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Monsters of Capitalism: Accumulation and Extinction in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

“Amongst other things, monsters are warnings – not only of what may happen but also of what is already *happening*.”¹

Introduction

In volume one of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867), Karl Marx famously presented capitalism as “a gigantic enterprise of dehumanization” that turns human beings “into instruments and means for money-making and capital accumulation.”² By linking the system with other monstrous apparitions and qualities, Marx portrayed capitalism as driven by “the werewolf-like hunger for surplus labour”³ and fueled by “the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour;”⁴ in its incessant search for more “hands,” capitalism transforms workers into “a crippled monstrosity,” depriving them of their diverse talents and skills and

¹ David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 9.

² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, transl. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 65.

³ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 367.

suppressing “a whole world of productive drives and inclinations.”⁵ Crucial to this process of monsterization is capital itself, which Marx defined as a strangely animate entity – as “dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”⁶ A monstrous mechanism, capitalism produces monsters, which Marx succinctly identified in his discussion of Thomas Malthus’ *Principles of Political Economy* (1820) as “the beautiful trinity of capitalist production: over-production, over-population and over-consumption.”⁷

In this article, I analyse capitalism and its “three delicate monsters”⁸ as presented in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), situating the critique of over-production, over-population, and over-consumption offered in the novel in the context of the climate crisis of the Anthropocene. In *The Ministry for the Future*, Robinson presents capitalism as the dominant and most destructive force of our times, with the market functioning as a strangely animate, semi-autonomous being whose body “worked so well that eventually all things everywhere were swallowed and digested by [it].”⁹ Portrayed as a self-reproducing organism, capitalism becomes one of the protagonists of the novel and can be described, borrowing Mark Fisher’s notion of capitalist realism, as “a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact.”¹⁰ In this text, I approach Robinson’s portrayal of capitalism and the market as a critique of the violence of global necropolitics and a reflection on the Capitalocene, a time when, as Jason W. Moore claims, capitalism functions “as a way of organizing nature – as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology.”¹¹ Accordingly, in what follows, I offer an overview of the concepts foregrounding the role of humans and capitalism in the climate crisis, focusing on the notions of the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, and the Necrocene. Fisher’s insights into capitalist realism provide a general framework for the analysis of Robinson’s novel and the monstrous offsprings of capital, embodied through the figure of the zombie.

⁵ Ibid., 481.

⁶ Ibid., 342.

⁷ Ibid., 787.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kim Stanley Robinson, *Ministry for the Future* (London: Orbit, 2000), 192.

¹⁰ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 6.

¹¹ Jason W. Moore, Introduction, in: *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press/Kairos, 2016), 6.

Throughout the article, I argue that while *Ministry for the Future* follows other early-twenty-first-century climate fictions in presenting capitalism as leading to the end of human history and of the world, it also makes the relationship between climate and capitalism more complex by pointing to the multiple social and economic factors influencing the system and presenting various alternatives to the capitalist mode of production. Thus, the novel can be seen as exemplifying the recent changes in how capitalism is represented, which Adam Trexler describes as consisting of the refusal to depict the system as a timeless certainty, providing instead “a framework to explore the complex interactions between a multitude of agents.”¹²

Capitalism in the Anthropocene

Formulated by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, the term “Anthropocene” has come to be widely used to stress the role of humans in influencing Earth system processes and to acknowledge that humanity has become a global geophysical force. In “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?”, Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill situate the beginning of the Anthropocene around 1800 and the Industrial Revolution, and point to the period after the Second World War as the time of the Great Acceleration, marked by unprecedented and continuing massive biodiversity loss, population growth, excessive resource use, and overall environmental deterioration.¹³ According to Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill, the Anthropocene reflects the growing awareness that humanity is becoming a self-conscious, active agent in the life of the planet¹⁴ and that now human activities “rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary *terra incognita*.”¹⁵ In many ways, the Anthropocene is a time of the unknown and the collapse of old certainties, assumptions, patterns, and ways of knowing: on the one hand, the Anthropocene reveals the limits of human knowledge in the encounter with what Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects – things, such as the climate or capitalism, that are “massively distributed in time and space

¹² Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 220.

¹³ Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, *The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?*, “Ambio” 2007, vol. 36, no. 8, 615-618.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 619.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 614.

relative to humans;”¹⁶ on the other, by highlighting scarcity and resource depletion, it forces humanity to revise the ideas of benevolent progress and growth and to confront the possibility of its end.¹⁷

While the concept of the Anthropocene is useful in highlighting the responsibility of humans for protecting the planet, it has been criticized for universalizing the category of the Anthropos and prioritizing humans over other beings, risking the exclusion of non-human planetary histories and erasing records of human and non-human oppression by racism, sexism, extractionism, and colonialism, among others.¹⁸ Jason W. Moore argues that the main problem with the Anthropocene is that it posits humanity as an undifferentiated, unified actor and thereby reinforces various dualisms, such as that of Nature/Society, which makes nature external to human production and therefore “cheap.”¹⁹ With nature being considered “cheap,” both as a resource and concept, anything associated with it, whether animate or not, becomes cheap as well, thus justifying capitalist practices of over-consumption and over-production. Moore sees such dualisms as fundamental to the project of modernity, whose achievements he describes as “premised on an active and ongoing theft: of our times, of planetary life, of our—and our children’s—futures.”²⁰ His definition of modernity as “a capitalist world-ecology”²¹ highlights the role of capitalism in producing the present climate crisis and stresses the system’s ongoing efforts “to turn the work/energy of the biosphere into capital.”²² In the Capitalocene, the period beginning in the long sixteenth century, capitalism is more than merely an economic system; it is “a way of organizing nature *as a whole*,”²³ that is, regulating the relationships between life, power, and

¹⁶ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.

¹⁷ Benjamin J. Robertson states that “the Anthropocene forces the human subject to confront finitude.” Quoted in Rune Graulund, *Putting the Earth to Use: Reading Resources in the End Times (Through Science Fiction)*, in: *How Literature Comes to Matter: Post-Anthropocentric Approaches to Fiction*, eds. S. Pultz Moslund, M. Karlsson Marcussen and M. Karlsson Pedersen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 193.

¹⁸ For an insightful critique of the exclusionary practices of the Anthropocene, see Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

¹⁹ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), 2.

²⁰ Moore, *Introduction*, 11.

²¹ Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life...*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 14.

²³ Moore, *Introduction*, 7.

capital. In Moore's account, the Capitalocene serves to historicize climate change, pointing to specific agents, operations, and modes of exploitation to demonstrate how planetary life has been managed in the interests of endless accumulation.²⁴

Marx describes capitalism as being based on accumulation through exploitation and as being driven by the logic of capital, the vampire-like dead labor which ceaselessly sucks the life of living labor. In a similar manner, Moore states that the accumulation of capital is based on the ongoing theft of time and life. Although capitalism's slow violence of "delayed destruction" is dispersed in time and space and thus may be hardly perceptible or not even recognized as violence,²⁵ it ceaselessly consumes life and makes extinction ubiquitous. Capitalism feeds on death: literally through its reliance on fossil fuels and metaphorically through the consumption of (human and non-human) energy and the resources necessary for future life. Framing his argument by reference to the ongoing sixth mass extinction and catastrophic climate change, Justin McBrien proposes placing extinction at the center of capitalism – as he writes, "Extinction lies at the heart of capitalist accumulation" – and to use it as the defining feature of the Necrocene, or "New Death," the "fundamental biogeological moment" of the Capitalocene.²⁶ McBrien's conceptualization of the Necrocene makes it clear that the origins of the contemporary climate crisis should be situated not in some abstract idea of "human nature" but in the operations of capitalism,²⁷ specifically in its logic of "accumulation through extinction" and its constant search for "new corpses upon which to feast."²⁸ The extinction that he writes about is that of species, cultures, languages, peoples, and the Earth;²⁹ it is indefinitely re-produced through the ideology of "Planetary Catastrophism,"³⁰ which not only feeds on catastrophes, like the disaster capitalism described by Naomi Klein,³¹ but

²⁴ Moore, *How to Read Capitalism in the Web of Life. Towards a World-Historical Materialism in the Web of Life*, "Journal of World-Systems Research" 2022, vol. 28, issue 1, 159.

²⁵ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

²⁶ Justin McBrien, *Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene*, in: *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press/Kairos, 2016), 116.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

³¹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

actually begets catastrophes, limiting the horizon of possible actions to the repetition of the (capitalist and apocalyptic) same.

The pervasive conviction that capitalism is the only viable political and economic system and that it is impossible to imagine an alternative to it is what Mark Fisher calls capitalist realism. Referencing Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum that "There is no alternative" to the existing order, Fisher claims that capitalist realism is not merely just one type of realism but that it is realism itself.³² Writing about the early twenty first century, he argues that capitalism pervades every sphere of life and effectively controls cultural production and imagination. Fisher analyses the mechanisms of capitalist realism in bureaucracy, mental health, work, and education, and references numerous popular culture texts, philosophy, and literary and cultural criticism to illustrate how capitalism "seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable"³³ and takes on the appearance of the "natural" order of things. To appear as occupying a natural state, capitalist realism deploys a fantasy structure based on the presuppositions that resources are infinite, that the planet is replaceable, and that all problems can be solved by the market.³⁴ As long as there are no inconsistencies in this structure, and as long as it is not presented as a harmful fantasy rather than as reality, capitalist realism will continue to colonize the public and private imagination, "acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action"³⁵ and preventing the emergence of anything new.

The concepts and perspectives discussed above draw attention to the disastrous state of the planet and stress the need for immediate action. The discourse of the Anthropocene explicitly makes humanity responsible for the present climate changes, and while this has led to the development of numerous post-anthropocentric and de-growth approaches and initiatives, it has also given rise to perspectives which seem to uphold the capitalist realist fantasy of finding a solution to the problems of consumer culture and technological expansion in the market and through techno-fixes.³⁶ The Capitalocene and the Necrocene stress the role of capitalism in exhausting

³² Fisher, *Capitalist Realism...*, 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁶ A good example of the latter perspective is ecomodernism. See John Asafu-Adjaye et al., *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, 2015, <http://www.ecomodernism.org> [access 5.08.2021].

human energies and natural resources, leading to the stage when, as McBrien cautions, extinction seems to be the only possible outcome. The approaches emphasize the need to imagine the future as different, so as to escape the conviction that the “future is the past forever”³⁷ or that it “harbors only reiteration and re-permutation”³⁸ of capitalist truths. Moore’s rendering of capitalism as part of the web of life indicates that such an effort requires a transformation not only of the relationships between power, nature, and capital but also of the ways of thinking about them. Literature can and perhaps should play a crucial role in this attempt to imagine a different future because, as Moore states, “[h]ow we tell stories of our past, and how we respond to the challenges of the present, are intimately connected.”³⁹

The Ministry for the Future

Published in 2020, Kim Stanley Robinson’s political utopia attempts to imagine a different future and move beyond the parameters of capitalist realism. *The Ministry for the Future* depicts a recognizable world ravaged by droughts, floods, heat waves, and other extreme weather events resulting from anthropogenic climate change: the planet and its inhabitants suffer as a result of over-population, over-consumption, and over-production, from deforestation, species and biodiversity loss, displacement, and growing social inequalities. Beginning in the early 2020s and ending in the 2040s, the novel records the international reactions to a series of planetary catastrophes and depicts the gradual transformation of the capitalist world order into more sustainable systems to make the planet habitable for all. The narrative centers around the activities of the Ministry for the Future established under the Paris Agreement, in Zurich, Switzerland, in January of 2025, “to advocate for the world’s future generations of citizens [...] defending all living creatures present and future who cannot speak for themselves, by promoting their legal standing and physical protection.”⁴⁰ Although it features a wide range of characters from various parts of the world, the book focuses on the lives of Mary Murphy, ex-minister of foreign affairs in the government of the Irish Republic and the first head of the Ministry for the Future, and Frank May, an American exile and one of the

³⁷ McBrien, *Accumulating Extinction* ..., 134.

³⁸ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*..., 3.

³⁹ Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*..., 5.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Ministry*..., 15.

few survivors of the great India heatwave of 2025. Secondary characters include employees of the ministry, such as Badim Bahadur, chief of staff and secret operations; Tatiana Voznesenskaya, head of the legal division; and Janus Athena, AI specialist and designer of YourLock, the Facebook replacement organized as a co-op owned by its users, as well as refugees, slave-workers, bankers, businessmen, government officials, scientists, activists, and terrorists. The variety of characters reflects the various actions that need to be taken in order to mitigate climate change. To similar effect, the novel uses a variety of narrative modes: alongside the conventional story of the lives of Mary and Frank, it deploys eyewitness accounts, Old English style riddles, meeting notes, radio show transcripts, and it-narratives, in which objects such as the market or the Earth narrate their story.⁴¹

The gravity of the situation on Earth is made visible at the very beginning of *The Ministry for the Future* as it opens with a scene of mass death in “an ordinary town” in Uttar Pradesh on 12 July 2025, during a heatwave when “[p]eople were dying faster than ever. There was no coolness to be had. All the children were dead, all the old people were dead.”⁴² Frank May, a 22-year-old American aid worker, attempts to save himself and others from the heat by getting into a lake, but after a night spent in a crowd of bodies, he wakes up to discover that he is the only one to have survived. The heatwave causes the death of twenty million people in India, more “than in the entirety of the First World War, and all in a single week and in a single region of the world,”⁴³ and forces first India and later other countries to fundamentally restructure their economic, political, and social systems to avoid future catastrophes. It also traumatizes Frank, who is unable to return to his previous life and who, driven by a sense of guilt, attempts to pay for his survival: he volunteers to work in a detention camp to help refugees, tries to join the Children of Kali, a terrorist group of heatwave survivors who kill those they deem responsible for climate damage, murders a random representative of the rich, and finally attempts to kidnap Mary to force the ministry to take more decisive action. Although unsuccessful, his attack makes Mary reconsider the ministry’s diplomatic

⁴¹ Robinson describes the narrative modes used in the novel in the interview with Amy Brady, *A Crucial Collapse in “The Ministry for the Future”*, 2020, <https://chireviewofbooks.com/2020/10/27/a-crucial-collapse-in-the-ministry-for-the-future/> [access 5.05.2022].

⁴² Robinson, *Ministry...*, 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23.

mission and leads her to encourage Badim to develop a secret division to sabotage the organizations and industrial activities that are most harmful to the planet. The traumatic event makes visible the manifold relationships and interdependencies between humans, capital, and nature in the web of life and initiates a transformation of the system; it ruptures the fantasy construction of capitalist realism and demonstrates that, “far from being the only viable political-economic system, capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment.”⁴⁴

The opening description of the crowd of people patiently waiting for their death becomes the controlling image of the whole novel, lending it an overall atmosphere of powerlessness and resignation: zombie-like, the people walk into the lake to find a place among the dead and half-dead bodies, indifferent to the deaths of others and their kin, focused exclusively on their physical needs and driven by the instinct for survival. In that, they are like the classic zombie: with no conscious experiences separate from physical processes and bodies functioning as empty shells, they have no sense of the self as a unique, human consciousness.⁴⁵ That they all die in the night merely literalizes their lack of agency and absence of self; their apathetic demeanor and machine-like movements echo the image of the capitalist workforce as a mindless zombie horde, in which the workers/zombies function as lifeless and replaceable “figures of industrial production and mechanical reproduction.”⁴⁶ Sarah Juliet Lauro argues that “when we talk about zombies, we are never *not* talking about capitalism;”⁴⁷ accordingly, it is only “natural” to encounter zombies in a world where thinking “has been reduced [...] to a neoliberal analysis and judgment of the neoliberal situation”⁴⁸ and where the dominant structure of feeling is built on economic terms, with ethics “quantified and rated for the effects that [...] actions have on GDP.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism...*, 18.

⁴⁵ Kevin Alexander Boon, *Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture*, in: *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007), 34-36.

⁴⁶ Fred Botting, *Zombie London: Unexceptionalities of the New World Order*, in: *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 279.

⁴⁷ Sarah Juliet Lauro, *Capitalist Monsters: Introduction*, in: *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 107.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Ministry...*, 74.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

The image of the zombie-worker harks back to the original “Zombie of Haitian legend, the dead risen to work the sugar plantations and serve the needs of the Nganga (Haitian medicine men) and farmers.”⁵⁰ It recurs in the novel in the depictions of refugees in detention camps, too many to be seen as individuals, anonymous slave-workers on ships and in illegal mines, and the millions of nameless victims of wars and disasters caused by anthropogenic climate change. The zombie-like state, accompanied by a lack of agency, is presented as a universal condition under capitalism, with the few rich granted the status of subjects capable of controlling their fate at the time of climate crisis:

But early in the twenty-first century it became clear that the planet was incapable of sustaining everyone alive at Western levels, and at that point the richest pulled away into their fortress mansions, bought the governments or disabled them from action against them, and bolted their doors to wait it out until some poorly theorized better time, which really came down to just the remainder of their lives, and perhaps the lives of their children if they were feeling optimistic—beyond that, *après moi le déluge*.⁵¹

As the passage above indicates, the novel does not present humanity in the Anthropocene as a unified group but as composed of differentiated, individualized subjects of oppression, unequally exposed to environmental dangers and unevenly protected. The lack of climate justice is noted in the discussion of the Indian heatwave, where the real culprits are identified as Europe, America, and China,⁵² and conveyed in the widespread conviction that climate catastrophes happen in the South, to “mostly poor people, in particular poor people of color. It couldn’t happen in the North. It couldn’t happen to prosperous white people.”⁵³ This conviction is proven wrong as more and more disasters happen all over the world, including a heatwave in America and the ensuing death of almost three hundred thousand people in a single day;⁵⁴ atmospheric carbon dioxide levels rising to 463 parts per

⁵⁰ Boon, *Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh...*, 35.

⁵¹ Robinson, *Ministry...*, 57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 348.

million;⁵⁵ inequality levels not seen since the so-called Gilded Age of the 1890s;⁵⁶ massive flooding, massive displacement due to war, famine, and a lack of water, with “a hundred million people wandering the Earth or confined in camps.”⁵⁷

The climate-related catastrophes presented in the novel perform two functions: On the one hand, the increasing frequency of climate disasters presents the Earth on the brink of extinction, reinforcing the sense of powerlessness which may explain the stifling of attempts to act and the zombie-like lack of agency – as McBrien argues, “near-term extinction is a pernicious perspective that short-circuits the ability to act.”⁵⁸ This “becoming extinction”⁵⁹ of the world and its people is a defining feature of the 2030s, the zombie time of the Anthropocene, described in the novel as “zombie years”:

The thirties were zombie years. Civilization had been killed but it kept walking the Earth, staggering toward some fate even worse than death. Everyone felt it. The culture of the time was rife with fear and anger, denial and guilt, shame and regret, repression and the return of the repressed. They went through the motions, always in a state of suspended dread, always aware of their wounded status, wondering what massive stroke would fall next, and how they would manage to ignore that one too, when it was already such a huge effort to ignore the ones that had happened so far, a string of them going all the way back to 2020.⁶⁰

On the other hand, the sheer number of catastrophic events and their universal, democratic character make it impossible to continue ignoring them or denying climate change. Thus, environmental catastrophe functions in the novel in the way described by Fisher, as the traumatic event that ruptures the Real and helps “develop strategies against a Capital which presents itself as ontologically, as well as geographically, ubiquitous.”⁶¹

⁵⁵ Ibid., 250.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 285.

⁵⁸ McBrien, *Accumulating Extinction...*, 135.

⁵⁹ “Becoming extinction” is the phrase McBrien uses to describe the processes of the Necroene; Ibid., 117.

⁶⁰ Robinson, *Ministry...*, 227.

⁶¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism...*, 77. A similar conclusion is reached by Rune Graulund in his analysis of Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* (Graulund, *Putting the Earth to Use...*, 209).

The Ministry for the Future presents the shock of the Indian heatwave as triggering action, first in India and later in other countries, to restructure economic and political systems and to build a community based on the core principles of human rights and climate justice. The numerous transformations include the dismantling of nation-states and the formation of new democratic bodies; the end of the caste system and social and wealth inequality; the granting of equal rights to women; public ownership of the necessities, that is, food, water, shelter, clothing, electricity, health care, and education;⁶² the creation of the new commons; taking control of social media; and the restructuring of agriculture and industry into participatory management, payment solidarity, and inter-cooperation.⁶³ Crucial to these changes are the legal and secret activities of the Ministry for the Future, particularly the introduction of the carbon coin, administered by the Climate Coalition of Central Banks.⁶⁴ Following the realization that society is “an actor-network” and that “[s]ome of the actors in an actor-network aren’t human,”⁶⁵ there are successful attempts to avoid a mass extinction event through geo-engineering and rewilding and acting according to the principle that rewrites “the Leopoldian land ethic, often summarized as ‘what’s good is what’s good for the land’ [into] ‘what’s good is what’s good for the biosphere.’”⁶⁶ Such changes constitute a global attempt to create “a planetary civilization,” with “the main sense of patriotism now directed to the planet itself.”⁶⁷ Significantly, these transformations are often initiated by ordinary people who are motivated by the realization that change “wasn’t going to happen from the top. The lawmakers were corrupt. So, if not top-down, then bottom-up.”⁶⁸ The understanding that change must be brought about by “[p]eople, the multitude”⁶⁹ is an act of awakening that begins what may be called a zombie rebellion or a process of de-zombification, in which the powerless regain agency to take control of dead labor and to produce rather than merely mechanically re-produce. This is the utopian

⁶² Robinson, *Ministry...*, 409.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

dimension of zombie narratives, which Robinson describes elsewhere as consisting of the “stubborn hope” for survival:

But the fight to stay alive rather than join the undead, there in the exposed, bloody heart of all our zombie narratives, is also a story of group solidarity in a life-threatening situation. That stubborn hope, that we might come together under duress, is what motivates the decisions we make about how to lead our private lives, and all the political resistance we can band together and make.⁷⁰

In *Ministry for the Future*, it is the story of solidarity in an apocalyptic situation that unites people in the fight against becoming extinction, proving thus that “the human being *can* be decoupled from Capital.”⁷¹ As the novel demonstrates, in the end, it is the system that must be zombified: “Capitalism: after a long and vigorous life, now incurable, living in pain. In a coma; become a zombie; without a plan; without any hope of returning to health.”⁷²

Conclusion

Robinson dedicated *The Ministry for the Future* to Fredric Jameson, the American Marxist critic whose claim that “[i]t is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” has often been repeated in texts about the Anthropocene, including in the novel itself and in the studies of capitalist realism and extinction by Mark Fisher and Justin McBrien. While the statement adequately reflects the present catastrophic structure of feeling, it is worth noticing that in the following sentence Jameson proposes that “[w]e can now reverse that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.”⁷³ Robinson’s novel does precisely that: by imagining the end of the world, it highlights the problems of the system and tries to break the spell of capitalist realism. The presentation of capitalism as a monster serves as a warning “not only of what may happen but also of what is already

⁷⁰ Robinson, *To Slow Down Climate Change, We Need To Take On Capitalism*, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kimstanleyrobinson/climate-change-capitalism-kim-stanley-robinson> [access 10.10.2022].

⁷¹ McBrien, *Accumulating Extinction ...*, 135.

⁷² Robinson, *Ministry...*, 320.

⁷³ Fredric Jameson, *Future City*, *New Left Review* 21, 2003, 76. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii21/articles/fredric-jameson-future-city> [accessed 8.4.2020].

happening,”⁷⁴ suggesting thus that we may indeed be living in the time of “the breakdown of the strategies and relations that have sustained capital accumulation over the past five centuries.”⁷⁵ The solutions proposed in Robinson’s novel draw on ideas and movements from the contemporary cultural milieu, referring to, among others, the work of Bruno Latour, Thomas Piketty, and E. O Wilson and projects like the Green New Deal, the 2000-Watt Society, originally from Switzerland, and the Half-Earth Project of the E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation, supporting species protection and acting against the extinction crisis. While the developments discussed in the novel may at times be close in spirit to green capitalism or are not radically new, they demonstrate that changes are possible and that they are already taking place, even if “in the crux, when things fall apart, something from the old system has to be used to hang the new system on, hopefully, something big and solid.”⁷⁶ Above all, *The Ministry for the Future* warns the reader that even though capital may be “an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker [...] the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ McNally, *Monsters of the Market...*, 9.

⁷⁵ Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life...*, 1.

⁷⁶ Robinson, *Ministry...*, 410.

⁷⁷ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism...*, 14.

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**Monsters of Capitalism: Accumulation and Extinction in Kim Stanley
Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future***

The article offers an analysis of Kim Stanley Robinson's 2020 novel *The Ministry for the Future* as a critique of capitalism at the time of the climate crisis of the Anthropocene. Robinson presents capitalism as the dominant and most destructive force of our times, with the market functioning as a monstrous entity that consumes everything in its reach, including humans and the planet. Referring to the notions of the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, and the Necrocene and the concept of capitalist realism, I analyze the images of zombies and the process of zombification and discuss alternatives to the capitalist mode of production presented in the novel.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, climate change, science fiction, zombie, Kim Stanley Robinson

Słowa kluczowe: Antropocen, Kapitalocen, zmiana klimatu, science fiction, zombie, Kim Stanley Robinson