

PROJECTING UTOPIAN THOUGHT: THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE “GOOD ANTHROPOCENE” IN KIM STANLEY ROBINSON’S *THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE*

Ana Tejero-Marín^{1*}

¹Universidad de Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain

Abstract

While the Anthropocene has traditionally been associated with apocalyptic images, the notion of the good Anthropocene, widely criticized since its origin, has emerged as its utopian counterpart. In his novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), Kim Stanley Robinson explicitly uses the name “good Anthropocene” to refer to the state of the world at the end of the story, more sustainable and equitable. This article examines the utopian and dystopian connotations of the (good) Anthropocene and analyzes how Robinson utilizes the term in his narrative; in particular, it focuses on his employment of narrative structure to convey the multiplicity of the Anthropocene, his preoccupation with discerning the socio-cultural origins of the epoch and his intention of conveying the positive future of the story as achievable through active hope and collaboration.

Keywords: Good Anthropocene; Kim Stanley Robinson; *The Ministry for the Future*; science fiction; anti-dystopia

* Predoctoral researcher at the English Department at the Universidad de Salamanca (Spain). Her research, fully funded by the Spanish Ministry of Universities under the FPU programme (FPU20/06066), focuses on representations of the Anthropocene in anglophone science fiction and fantasy. Her thesis project is under the supervision of Dr. Miriam Borham-Puyal (Universidad de Salamanca) and Prof. Rosario Arias-Doblas (Universidad de Málaga). Email: anatejero@usal.es. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9868-1286>.



The various environmental crises that our planet is currently suffering often seem to leave little space for hope. Climate change usually gets the most attention, as the effect of the global rising temperatures are closely related to droughts, floods, hurricanes and other extreme weather events that can be directly experienced (see “Climate and Weather Extremes”, 2022, for recent examples). However, there are other aspects that are changing the way our planet functions: the rapid extinction of non-human species, ocean acidification or the proliferation of non-biodegradable waste, among others. Humans are destroying ecosystems, over-using natural resources and, in the process, turning the planet into a place that will no longer be as hospitable to future generations (see IPCC 2022).

These concerns can all be related to the fact that we live in the Anthropocene, a geological epoch proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 that highlights the role of humankind in the modification and transformation of the environment; in this manner, it would follow the Holocene, the current official geological epoch, characterized by its stable climate. The concept has rapidly expanded to other disciplines, including the humanities, as a framework for understanding our world in crisis (see Horn and Bergthaller 2020). Taken at face value, the advent of the Anthropocene can be interpreted as a product of colonial and neoliberal ideologies that champions economic expansion and human exceptionalism. For this reason, it has come under much scrutiny and criticism, and it has been reworked and reconceptualized countless times during the years (see Hafner 2022). Despite its faults, the concept has continued to be used in multiple research fields because of its evocativeness: in just one word, different dimensions of the environmental crises are included, and, by using the term critically, it can also encompass the systemic causes behind it (capitalism, industrialization, colonialism and racism, among others).

In literature, numerous authors have engaged with the idea, either implicitly or explicitly, that we now live in the Anthropocene. Kim Stanley Robinson has dedicated most of his career to exploring the interrelations of human societies and their environments from the perspective of science fiction. The acclaimed *Mars* trilogy (*Red Mars*, *Green Mars* and *Blue Mars*, originally published between 1992 and 1996) deals with the terraforming of the planet Mars, while works such as *2312* (2012) or *New York 2140* (2017) examine the effects of climate change on a future Earth.

Robinson’s latest novel, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), is concerned with presenting several projects that intend to palliate the worst effects of the environmental crises in order to drive the Earth to an era he calls the “good Anthropocene” (475). The notion of the good Anthropocene has been controversial for how it conceptualizes a possible environmental utopia. Nevertheless, Robinson reworks it to serve his purposes, namely, to refer to a society that is both more sustainable and socially equitable than our current one.

The main aim of this article is to analyze the utopian project that is carried out in *The Ministry for the Future* through an exploration of the concept of the good Anthropocene. First, I will present the ways in which traditional Anthropocene

thought has been linked to dystopianism and dire futures. Along these theories emerges their utopian counterpart, the notion of the good Anthropocene, which has been nonetheless harshly criticized by some authors and reclaimed by others. The reading of *The Ministry for the Future* will concentrate on how it constructs its utopian project around the notion of the good Anthropocene, focusing on its narrative structure and its preoccupation with finding the root causes of the problem instead of simply working towards mitigation. In this manner, I intend to show how hopeful narratives are useful and even necessary for confronting the Anthropocene. Instead of accepting a disastrous fate, novels such as *The Ministry for the Future* propose concrete actions to work towards more sustainable societies and, in that manner, they can inspire change in the real world.

The apocalyptic worlds conjured by the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene can be easily linked to dystopian and apocalyptic thought. It speaks of a planet controlled by humans and for the benefit of humans, whose disregard for the functioning of Earth systems has driven them to a tipping point. It suggests that we have arrived at an epoch in which human impact on the planet has become irreversible, which will lead us to an uncertain future. The mere name “Anthropocene”, that is, “the age of humans”, not only suggests an anthropocentric view, but places the blame of the environmental crises on the whole species, regardless of socio-economic background. This perspective has been contested from numerous theoretical frameworks, which have reworked the meaning of the term or even proposed alternative names that better capture the origin of the environmental crises, which in turn can provide specific pathways to prevent ecological collapse.

Marxist and postcolonial critics, among others, are interested in discerning the sociocultural origins of environmental destruction. In their vision, this allows to tackle the root cause directly instead of working within the constraints of unjust systems that will surely perpetuate the damage upon the planet, as the exploitation of nature is directly tied to their core functioning. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg (2014) believe that the concept of the Anthropocene is strongly linked to species thinking; that is, it treats humanity as a whole instead of acknowledging that capitalism as a system creates inequalities, and thus find that the whole category is intrinsically unhelpful. Moreover, they maintain that thinking within the Anthropocene framework is “conducive to mystification and political paralysis. It cannot serve as a basis for challenging the vested interests of business-as-usual” (67).

Directly tying the advent of the Anthropocene to the rise of capitalism has led to the creation of the word Capitalocene, which, for Marxist critics, better conveys the guilty party of the environmental crises (Malm and Hornborg; Malm 2016; Moore 2016). The Capitalocene displaces the responsibility from a universal *anthropos* and instead holds at the center the economic system, whose ideology calls for a continuing exploitation of natural resources regardless of the productive

capacity of the planet. According to this point of view, the environmental crises cannot be tackled from a capitalist perspective, but dismantling the whole system is primordial for changing the way we relate to the Earth.

The strongest link between the Anthropocene and dystopia can arguably be found in the work of postcolonial scholars. Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (2017) describe the violence of colonialism as “a seismic shock” (771); the Anthropocene, a concept that arises in Western academia, is nothing more than a natural consequence of this violence placed upon peoples and nature, “the arrival of the reverberations of that seismic shockwave into the nations who introduced colonial, capitalist processes across the globe in the last half-millennium in the first place” (774). In that vein, Kyle P. Whyte (2018) recognizes that the Anthropocene conjures dystopic and apocalyptic images that erase the experience of Indigenous peoples. Colonialism has already made Indigenous communities live through the same scenarios that the advocates of the Anthropocene fear lie in the future of White and Western societies: for instance, mass displacement or the loss of ecosystems and cultural practices. Consequently, we already live in what the ancestors of Indigenous peoples would have considered a post-apocalyptic world. Whyte advocates for what he calls “living Indigenous science (fiction)”, “a philosophical place of intergenerational dialogue that unfolds through finding and empowering those protagonists who can inspire and guide us through the ancestral dystopias we continue to endure” (233); that is, Whyte accepts that dystopia does not lie in the future, but is already the living reality.

Similarly, Kathryn Yusoff (2018) asserts that the Anthropocene “might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence” (11–12). As a counterpart, she introduces the notion of “a billion Black Anthropocenes”, an attempt to decolonize geology via acknowledging its traditional anti-Blackness, achieved through geology’s universalization of the White experience and the erasure of Black histories. The concept of a billion Black Anthropocenes “asserts an insurgent geology for the end of the world, for the possibility of other worlds not marked by anti-Blackness, where the inhuman is a relation, no longer an appendage of fungibility” (111). In this way, Yusoff asserts that geology (that is, the discipline from which the Anthropocene arises) is never neutral, but always the product of concrete political ideologies.

For theorists that align with philosophical stances such as post-humanism and new materialisms, a more ethical relationship with our environment lies in recognizing that humans live in an entangled world and that we depend on our relationships with non-humans to thrive. They reject the anthropocentric view of Western societies and link the advent of the environmental crises with a disregard for nature and a belief in absolute human power that has made us assume that all the Earth was ours to exploit. Donna Haraway (2015) interprets the Anthropocene not as a new epoch, but as a transient period that will inevitably lead to a world fundamentally different from what came before. In order for this new world to be more just, she advocates for “making kin” (161), that is, acknowledging that

all species fundamentally share a common origin and, consequently, deserve our recognition and respect. Thus, she utilises the concept of the Anthropocene as a jumping point from which to conceive a post-Anthropocene future that is more equitable for all species and, in this way, transcends the apocalyptic vision of traditional Anthropocene discourse. Notwithstanding, she interprets the Anthropocene proper as an undesirable epoch that we should make “as short/thin as possible” (160).

Clive Hamilton (2017), however, takes a contrarian position. He critiques posthumanism as unscientific and instead proposes a “new anthropocentrism” (43), that is, a vision that recognizes humanity’s central role in bringing forth ecological catastrophe, but which, instead of championing freedom as the ultimate personal goal, places upon humans the responsibility of caring for the Earth. In this way, anthropocentrism becomes the inevitable byproduct of human agency: humanity is guilty of destabilizing natural ecosystems, but also the only species capable of restoring their balance. This agency is not individual, but social, exerted via the proxy of systems and institutions. This vision recognizes the entangled destinies of humanity and the planet, but, instead of valuing nature for nature’s sake, it does so insofar as the Earth provides resources and sustenance to human societies.

What all these critiques of the term from different perspectives show is that the Anthropocene is a concept that captures a multiplicity of meanings which can work in consonance or be outright contradictory, thus mirroring the diverse reality of human societies. However, most of these analysis of the epoch, even those that propose alternative worldviews to arrive at more just futures, share a pessimistic attitude towards it, considering the Anthropocene an epoch of disruption, environmental destruction and flagrant inequality.

The “good Anthropocene”: utopia or dystopia?

In contrast, one particular rethinking of the Anthropocene epoch stands out for its optimistic or even utopian view of both present and future: the notion of the “good Anthropocene”. Its origins can be traced back to Erle Ellis, who in 2011 wrote that “human system boundaries” (37–38), and not planetary ones, constrained the development of human civilization. As humanity has expanded its dominion over nature, the capacity of Earth to sustain us not only has not decreased, but has become ever more efficient, and there is no sign that this is going to be altered after the arrival of the Anthropocene. Ellis believes that humanity will be capable of adapting without any problem to our new environment, and that “we must not see the Anthropocene as a crisis, but as the beginning of a new geological epoch ripe with human-directed opportunity” (43) for bettering our well-being as well as that of non-human species. By reason of “the mantle of planetary stewardship” (42), which implies continuously modifying and engineering the remaining ecosystems —though he admits that we still lack the

sufficient expertise to fully manage our own technologies—, Ellis concludes that “[a] good, or at least a better, Anthropocene is within our grasp” (42–43).

Ellis’ perspective, a return to a universal *anthropos* as the agent of the Anthropocene who will ultimately care for the prosperity of all humanity, has come to be known as ecomodernism, a philosophical framework whose main principles were later summarized in *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015). In the text, its authors —among whom we encounter Ellis himself— sustain a hopeful and optimistic stance on the current environmental crises. They do not deny their existence, but instead center their ideas around the notion of the good Anthropocene and “decoupling”, that is, demonstrating that there is not, and there will not be, a correlation between economic growth and human impact on natural ecosystems. Instead, they believe that an improvement in human well-being can and should be “inseparable” (31) from a healthy environment. They already see this trend in contemporary human societies and thus maintain that human environmental impact will likely peak and then decline naturally, attributing this tendency to the development of new and more efficient technologies. Ecomodernists believe that current Western societal practices are compatible with ecological restoration, and thus we should not change our consumer habits, our values or our economic models, which will eventually allow us to reach a “great Anthropocene” (31, emphasis in the original).

The vision of *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* has been challenged for its anthropocentric view, its apparent disregard for the severe environmental problems plaguing the planet nowadays and its almost irrational faith on the benevolent forces of science and technology, which, as if it were the invisible hand of the market, will always come to the rescue in our times of need and balance the relationship between humans and the biosphere; ecomodernists give no thought to the collateral damage that will continue until this transition occurs (see Collard et al. 2016; Crist 2016; Latour 2016; Szerszynski 2016). Hamilton (2016), one of the fiercest critics of ecomodernism, believes that their notion of a “good Anthropocene” is modelled on a theodicy, that is, an argument for demonstrating that God is ultimately good, as they blindly believe that humans having such an impact upon the environment, and ever more, is something that will eventually lead us to a utopian future. Hamilton, on the contrary, interprets the Anthropocene as a radical departure from the Holocene, so, according to his vision, the ecomodernist logic, based on conventional approaches to society and economics, cannot work in an epoch that is fundamentally different to what came before.

The concept of the good Anthropocene has continued developing beyond ecomodernism. Part of its attractiveness lies on the simplicity of the adjective “good,” which has elicited analyses of the epoch based on a good/bad dichotomy. The bad Anthropocene, of course, refers to the current situation, in which a growing number of greenhouse gas emissions, consumption rates and raising inequalities are partnered with political immobilism. Defining the good Anthropocene has proven to be substantially more difficult. If the bad Anthropocene is connected

with dystopian thought, the good Anthropocene must naturally refer to its utopian counterpart. However, visions greatly differ: what the ecomodernists defined as the good Anthropocene, based on neoliberal ideologies, has been mostly rejected in ecology and connected disciplines. Some critics, in the same vein as Hamilton, refuse to recognize the possibility of a good Anthropocene, believing that the sole (theoretical) existence of the epoch is a tragedy: nothing good can come from an Earth characterised by the disruption in the fundamental working of planetary systems. Simon Dalby (2016), on the contrary, believes that the Anthropocene “is neither good nor bad” (16), but can certainly get “ugly”: that is, the policies we will have to adopt to mitigate the worst effects of the climate crises will probably not be entirely palatable.

In this fashion, other critics have engaged with the concept in order to explore what the arrival of a good Anthropocene would entail. These discussions relate to the fundamentally ideological nature of utopias (see Jameson 2005): they are always deeply ingrained in the agenda of the ideologue, who parts from a specific position in the world defined by their class, gender, race, sexuality, etc. That is, the utopia of ecomodernists, who are techno-optimists and believers in self-regulation according to capitalist principles, might be interpreted as a dystopia by those who exhibit other ideologies or tackle the Anthropocene from different points of view.

For this reason, Jan Kunnas (2017) advocates for reclaiming the good Anthropocene from ecomodernism. He proposes to define it as the conscious moment “when humans make decisive action to return within the planetary boundaries” (139). Thus, Kunnas’ conception of the good Anthropocene is neither passive nor hubristic, as it recognizes both the value of non-human entities and the possibility for human beings to radically transform their environments: it is human responsibility to choose whether to make these environments more hospitable to all species or to exploit them for monetary gain. In this manner, his reworking of the good Anthropocene opens up the possibilities for futures guided by human decisions but not totally subject to human needs.

More recently, McPhearson et al. (2021) have criticized normative projects, such as Bennett et al. (2016), that utilize the good Anthropocene narrative to seemingly work towards sustainability while remaining within already established power structures. Instead, they assert that radical societal and political change are necessary for achieving a truly good Anthropocene, a future that is “environmentally just, socially equitable, ecologically healthy, socially, ecologically, and technologically resilient and sustainable at all scales” (McPhearson et al. 3). In order to work towards achieving that goal, they propose a set of systemic changes that include rethinking about economic growth, the role of the state and the relationship between marginalized communities and their environments.

The good Anthropocene is a concept that allows for thinking about the future of the environment in utopian terms, rather than the dystopian perspective so prevalent in traditional Anthropocene discourse. Instead of focusing on the shortcomings of the present, the good Anthropocene opens up possible futures

that are more hospitable and sustainable for the people and the planet. Although this notion carries utopian connotations, the Anthropocene in its broader sense cannot (and never should) become a utopian concept. In spite of its main aim being bringing attention to the extent to which humans have modified their environments and shocking people into action, its core denotes a profoundly somber meaning: human influence upon the environment has become so pervasive that it will remain in the geological record for millions of years to come. Even if action is taken to palliate some of the effects of the Anthropocene, others are already irreversible, so a good Anthropocene can never aspire to return to the stable state of the Holocene. For that reason, the good Anthropocene lies in an intermediate state between utopia and dystopia: it deals with the desire to make things better (and what that entails is a question of ideology), but, at the same time, it must recognise that having entered the Anthropocene in the first place implies a disruption that cannot be completely overturned.

The Ministry for the Future: fictitious history and future projection

The dystopian images conjured by traditional Anthropocene discourse form the aesthetic basis of climate fiction (or cli-fi), a genre that deals specifically with climate change as the catalyst of its plots. Adeline Johns-Putra (2016) has asserted that in climate fiction “overwhelmingly, climate change appears in novels as part of a futuristic dystopian and/or postapocalyptic setting” (269). She establishes in this way a direct link between this pessimistic view characteristic of the Anthropocene and a futuristic perspective, a technique that can be associated with the broader genre of science fiction.

The relationship between science fiction and the Anthropocene has long been noted by critics; as Ursula K. Heise (2019) puts it: “the Anthropocene idea itself relies on a science fiction conceit by inviting us to look at our present through the eyes of a future geologist studying the Earth’s strata millions of years hence. This anterior future, now standard in narratives about the future of the planet, has always been the purview of science fiction as a genre” (301). As Fredric Jameson has established, one of the main pursuits of science fiction is, in fact, to imagine possible futures. However, these futures of science fiction for the most part do not function as predictions: “Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come” (288). Via engaging with the present as history, science fictional narratives project a trajectory whose intention may not only be to comment on its potential outcomes, but also on the present itself and what can be done now to achieve (in the case of utopia) or avoid (in the case of dystopia) the situation presented in the story.

Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) employs this technique in order to convey the image of a more sustainable society. Set in the immediate future, the story spans several decades and describes the establishment of a supranational body, the aforementioned Ministry for the Future, whose

main objective is to manage the environmental crises and to guide the world towards sustainability. The main interest of the novel, instead of recording the personal feelings of specific characters, is to narrate the concrete steps taken towards achieving this societal transition. The protagonists are Mary and Frank, respectively the head of the Ministry and a common man who, after experiencing the deadly heat wave with which the novel opens, becomes radicalized and decides to take action against those who are most to blame for the environmental crises. Their stories are interwoven with chapters in different and distinct narrative styles: political essays, first-person accounts of environmental projects carried out in different parts of the world or even experimental texts in which the author speaks in the voice of inanimate or abstract entities such as the sun, history or carbon atoms. This polyphony reflects the complexity and diversity of both the climate crises and human societies, and, mirroring the contradictory visions of the Anthropocene, provides distinct opinions and points of view on how to achieve environmental stability. At the same time it depicts a societal transition towards a more equitable future, the narration questions the ability of the Ministry to take actions that are beneficial for all sorts of people and societies: it describes the bureaucratic limitations of working within existing systems of power and gives voice to characters that are negatively affected by the actions taken by the Ministry.

Some of the chapters of *The Ministry for the Future* take the form of a future history; that is, they narrate the string of events covered by the novel as if it had long happened, even naming specific incidents and periods: for instance, the first years covered by the novel are “what some have called the Trembling Twenties”, while the actions performed in pursuit of a more sustainable society are labelled “the Great Turn” (123). This authoritative approach contrasts with the rest of the novel, which privileges multiplicity and ambivalence as necessary for engaging with the complexities of the world. Although these historiographical accounts are only one of the voices that build the novel, their decisive tone certainly guides the readers in their understanding of how the events unfold, thus becoming a sort of chronological chart of Robinson’s proposed future.

This approach certainly oversimplifies the trajectories taken in pursuit of sustainability. Nevertheless, Robinson himself also questions the validity of these historical constructions: “Of course attempts are always made to divide the past into periods. This is always an act of imagination” (123). He continues the discussion by connecting the narration of historized time to feelings rooted in the zeitgeist: “how you feel about your time is partly or even largely a result of that time’s structure of feeling. When time passes and that structure changes, how you feel will also change” (124). The historical accounts of *The Ministry for the Future* are explicitly “acts of imagination” in the sense that they are fictional. Nonetheless, they stem from a specific point in time that serves Robinson to comment on cultural feelings of the present about the present. In this manner, the future history technique is fundamental for understanding the perspective taken by the novel: when depicting a possible path that humanity can follow in its fight against

climate change and other environmental concerns in a predominantly positive light, Robinson is providing the audience with hope for change and calling them to action if they intend to achieve a global society similar to the one in the novel.

Giving a sense of immediacy and plausibility to the story also proves to be central for achieving this goal. For this reason, instead of taking a far-future perspective, the novel is set in the immediate future: after deciding on its founding in 2023, the Ministry is established, thus kickstarting the plot, in 2025, while the novel was published just a short time before, in 2020. By mixing real-life events, such as the signing of the Paris Agreement or the dip in CO₂ emissions in 2020, with fictitious occurrences, Robinson creates an interwoven tapestry of fact and fiction that is nonetheless anchored in the present, thus providing a strong base for his projection towards the future. When including sections that deal with this imagined web with the authority of a historian, the fictional elements are reinforced as fact, and the world that Robinson has created becomes clearer, more robust and conceivable.

The socio-economic components of the Anthropocene and the limitations of utopia

Robinson is preoccupied with palliating the catastrophic consequences of the Anthropocene, but also with examining its origins and reworking the systems that have enabled its birth. He understands that equity and ecological balance are intertwined and, for that reason, the objective of the Ministry is not only to better the environmental conditions on Earth, but also to influence society to consider the importance of sustainability and to work towards improving the material conditions of the marginalized. The polyphonic structure of the novel proves, again, crucial for the exploration of the socio-economic component of the environmental crises: it allows Robinson to present scientific fact and political commentary detached from the main plot, but, at the same time, it also reveals discrepancies between his core beliefs about the necessity of systemic change and the development of the story.

Some chapters of *The Ministry for the Future* unfold in the form of dialogues. Be them meetings of the Ministry itself or exchanges between unnamed characters, these chapters explore current topics relevant to the context of the story and the struggle for avoiding environmental and societal collapse, such as the actual efficacy of geoengineering or viable alternatives to capitalism. The conversational mode is aligned with the novel's intention of providing distinct points of view about the topics with which it deals and shows that the actions taken towards repairing the relationship between humanity and nature are not universally accepted, but subject to debate. The novel does not style itself as a blueprint, nor does it believe that there is an easy and unified path for arriving at a better future; rather, it concerns itself with depicting the environmental crises as complex problems that require both collaboration and compromise between opposing viewpoints.

Similarly, other chapters are written in the form of essays, thus tying again the novel with scientific and historical fact. These essays are not explicitly connected to the plot or voiced by any characters and thus add yet another layer of meaning to the story, presenting ideas and proposals that none of the other characters can convey. While the main plot deals with the Ministry for the Future, a UN agency which naturally works within existing political systems, the essays exhibit a more radical approach, blaming capital and the free market for the environmental crises in the vein of the proponents of the Capitalocene (see, for instance, pages 29-30, 57-58 or 73-76 of the novel). This juxtaposition reveals a contradiction between Robinson's ideals and what he has deemed possible within our cultural context. The reforms carried out by the Ministry lie within the constraints of the current systems, and thus comes as no surprise that the novel has been called "a reformist rather than a revolutionary one" (Shaviro 2020, 112).

There seems to be tension as well between the ideals of the individual people that work in the Ministry and what they can effectively achieve inside an institutional context. Mary, the head of the Ministry, once tells the Swiss presidency: "Help us get to the next world system. New metrics, new kinds of value creation. Make the next political economy. Invent post-capitalism! The world needs it, it really has to happen" (317). Her deepest intentions are to drive the world towards a stage beyond capitalism; however, the Ministry has to appeal to the agents of business-as-usual in order to get their proposals ratified.

This can be clearly seen through the struggle to develop and implement the carbon coin, a currency based on the capture of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and intended to substitute traditional monetary systems. This becomes the Ministry's biggest project, and they have to go through several rejections and complications before it becomes standardized, which cannot occur without the support of the world's most powerful central banks: the ratification of the project hence plays into the needs of the state. In the final reunion to push the carbon coin, the central bankers are described the following way:

[T]hese people were as close to rulers of the world as existed. If they were now using their power to protect the biosphere and increase equity, the world could very well tack onto a new heading and take a good course. . . . They were securing money's value, they still told themselves; which in this moment of history required that the world get saved. (510-11)

This passage shows how bankers, representatives of the current economic system, act as gatekeepers of a sustainable future, and thus compromise between deep reform and the concerns of governments are shown as necessary for achieving the desired transition. The support of the bankers proves crucial for passing the Ministry's reforms, but they do not offer it because of a desire to create a more just society, but because it aligns with their economic interests at that moment. Their attitude change is only achieved due to external influence, tied to a change in public consciousness: "Of course the whole world was making them do it" (Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* 511). This change in the culture at

large is firstly achieved through protest and even violent action, and then a shift in how people relate to the world and to one another.

At the beginning of the novel, the Ministry's actions are ineffectual, and official policies promoted by national governments are not enough, according to part of the public. Frank's character arc departs from his need to take some action to remedy this situation, so he tries to join an ecoterrorist organization; when his membership is rejected, he kills a rich man in a rage: “You fuckers are burning up the world with your stupid games” (77), he tells his victim beforehand, suggesting that he acknowledges the influence of capital in environmental degradation. Frank later kidnaps Mary and tries to convince her of the necessity to murder the people who are the most to blame for the environmental crises, but Mary remains firm and tells him that working within the law gives the Ministry a better change to instill change. Frank's rage eventually amounts to nothing, as he is later arrested and put in prison until his death near the end of the novel. At the end of his life, Frank is shown as a person who has lost his will to fight: “I've been losing my opinions. . . . They seem to be going away” (463), he says.

In contrast, the organization he tried to join, the Children of Kali, is implied to be responsible for Crash Day, when sixty planes all around the world were made to crash in order to send a message against fossil-fueled aerial transportation: “The War for the Earth is often said to have begun on Crash Day” (Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* 229), which signals the importance of this event in the context of the transition to sustainability. After that, the Children of Kali target container ships, which run on diesel, and infect cows with mad cow disease so that people would stop eating beef and drinking cow milk, as cattle is proven to be one of the main emitters of greenhouse gases. These violent attacks, however, become the first actions in the novel to have a definitive effect on the wider culture: “And indeed . . . ever after, less beef got eaten. Less milk was drunk. And fewer jet flights were made” (Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* 229–30). Without the extremism of the Children of Kali and the fear they projected onto the population, society would not have changed its consumer habits and, thus, the Ministry would not have been able to convince the world governments of the importance of their reforms.

Although the focus of the novel, as signaled by its title, is the Ministry for the Future and its institutional power, violence and protest are also present in the novel as crucial strategies for achieving the desired change in cultural values. Indeed, the Ministry itself is implied to have a black wing which carries out covert operations in order to accelerate their intended transformations. In this way, the novel shows the difficulty of convincing the agents of business-as-usual of the necessity of changing their ways and the power that can be exerted via unorthodox actions: it is only after violence has elicited a change in public consciousness that official authorities can endorse those reforms that prove the most effective in the struggle against further environmental degradation. This may reveal a limitation in purely utopian thought, as the novel supports that, sometimes, unpalatable processes have to be set into motion before things effectively get better.

In a similar manner, *The Ministry for the Future* clearly privileges the collective over the individual and is more interested in exploring societal change than providing a heroic narrative in which extraordinary individuals perform an action big enough to solve all the problems of the Earth. The plans in the novel unfold gradually, throughout several decades, and, as it has been discussed, none of them would work on their own, but it is the combination of distinct forces what pushes the world towards a more sustainable state. Again, this is reflected by the structure of the novel, which brings together different voices to represent the importance of diversity and collaboration, but also disruption, in the fight against the environmental crises.

In contrast, the main characters are relatively powerless to bring change forward by themselves, and their storylines feel like a formality, an obligatory connection with personal subjectivity to conform to the expectations of the novel form. This is best exemplified by Frank, who tries to fight against the most powerful alone but ends up imprisoned and defeated, his will to battle subdued. Mary, as the head of the Ministry, feels a sense of accomplishment at the end of the novel, but, again, her influence stems from her collaboration with a bigger organization. Furthermore, the majority of the narrators in the different sections that make up the novel are unnamed, thus making them archetypes or symbols of their social position or simply vessels to convey information or judgment. Robinson is clearly more interested in exploring the power dynamics that enable the Anthropocene than delving into characterization, and hence *The Ministry for the Future* can be described as a novel that deals with the collective instead of the individual.

The arrival of a better world: The good Anthropocene

The first part of *The Ministry for the Future* is characterized by feelings of ineffectiveness and impending doom. As discussed in the previous section, the first attempts of the Ministry to effectively change the relationship between human societies and nature are not particularly productive: in fact, environmental catastrophes become ever more common. Meetings of the Paris Agreement continue happening despite a growing sense of futility. In fact, the 2030s in the novel are called “zombie years. Civilization had been killed but it kept walking the Earth, staggering toward some fate even worse than death” (227). Nevertheless, the progressive implementation of reforms gradually transforms the mood as well, turning *The Ministry for the Future* into a hopeful story.

Near the end of the novel, the 58th Conference of the Parties and the sixth general assessment of the Paris Agreement are simultaneously held.¹ The conference summarizes the policies that have been taken throughout the novel to mitigate the environmental crises and their positive outcomes, but also the problems that still need to be tackled; these scenes prove crucial for understanding the purpose of the novel. Although the conference is viewed through the perspective of Mary, the exhaustive descriptions of the state of the

planet in scientific terms give it a sense of authority that distances the narration from personal interpretation and which mirrors the effect of the future history chapters.

During the first day of the conference, all of the developments that are considered positive are presented together: the transition to renewable energy sources, the decrease in per capita consumption, the lower quantity of CO₂ in the atmosphere, among others. The second day is devoted to exploring concerns with the state of the planet, which, despite being a signal that humanity is “still in the thick of it” (480), are interpreted as challenges by the attendees to the conference:

[G]iven what had been revealed and celebrated the day before, there was a sense in the hall that these problems, as wicked as they were, were impediments to a general movement, to history itself, and thus susceptible to being overwhelmed, or solved piecemeal, or worked around, or put off to a later time when even more momentum would be available for deployment against them. (480)

This passage shows a historicist and triumphalist vision of the world, a belief that progress is always a straight line and that human ingenuity can overcome any problem, which contrasts with the focus on multiplicity the rest of the novel exhibits and its critique to the possibility of achieving utopia within the already existing systems of power. Nonetheless, it also highlights how positive narratives can contribute to creating an affirmative outlook in the face of problems. In the novel, when seeing how concrete change has effectively bettered the environmental conditions of the world, the attendees to the conference proceed to engage with active hope, that is, believing that things will continue getting better only when working towards that goal.

In this context, the Paris Agreement is reframed in the story as “[t]he greatest turning point in human history, what some called the first big spark of planetary mind. The birth of a good Anthropocene” (475); this way, Robinson explicitly engages with the concept of the good Anthropocene. His understanding of the term is more akin to that of Kunnas and McPhearson et al. than the situation presented in *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*: a reworking of the concept that accepts human responsibility for the planet via direct reform and action, as it has been seen throughout the whole novel. Although he does not present a radical rethinking of the economic and political systems that lie under the arrival of the Anthropocene, Robinson condemns them in his essays and weaves their modification into the narrative in order to show that there can be no sustainability without at least reconducting —and, perhaps more effectively though harder to achieve, eliminating— the needs of capital.

The creation of the aforementioned “planetary mind” is also crucial in Robinson’s conceptualization of the good Anthropocene, in line with his focus on societal change and collective action. Throughout the novel, the Ministry observes that people “are coming to think of themselves as part of a planetary civilization. Main sense of patriotism now directed to the planet itself” (358).

Via radical identification with the world, the people partaking in this movement adopt the planetary perspective of the Anthropocene, which believes in the interconnectedness and mutual influence of all planetary and social systems, and thus seek to act at a global rather than a local level.

This comes to a climax near the end of the novel, when an unnamed narrator describes an event in which people all around the Earth listen to a speech at the same time: “We are the children of this planet, we are going to sing its praises all together, all at once, now is the time to express our love, to take the responsibilities that come with being stewards of this Earth, devotees of this sacred space, one planet, one planet, on and on it went” (538). This scene highlights interconnection and the feeling of community felt by the people who participate in the occasion not only with each other, but also with other beings in the planet: “We are all family, . . . and as every living thing on Earth shares a crucial 938 base pairs of DNA, I guess it’s really true” (Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* 539). This is a philosophy much akin to Donna Haraway’s proposal for overcoming the Anthropocene; however, Robinson brings it together with the idea of planetary stewardship, that is, the idea that humans should exert their power to modify the Earth systems in order to ensure the survival and well-being of all species and ecosystems. In contrast to traditional environmentalism, which usually focuses solely on preservation, Robinson seems to advocate instead for conscious modification of the environment if that betters the survivability of its inhabitants, as exemplified by the reforms carried out during the story: for instance, geoengineering projects that intend to lower global temperatures and avoid the rise in the sea levels or the creation of wildlife corridors to increase the population of wild animals.

The perspective of *The Ministry for the Future* is optimistic and, to a certain extent, utopian, as it believes in the possibility of the arrival of a more just world. Nevertheless, the shortcomings and limitations of the policies approved throughout the novel are not ignored: for instance, the continuing pollution of the biosphere, the mistreatment of women and the worsening of ocean health are explicitly mentioned (483–84), once again tying environmental and social well-being. The last aspect is especially interesting, as the novel describes a series of processes in the functioning of the ocean (namely acidification, rising temperatures and deoxygenation) that are not possible to directly control: even in the new world of the good Anthropocene, there are some remnants of the past, reminders of the effects that humans have already caused on the planet that are not reversible. That is the core meaning of the Anthropocene: a change in the planetary systems so profound that it will ever continue to appear in fossil records. The mere existence of the Anthropocene, even in its modified “good” version, implies an apocalyptic vision: the end of a world, the birth of another. Following this example, the oceans (both in the story and in reality) will never be the same as in the Holocene, and we will have to deal with the consequences of former actions for generations. In this way, the past continues haunting the new world created in the novel and prevents it for achieving that cherished utopia.

For that reason, McKibben (2020) has opted for calling *The Ministry for the Future* “anti-dystopian”: the novel refuses to give up to the despair that has become usual when confronting the climate crises, but, at the same time, recognises the limitations in human action and the impossibility of completely amending the mistakes of the past. The difference between the utopian and the anti-dystopian is slight: while utopia refers to the impulse to create a “better” society, although the final objectives may not have been achieved yet, anti-dystopia refers to an outlook that explicitly opposes disparities, defeatism and overall darkness. The preference of one word above the other to describe *The Ministry for the Future*, or the notion of the good Anthropocene in general, lies within the choice whether to highlight positivity or resistance, although both are crucial components of both terms.

Conclusions: anti-dystopia for the Anthropocene

The Ministry for the Future decides to engage with the environmental crises with a hopeful outlook and a focus on concrete action. Via the description of specific social and environmental projects, the novel presents a possible future world that is more equitable and sustainable than our current one. Although it has been classified as science fiction, Robinson cares deeply about connecting his fictional story with the present in order to give it a sense of plausibility and to inspire his readers to pursue social, economic and political change. In this way, he intends to combat the pessimism that has been traditionally tied to Anthropocene thought and climate fiction.

The notion of the good Anthropocene, optimistic by design, proves crucial in this regard. Instead of deriving its meaning from the ecomodernists, Robinson repurposes the concept to refer to a state of the world achieved only through active hope, that is, the belief that things can get better only when intently working towards that goal. He considers sustainability as the most important human project, but takes into account not only the environmental component, but also the need to change the systems that perpetuate both social and ecological harm. For that reason, he focuses on collective action instead of building the story around a heroic individual. The structure of the novel is fragmented and multi-faceted, and Robinson employs diverse narrative techniques and voices to convey the complexity of tackling the environmental crises: many of his narrators are unnamed, and his characters only show real influence when they work within organized groups.

Similarly, *The Ministry for the Future* recognizes the limitations of this proposed good Anthropocene. Firstly, it acknowledges that the arrival of the Anthropocene inherently implies a rupture with the previous epoch and that some of the consequences of human modification of the environment are irreversible. Robinson also places the focus of the novel on an official institution, whose goals are noble but which needs to work in tandem with governments, laws and other systems of power which are already in place and ultimately responsible for environmental harm and social inequalities. This tension leads him to produce a

narrative that, at the same time, plays into the interests of business-as-usual and that accepts the necessity of unorthodox and even violent methods to bypass the barriers placed by hegemonic structures. Nevertheless, he ultimately endorses the influence exerted by public consciousness: once the general population changes its outlook in how they relate to the planet, the institutions in power must adapt in order to retain their dominance.

The novel believes in the possibility of a good Anthropocene, guided by a utopian impulse: despite the aforementioned limitations and the world not achieving an ideal state at the end of the narrative, active transformation and hope are continuously reinforced as the fundamental strategies for improving sustainability. In this sense, *The Ministry for the Future* adopts an anti-dystopian perspective, denying that the environment is destined to deteriorate to the point of no return and rather advocating for the possibility of developing both social and natural well-being, but only when rethinking how human societies function and relate to their environment.

Nota

1. If we take into account that the first global stocktake was held at the beginning of the novel in 2023 and it occurs every five years, this would situate this meeting in 2048, 25 years later.

Works cited

- Asafu-Adjaye, John, et al. *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*. 2015, <http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto-english>.
- Bennett, Elena M., et al. "Bright Spots: Seeds of a Good Anthropocene." *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, vol. 14, no. 8, 2016, pp. 441–48, <https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.1309>.
- "Climate and Weather Extremes in 2022 Show Need for More Action." *World Meteorological Organization*, 23 Dec. 2022, <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/news/climate-and-weather-extremes-2022-show-need-more-action>.
- Collard, Rosemary-Claire, et al. "The Moderns' Amnesia in Two Registers." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 227–32, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616425>.
- Crist, Eileen. "The Reaches of Freedom: A Response to *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 245–54, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616452>.
- Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. "The 'Anthropocene.'" *Global Change Newsletter*, no. 41, May 2000, pp. 17–18.
- Dalby, Simon. "Framing the Anthropocene: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly." *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, pp. 33–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019615618681>.
- Davis, Heather, and Zoe Todd. "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2017, pp. 761–80.
- Ellis, Erle. "The Planet of No Return. Human Resilience on an Artificial Earth." *The Breakthrough Journal*, no. 2, Fall 2011, pp. 37–44.

- Hafner, Robert. “The Anthropocene: Thought Styles, Controversies and Their Expansions. A Review.” *Die Erde*, vol. 153, no. 3, 2022, pp. 149–61, <https://doi.org/10.12854/erde-2022-619>.
- Hamilton, Clive. *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. Allen & Unwin, 2017.
- Hamilton, Clive. “The Theodicy of the ‘Good Anthropocene.’” *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 233–38, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616434>.
- Haraway, Donna. “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin.” *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 159–65, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934>.
- Heise, Ursula K. “Science Fiction and the Time Scales of the Anthropocene.” *ELH*, vol. 86, no. 2, 2019, pp. 275–304, <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2019.0015>.
- Horn, Eva, and Hannes Bergthaller. *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities*. Routledge, 2020.
- IPCC. *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. Cambridge UP, 2022, doi:10.1017/9781009325844.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2005.
- Johns-Putra, Adeline. “Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies: From Cli-fi, Climate Change Theater and Ecopoetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism.” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, vol. 7, 2016, pp. 266–82, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.385>.
- Kunnas, Jan. “Storytelling: From the Early Anthropocene to the Good or the Bad Anthropocene.” *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, pp. 136–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019617725538>.
- Latour, Bruno. “Fifty Shades of Green.” *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 219–25, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616416>.
- Malm, Andreas. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. Verso, 2016.
- Malm, Andreas, and Alf Hornborg. “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative.” *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 62–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291>.
- McKibben, Bill. “It’s Not Science Fiction.” *The New York Review of Books*, 17 Dec. 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/12/17/kim-stanley-robinson-not-science-fiction/>.
- McPhearson, Timon, et al. “Radical Changes Are Needed for Transformations to a Good Anthropocene.” *Npj Urban Sustainability*, vol. 1, no. 5, 2021, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42949-021-00017-x>.
- Moore, Jason W. “The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2017, pp. 594–630, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. *2312*. Orbit, 2012.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. *Blue Mars*. Spectra, 2003.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. *Green Mars*. Spectra, 2003.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. *New York 2140*. Orbit, 2017.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. *Red Mars*. Spectra, 2003.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. *The Ministry for the Future*. Orbit, 2020.

Shapiro, Steven. "Optimism in the Face of Catastrophe: Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*." *Studies in the Fantastic*, no. 10, 2020, pp. 108–14, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sif.2020.0020>.

Szerszynski, Bronislaw. "Getting Hitched and Unhitched with the Ecomodernists." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 239–44, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616443>.

Whyte, Kyle P. "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, 2018, pp. 224–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618777621>.

Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. U of Minnesota P, 2018.

Recebido em: 23/01/2023

Aceito em: 01/06/2023