of people; a ceremony ideally involving not only human beings but the entire bio- and noosphere – 'a planetary superorganism integrating all geological, biological, human, and technological activities' (Vidal, 2022). 'We are all family, as the new religion was telling us, and as every living thing on Earth shares a crucial 938 base pairs of DNA, I guess it's really true' (Robinson, 2020, p. 539). In the next section, we explore Robinson's attempts to decentre the human subject by focusing on the stylistic and narrative techniques used throughout the novel.

## **We are all family. But who are we, anyways? Decentring the human to heal the Earth**

It is impossible to understand the utopias at stake in *The Ministry for the Future* without understanding how the crises they respond to are framed. For all its merits, Erik Olin Wright's (2010) *Envisioning Real Utopias* is strangely silent on ecological matters and remains somewhat narrow-minded in terms of primarily understanding capitalism as 'a particular way of organising the economic activities of a society' (p. 34). This perspective should be supplemented with one that views capitalism as a force in and of nature. What we mean by this is that capitalism is also, and perhaps above all, a particular way of organising nature. Or more succinctly, when capitalism – violently and brutally – organises the economy and society as such, it also organises nature (and vice versa). In the words of environmental and climate historian Jason W. Moore (2015), capitalism is more than an economic or social system, it is a world-ecology, 'a patterned history of power, capital, and nature, dialectically joined' (p. 8).

Any Robinson reader will know that he shares this view. The tentacles of capitalism are everywhere, reaching into the most remote areas of land, the deepest parts of the oceans and the most outer regions of the biosphere. For instance, in Robinson's (2017) previous novel, *New York 2140*, sea levels have risen dramatically by 2140 due to global warming, various catastrophes and Hurricane Fyodor (p. 453). Most of the world is now under water, including New York, where most of the novel is set. Manhattan is described

as a kind of super Venice: ‘Same as ever, but wetter’, as a character quips at one point (p. 279) – or, as President Donald Trump remarked when Hurricane Florence hit North and South Carolina in September 2018, ‘one of the wettest we’ve ever seen from the standpoint of water’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, from the standpoint of water, the world of *New York 2140* is exceedingly wet. In terms of capital, it is still an enormously liquid world – in both senses of the term – and there are thus plenty of opportunities to make a profit and keep the speculation going, say on property, through the ingenious Intertidal Property Pricing Index, which combines housing prices with sea levels. *New York 2140*, although set in the future, is all too real, not just for New York, but for most coastal cities around the world, including Miami, Florida in the US, where the sea level had not changed for 2000 years until rising 25 centimetres since 1900 (Miller, 2019).

As mentioned previously, the beginning of *The Ministry for the Future* is warmer and more humid, and thus more lethal. Both Andreas Malm (2021) and Bill McKibben (2020) note that *The Ministry for the Future* may be a work of science fiction that takes place in the (near) future, but it is first and foremost a deeply realistic piece of literature. The tragic event in India is not simply fanciful speculation as large parts of the planet will be so hot and humid that they will become uninhabitable – at least for human beings. This is already happening. As the authors of the article ‘Climate endgame: Exploring catastrophic climate change scenarios’ remind readers, climate change feedback, known and unknown, may, in the worst case, ‘amplify to an irreversible transition into a “hothouse Earth” state’ (Kemp et al., 2022). The reality of such a hothouse state, with wet-bulb temperatures exceeding 35°C, is what Robinson depicts, vividly and horrifyingly, at the beginning of *The Ministry for the Future*.

Our point is that this is where Robinson starts, but not where he ends. Many contemporary ecotopian narratives – sociological, literary or otherwise – begin with descriptions of ecological catastrophe, in the ruins of this world and with loss. These losses are ecological and environmental, and they are also political. Hauske and Strang (2022) observe that ‘for all the prescriptive optimism with which it [*The Ministry for the Future*] seems to have been read, it is surprisingly full of scenes of loss’. ‘History,’ thinks Mary, ‘was going to go like this: lose, lose, lose, lose, lose, lose, win’ (Robinson, 2020, p. 456). This is not the cynical wisdom of defeatist sci-fi that has surrendered to capitalist realism or to the kind of cosmic pessimism to be found, in abundance, in TV series like *True Detective* (Frantzen, 2020). Instead, it is a kind of literature that describes the disorder and the diseases of contemporary world, only to go on, speculatively and stubbornly, to tell, in the words of one reviewer, ‘the novel’s true story: the world healing’ (Frug, 2021) – or to repeat the words of the author himself: healing the Earth (Robinson, 2020 p. 425).

What this means in and for Robinson’s (2020) novel is that its utopian future and the experiments to get there will ‘feel like coming back from a time of illness. Like getting healthy’ (p. 502). When the land is sick, you are (also) sick, or in the words of American ecologist Aldo Leopold (1949), ‘what’s good is what’s good for the land’ (p. 502) – a statement Robinson is fond of quoting, sometimes replacing ‘land’ with ‘biosphere’. This type of healing requires an alternate diagnosis as well as a different conception of what a cure could consist of, i.e. one that is utterly foreign to Western medicine. In an online public lecture, Robinson at one point asked the question ‘What’s the cure to Lyme disease?’, only to answer it himself, in a seemingly enigmatic manner, ‘Wolves! Why?’

Well, Lyme disease is transmitted to humans through the bite of infected blacklegged ticks, and there are too many ticks because there are too many deer and there are too many deer because there are too few wolves, because there are too many humans.<sup>77</sup> So instead of isolating the symptom – Lyme disease – to treat it, one might look at the proverbial bigger picture to arrive at a wholly different understanding of what is wrong and what needs to be done.

It is also imperative to note that healing the Earth means healing *this* world, not going to Mars on an imperialist and/or escapist space colonisation adventure. Healing this world does not mean healing something out there, something external to humans, and perhaps it does not even mean healing something limited to the physical health of humans. We suggest that Robinson's political ecology is marked by what some scholars call 'deep medicine', one that combines healing the economy and the ecology, the human and the non-human, the physical and the spiritual. Among others, Rupa Marya and Raj Patel (2021) develop this concept in a book entitled *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*, stating, 'The study of ecology is becoming indispensable to the study of medicine because humans are not just a single animal but a *multitude, an ecology of beings living on us, in us, and around us*' (p. 23, emphasis added).

This vision of a world containing multiple worlds, or a plethora of interrelated ecologies, is not just reflected in the content of *The Ministry for the Future*, but also at a stylistic level, particularly in relation to who speaks in the novel and who narrates it. The author goes to great lengths to let the biosphere speak, or rather, to let as many different parts of the biosphere speak as possible. The narrative perspective is thus not strictly or exclusively human. Just as there are many agents of historical change in the novel's overall plot, e.g. central bankers, politicians, eco-terrorists, grassroots activists, the ministry, billionaires and Arctic scientists, there are many voices, many narrators, some expected, and others, less so. In addition to the third-person narrator who dominates most of the novel, the reader encounters 'a whole series of first-person narrations by various non-living entities: a carbon atom, a photon, the market, history, the sun' (Frug, 2021).

The purpose of these chapters and shifts in narrative voice is to establish a formal ecology that mirrors the vision of the world arranged at the content level, and one that is also on par with the political task at hand. If humans, according to the novel, are not the only historical agents, then humans do not need to be the only narrative voice in the novel. In other words, we find that decentring humans destabilises the narrative authority of the Anthropos that is so familiar and integral to the history of the novel, and more broadly, to the genre of science and speculative fiction; in the vocabulary of Stefania Barca (2020), decentring humans aids the ambition to create a counter-hegemonic narrative in the novel.

At stake here is a story that is large and contains multitudes: an ecology of ecologies. One could certainly do a post-humanist, new materialist or Latourian reading of *The Ministry for the Future*, but it is far easier to imagine proponents of said theories criticising the novel. We could hear them asking questions such as: Couldn't *The Ministry for the Future* have been more post-human in its outlook and narrative point of view? Couldn't the topic have been more vibrant? Couldn't Robinson have gone farther in exploring multispecies relationships? Following Thaler's (2022) interpretation of Robinson as a writer who invests 'hope in a gradual but steady resolution of the

ecological crisis through ground-breaking innovations in science and technology' (p. 146), one could even explain the relatively limited use of non-human subjects and non-human perspectives as a result of the author's anthropocentric and optimistic ecomodernism. However, we contend that *The Ministry for the Future* should not be boxed in as solely a post-humanist or purely ecomodernist story.

Our more general point is that when we consider Robinson as a writer of deep medicine, we read his novel as an anti-capitalist gesture that has little to do with ecomodernism. Not because it is against science; on the contrary, Robinson's project, as he emphasises again and again, is to reclaim science for emancipation (Cohen, 2021) – science as a decolonial, anti-capitalist and not exclusively Western concept and enterprise (if we chose to fault the author it would be for not venturing far enough in these directions).<sup>8</sup> The problem with reading the non-human narrators – a carbon atom, a photon, the market, history and the sun – as evidence of some form of ontological democracy wherein agency and responsibility are equally distributed across human and non-human entities is that, just like the Anthropocene myth, it lets 'capitalism off the hook' to quote Malm (2015); i.e. it risks overlooking the fact that climate change and environmental destruction are the result of 'a [human-driven] world-ecology of power, capital, and nature' (Moore, 2015, p. 6).

As the critics of hegemonic narratives of the Anthropocene remind us, climate change is in fact the result of the intertwined historical trajectories of global capitalism, imperialism and colonialism (Barca, 2020; Patel & Moore, 2017). Robinson seems to be especially aware of the systemic issues at the root of the climate crisis; however, throughout the novel, he is much less invested in a theoretical and political critique than Malm (2018).<sup>9</sup> In *The Ministry for the Future* he does not, like Malm, present his readers with a 'choice calling for a decision', but with 'a problem calling for invention and experimentation' (Rübner Hansen, 2021). This is the central tenet of Robinson's 'pluralistic' political strategy, and it is precisely what makes his work so easily misunderstood, or to put it differently, so amenable to such different, sometimes divergent, readings.

## Conclusions

Most utopian studies scholars, for all their respective differences, would agree that science fiction not only delivers images of alternative futures, but also, and perhaps above all, serves a critical function in and of the present through various narrative techniques. Levitas (2017) writes that through utopia 'we can imagine a future society with a different ethic, and look at our own practices from that standpoint' (p. 12). The critical function of science fiction, and in this case, ecotopian fiction, is what makes novels such as *The Ministry for the Future* so important both for scholars interested in analysing the present and those invested in Levitas's IROS (2013b).

If we are serious about tackling climate change, this labour of reimagination is not an option, but a necessity. It is not a surprise, then, that science fiction books and movies are increasingly becoming subjects of research projects, articles and books in the social sciences and humanities. For example, contemporary scholars such as Steven Shaviro (2015, 2021), Sherryl Vint (2019) and Ali Rıza Taşkale (2023) have recently explored the intricate relationship between speculative finance and speculative fiction, the last

mentioned in relation to Robinson's *New York 2140*. Others have linked ecotopian fiction to sociological theories of the imagination and transformation, with Lisa Garforth (2018) reviewing the evolution of environmental utopianism from the 1960s until today, Mathias Thaler (2022) exploring utopian visions for life on a climate-changed planet, Yannick Rumpala (2024) analysing a variety of post-capitalist imaginaries and Manjana Milkoreit (2017) pointing out that ecotopian fiction 'can support sustainability transformations' (p. 2). We, too, belong to this thriving group of scholars.

In this article, we set out to discuss Robinson's (2020) latest novel, *The Ministry for the Future*, as an example of *utopian realism*: a type of utopianism set in a quasi-parallel present where the author displays a tapestry of transformative strategies that, in the course of many decades, allows humanity to transition to a more just and ecological future. Utopian realism does not provide a fixed blueprint or a univocal plan for how society should tackle the climate crisis. Instead, utopian realism entails a much more open-ended, dynamic and ambivalent process of change involving a multiplicity of actors and strategies that should and could, in a realistic scenario, be part of such an encompassing and contentious societal transformation. In this sense, utopian realism has a lot in common with Moylan's critical utopias (1986/2014): rejecting the idea of utopia as a blueprint, focusing on the process of social change required to transition from the original world to a new society, while remaining aware of the almost inevitable co-option attempts by modern structures and focusing on the 'presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself' (p. 10). Robinson's utopian realism is indeed imperfect and problematic, but a transformation is *there*; it is put on the table. We do not have to accept defeat. In fact, our very survival depends on the ability to enact Levitas's (2013b) plan to 'reconstitute society'.

The distinguishing feature of utopian realism is the focus on *how* to attain the utopian society taking the 'pervasive atmosphere' of capitalist and eco-capitalist/climate realism as the inescapable point of departure (Barca, 2020; Fischer, 2009; Kornbluh, 2020). This cannot possibly be an easy or straightforward journey. We could even dare to say that capitalist realism and utopian realism 'speak the same language', because utopian realism unavoidably stems from, and in reaction to, capitalist realism. Rephrasing a quote from Tom Moylan (1986/2014), utopian realism grew up with eco-capitalist realism as its godparent and the underlying social and personal yearnings and sufferings as its immediate progenitors (p. 4). And it couldn't be otherwise when eco-decolonial terrorists coexist with enlightened financiers and eco-conscious capitalists; when geo-engineering, community-led permaculture and cryptocurrencies are concertedly deployed to mitigate the consequences of climate change; and when top bureaucrats and bankers from seven continents agree to implement a set of reforms that substantially alter the functioning of the global economy.

The embeddedness of the novel in capitalist realism calls for an all-hands-on-deck strategy resulting in a galvanising sequence of transformations occurring *within and despite* the limits imposed by capitalism itself. However, Robinson does not shy away from carving out radical spaces for 'open-ended estrangement' (Garforth, 2005, p. 418). A new global ecological religion, the kidnapping of illustrious participants at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Internet takeover through YourLock – all of these radical actions counterbalance the more bureaucratic reforms in what appears to be an effective

blend of E. O. Wright's (2010, 2019) pragmatic utopianism and Levitas's (2008, 2013a, 2013b) more holistic perspective on social change.

In other words: is the transformation described in *The Ministry for the Future* perfect? No. Are there problems and contradictions? Yes. In fact, we are not arguing that utopian realist sci-fi is the *only* type of fiction we need today to envision better futures. Other sci-fi writers have engaged more resolutely than Robinson with issues of race, ethnicity and socio-economic inequalities (e.g. Butler, 1979), uncanny futures (e.g. VanderMeer, 2019), non-Western-centric perspectives (e.g. Cixin, 2008) and gender-fluid and feminist worlds (e.g. Piercy, 1976). Each of these science and speculative fictions plays a crucial role if we are to rethink and reconstitute society. However, what we are arguing is that utopian realism, as characterised in *The Ministry for the Future*, offers a peculiar and extremely sociological sketch of plausible, quasi-prescriptive solutions to the challenges faced by humanity, aptly reminding us that 'the real is not limited to the actual' (Levitas, 2008, p. 57) – a powerful antidote to the suffocating ideology of capitalist realism.

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### Notes

1. <https://www.ipcc.ch/>
2. From the United Nations Climate Change website: 'The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change. It was adopted by 196 Parties at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, France, on 12 December 2015. It entered into force on 4 November 2016. Its overarching goal is to hold "the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" and pursue efforts "to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels".' <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>
3. Greta Thunberg at the Climate Action Summit 2019 – Official Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9KxE4Kv9A8>
4. See Carbon Credit Markets: <https://www.carboncreditmarkets.com/en/single-post/carbon-is-going-to-be-very-close-to-a-currency>
5. Mr. Robot was an acclaimed award-winning 2015–2019 American TV series set in a post-financial crisis and post-Occupancy New York world, where the protagonist, a young,

anti-social IT programmer decides to join a team of hacktivists on a mission to cancel all consumer debt.

6. Trump on Hurricane Florence, ‘One of the wettest we’ve ever seen, from the standpoint of water’: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45X4WvkTK\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45X4WvkTK_I)
7. See Ecology and Utopia – 8 December 2021: <http://andutopia.com/index.php/blog/> For a similar view of deep medicine and a similar example citing wolves and the collapse of ecosystems, albeit within the context of degrowth, see Hickel (2020, pp. 279–282).
8. As for the question of technology, it naturally has numerous tentacles, such as geo-engineering (see Haines, 2023) and the transformative possibilities of finance (on finance and climate realism in *New York 2140*, see Kornbluh, 2020; on MMT and *The Ministry for the Future*, see Seijo, 2022). Another one of Robinson’s apparent regrets is that he included cryptocurrencies, bitcoin and blockchain in the novel (cf. Wray, 2022).
9. In *The Progress of This Storm*, Malm (2018) lashes out at thinkers such as Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton, writing in relation to the last mentioned, ‘No one would ask CO<sub>2</sub> molecules to come down from the heavens or demand that the oil platforms scrap themselves and pay their victims – not even Timothy Morton, for he would not find a way to communicate with the oil’ (p. 117).

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