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Slow, Complex, Dull? Climate Boredom and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

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Abstract: The article discusses the phenomenon of climate boredom via Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*. Based an embodied understanding of boredom—particularly as a literary effect—I considers the novel's potential to bore through its slow narration of the politics, economics and administration of global carbon sequestration. I posit that the novel's willingness to bore arises from and resonates with the ways in which it imagines that climate change might be at least somewhat successfully managed. Furthermore, I argue that this may represent a purposeful shift from cli-fi's perhaps too familiar spectacularizing of climate change's effects, and that the often delayed, backgrounded or distanced action of the novel serves to redirect interest to the slow, complex and often dull work of climate change's solving which, while hardly positive, may be more workable than a paralyzing boredom that can emerge as means of distancing climate change. In analyzing *Ministry* through boredom, I also seek to establish a connection between the phenomenon of climate boredom and critical discussions of literary slowness and complexity, particularly as they are positioned in relation to imaginings of the Anthropocene. Moreover, I want to interrogate this championing of difficult texts in relation to their ostensible aim, which is to shift, inflame and nuance public consciousness on the issue. This article, then, pays particular attention to the 'caveat' reader, the bored reader who puts down the text, and thus attends to boredom also as a risk of slow and complex literature.

Keywords: science fiction, climate boredom, ecocriticism, embodiment.

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> Eventually you have to recognize that many necessary things are boring, but also, quite a few things are both boring and interesting at the same time.
>
> Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*, 2020

1. Introduction

Climate change is boring: that is, the apocalypse, and its incredibly complicated mode of delivery, dramatic results, and our diminishing ability to prevent them, is not quite riveting. Or, we can at least say that interest in climate change is, volumetrically, lower than sensible and clearly unevenly distributed. At times, we are bored with it, and if it is riveting it is the sense of being held fast, pinned, stuck. By all our usual metrics of 'interesting'—complexity of processes, spectacularity of effects, novelty, relation of effects to the individual, changing of status quos and erstwhile constants—climate change should be the endgame of interesting. Then why isn't it?

We might proffer that it is just discussion of climate change that we are bored by. And this may be the case for some of us, but it likewise seems that the scale of climate change exerts a pressure that, over time, metamorphoses worry into boredom, or at least braids the two together. For those who take climate change seriously, our carbon footprints have become a quantifiable calculation of climate sins, giving us the ability to precisely tot up our individual, daily contribution to our shared global apocalypse. Even if we are not, then, individually bored by climate change, it bores in the manner of a wagged finger, a judgmental omnipresence closer to the infernal than the divine.

Ben Anderson (2023) suggests that we are faced with the phenomenon of 'climate boredom', which, he argues, may be rooted in

> a defence against the need to detach from fossil-fuelled forms of life; a way of inhabiting the overwhelming or unbearable; a means of continuing existing attachments; the refusal of a demand issued from elsewhere; a desire for normality to endure (p. 3).

Anderson principally conceives of climate boredom as serving as a form of denial, perhaps as a defense mechanism against grief for a dying, or dead, way of life. Thus, climate boredom is also a condition of modernity and modernity's potential end, or transformation, through its inability to exist while continuing to rely on fossil fuels and hyperconsumption. Climate boredom does not just arise, then, from the apocalyptic repetitiveness of climate discourse, but perhaps forms a part of the Anthropocene's wider affective malaise. Which is to say that you can't spell 'yawning abyss' without yawn.

Among a number of treatments for climate boredom, Anderson (2023) mentions Kim Stanley Robinson's (2020) *The Ministry for the Future* as having the potential to shake people from their lassitude, to "shock a reader into action" (p. 6). Anderson specifically references Ministry's near-future opening scene, which depicts a wet-bulb heat event in India that results in the deaths of an estimated 20 million people. This scene is focalised through an American aid worker—Frank May—who is the sole survivor of the Uttar Pradesh town in which he is posted. It is a sequence which has won the novel much praise, largely due to the strength of its embodied effects: the horror and claustrophobia of Frank's experience, and the ensuing trauma that irrupts into his life and narrative. It is notable, however, that the emotional valance of Ministry's opening scene is significantly different from the wider novel. In fact, its strongly embodied reading

experience provides significant propulsion to move through the rest of the story, which is a much slower, even muted, affair. *The Ministry for the Future* is not a disaster novel: it is a preventing-a-disaster novel. And it does not do this through mere spectacle: there is no asteroid to blow up, no bomb to defuse, no sudden apocalypse to survive. The 'apocalypse' that threatens—climate change—is a slowed one,[1] insidious, and it is, in *Ministry*, combatted through bureaucracy, diplomacy, speculative finance, and citizen action. And, of course, through large, violent acts of eco-terrorism, the spectacle of which—through distancing summary—is tellingly backgrounded.

Robinson's own commentary on the novel suggests that this turning away from spectacle may be purposeful. In a 2020 interview with *The Nation*, he is invited to discuss the contemporaneous civil unrest in the U.S. in relation to that imagined in *Ministry*. In his answer, he notes how he has been intrigued by scientific literature that suggests that protests are party-like: "they're easy […] you feel you've expressed your sense of righteous indignation, you've done something that's physical, you've been reassured, and then everything goes back to normal" (Gordon, 2020). The energy of protest is figured as an outburst, as a spectacle, an interruption to the norm to which most then return. Robinson juxtaposes this type of energy to that of the "actual work of political change," his characterization of which proves highly illuminating of *Ministry*, particularly the character of its narrativity—that is, the felt quality of its narrative—and its wider affective profile:

> the actual work of political change has to do with incredibly tedious and meticulous attending of school board meetings and town council meetings, staying engaged as a citizen, and doing something that feels like a waste of one's hours that is not very fun. It goes on and on, and you don't see the changes for years, if ever. This kind of work is hard to stick with. Donna Haraway calls this "staying with the trouble"—and staying with the trouble is hard (Gordon, 2020).[2]

Political change is thus figured as mundane, as the dull, as that which we must integrate into the 'normal' to which we return. It is, moreover, continuous, rather than interruptive: it demands 'staying with.' I take Robinson's comment here as a springboard to consider one of the most noticeable effects and interests of *The Ministry for the Future*, and the entangling of this effect with our response to climate change. That is, boredom, and its place within the wider cultural object of the Anthropocene.

The Ministry for the Future is boring. This is not a castigation of the novel, but a recognition—in my own reading and as expressed by critics, reviewers and in corridor, classroom and conference conversations—that it bores.[3] If it does not bore as a totality then, at least, per the quite long reading experience, it does so at points, to the point that we can sensibly describe it as a very interesting boring book, or perhaps an important book that bores. The manner in which

[1] I use 'slowed' rather than Nixon's 'slow' in accord with Anaïs Maurer's (2024) position that the violence of the Anthropocene can happens in bursts, with immediate effects, whose ripples are typically only slow by the time they reach the Global North (see p. 24). I somewhat extend Maurer words, here, beyond the immediate context in which she writes, which centers on the effects of nuclear testing in the Pacific.

[2] It is worth noting Robinson (2020) does not seem to doubt the effect of protest and mass demonstration—as at least evidenced by the wider context of this article's epigraph, where the speaker corrects an interviewer about the efficacy of Hong Kong activist groups (see p. 516).

[3] In relation to corridor conversations, this approach to *Ministry* was nuanced through conversations with my colleague Marco Caracciolo, who's forthcoming book includes an analysis of boredom in relation to *Ministry*'s engagement with the scalar challenges of the Anthropocene.

Ministry might bore the reader, however, is highly interesting and—considering Robinson's words above—potentially purposeful. Boredom, too, is anything but boring, and not all boredom is experienced the same. Boredom, typically characterized by an enervation of energy and attention, prompts us to disengage from an activity in order to question the worth of continuing it: a reaction that creates a critical distance in order to relate this activity to our wider priorities. Accordingly, boredom is an emotional state defined by worth and meaning (Eastwood et al., 2012; Finkielsztein, 2023). Experiences and expressions of boredom can be a significant indice of personal and societal priorities, of what is and is not worth 'staying with.' I will return to a fuller definition later, but here I want to underline boredom as a licked finger held to the breeze of meaning. What might it mean to be bored by—or to have boredom threaten—the literary imagining of climate change, and its solving? Extrapolating from this, what danger does boredom pose to our ability to not only contemplate slow, complex works such as Robinson's, but the slower and more wickedly complex, multi-scalar threat of anthropogenic climate change? And might boredom also, in fact, require us to do more than put up with it, but to embrace it, as a necessary, critical reaction to climate change?

To answer these questions, *Ministry* must be understood not just against the threat of climate change, but against the literary contexts of climate change literature (or cli-fi), whose narrative challenges are well accounted for. In particular, literary representation of the Anthropocene is argued to struggle on two fronts, namely of rising to the challenge of its wicked, scalar complexity while continuing to appeal to human narrative predispositions. Timothy Clark (2015) summarizes this double bind as so:

> In literary representations of the Anthropocene the techniques available to engage a reader's immediate emotional interest emerge as most often at odds with the scale, complexity and the multiple and nonhuman contexts involved. Thus politically engaged novels and films almost always dramatize the issues in the form of a confrontation or conflict between the stance of characters with opposing views, so that a reader's or viewer's engagement with intellectual debate tends to become eclipsed by familiar modes of suspense and identification, which usually have more to do with the human psychology of competition or self-fulfilment (p. 181).

Ursula Heise (2008) suggests that this challenge requires us to thus recalibrate our traditional literary and lyrical forms "that have conventionally focused above all on individuals, families, or nations, since it requires the articulation of connections between events at vastly different scales" (p. 205).

In recent years, ecocriticism's focus has indeed shifted from the texts that center human conflict to the perhaps more ambitious ones called for by Heise. Forms of slowness and complexity have, in particular, been championed for their ability to challenge the embodied range of readers' narrative biases. From the recently published collection *Slow Narrative Across Media* (Caracciolo and Mingazova, 2024), Caracciolo (2024) posits that, for narrative engagement with ecological issues

> slowness offers the audience a unique opportunity to leave their anthropocentric comfort zone by disrupting the teleology of plot […] [enhancing] the ecological significance of narrative by creating a contemplative form of attention that welcomes the convergence of human and more-than-human temporalities […] For the predisposed readers (and for students of econarratology), there is great value in the defamiliarization of human-nonhuman relations that slowness can provide (p. 183).

But this is a potential, not a certainty, and, as noted by Clark, may be at odds with the general interest of readers. As Caracciolo and Mingazova (2024) also suggest in their introduction to the same collection, slowness, as an experience, depends on a reader's ability and willingness to engage with it (see p. 7). And both options—engagement and retraction of interest—include boredom: as a threat to overcome or avoid, or a discomfort that requires 'staying with.'

In describing *Ministry*'s potential to bore I am, then, also describing its thoughtfulness, its slowness, its caution, and its complexity. Organizing these under boredom is not a suggestion that all such traits collapse to that baseline. As will be seen, boredom is an unquashable threat, or potential, for any text or activity that demands significant attention for a prolonged time, that engages with due diligence in such a complex and depressing topic. The work required of readers by such texts may necessitate dips, or plunges, into boredom, toward an assessment of the text's use of our energy. Some cli-fi texts seek to overcome this through spectacle and high levels of characterological narrativity: the spoonful of sugar to medicine approach. However, while this can make climate change 'realer' to a reader, it risks an anthropocentric approach, which may not be suited to sticking with climate change's slow, non-human, geotemporal and multiscalar trouble. Thus, the boredom/engagement dialectic is an ever-present risk that one takes not only with slow and/or complex literature, but with any serious, sustained response to climate change, literary or otherwise.

In this article, then, I first posit that the cultural and physical realities of climate change inculcate boredoms that require close and sustained attention, including an attention to the embodied experience of boredom itself. I then proceed to argue that this reality, and its literary representation, can be valuably illuminated by a reading of *The Ministry for the Future* that focuses on the narrative techniques by which it cultivates a boredom that both arises from and resonates with the ways in which it imagines that climate change might be at least somewhat successfully managed. That is, that *Ministry*'s boring potential may be a positive. In the context of wider cli-fi, I argue that this may represent a purposeful shift from a cultural predisposition to fixate on the spectacular effects of climate change, and that the often delayed, backgrounded or distanced action of the novel serves to redirect interest to the slow, complex and often dull work of climate change's solving. This further harmonizes with Robinson's above citation of Haraway, and what it will mean to 'stay with the trouble' of the novel. I also, however, pivot from Caracciolo's words, with the 'non-predisposed reader' also inspiring the somewhat mischievous strand of this article's focus on boredom.[4] In analyzing *Ministry* through boredom—as both a concept and experience—I also seek to establish a dialogue between the literary discussions of slowness and complexity, particularly as they are positioned in relation to imaginings of the climate change and the Anthropocene, and the cultural phenomenon of climate boredom. This article will thus also pay attention to the 'caveat' reader, the bored reader, to whom we typically only nod at out of critical awkwardness, with boredom serving as an entry point to the reading experiences that literary criticism typically sidelines as unintended, incomplete, or simply undesirable.

[4] I am also laterally inspired, in interrogating (and sometimes sidestepping) the overbearing seriousness of climate discourse, by Nicole Seymour's (2018) *Bad Environmentalism.*

2. Boredom

An understanding of the phenomenology of boredom can help us to understand not just why it endangers an appropriate response to climate change, but the particular aesthetic pressures it poses for literature on this topic. Boredom is neurologically distinct, and 'true' boredom differs from mere idle states such as daydreaming. Evolutionarily, boredom is thought to function as a signal of cognitive slack, an embodied suggestion that we are capable of more than we are currently engaged in (Eastwood et. al., 2012; Eastwood and Gorelik, 2019). As to how this manifests as an embodied experience, Finkielsztein (2021) defines situational boredom—momentary, rather than chronic—as

> a transient, negatively perceived, transitional emotion or feeling of listless and restless inattention to and engagement withdrawal from interacting with one's social and/or physical environment caused distinctively by an atrophy of personally-valued meaning, the frustrated need for meaning (p. 78).

In short, we may feel bored when something demands more attention than we feel it is worth. If we are bored by an activity, such as the reading of a particular text, we may thus question the worth of the activity and entertain a withdrawal of attention, perhaps because another task will reward it better, or be more meaningful to that which we find meaningful. As expounded by Hogan (2003), however, boredom can also arise from overstimulation: when we cannot appropriately sort the data we are receiving in a meaningful or intelligible way, which may manifest as cognitive disorientation (see p. 10). Thus it is not just insufficiently novel experiences that can bore, but also a continually novel experience—particularly when it requires more cognitive effort than the expected reward is deemed worth.

Contextualizing boredom against evolutionary requirements is helpful to understand it at a fundamental level, but it requires further contextualization to explain its arousal in reading, where we may be less likely to place it on a scale of boring/worthwhile compared to boring/entertaining or boring/interesting. As accounted by Willemsen and Kiss (2022), it has long been argued that aesthetic appeal of art is at its optimum at moderate and manageable levels of complexity, with confusion an unwanted result of the overly complex (see pp. 2–3), which resonates with Hogan's position that boredom can emerge from the overly novel. Tracking narrative complexity in a text may, then, reveal the related pattern of narrative interest as in, for example, the ways in which a text cultivates emotions such as suspense, surprise, or curiosity. Narrative interest may emerge from gaps in the text where the reader can cognitively involve themselves by, for example, predicting narrative progression, analyzing character motivation, or spotting narrative patterns, and thus exercising and potentially bettering our pattern recognition, theory of mind and theory of world.[5] By this understanding, what are first experienced as aesthetic challenges, perhaps even negatively-valenced frustrations, can contribute to later positive experiences, as when we overcome a challenge that has previously exasperated us. As opposed to confusion, however, which is a natural effect of a puzzling challenge, boredom is typically considered a flatly negative reading experience whose occurrence in literature is only positive should it give way, for example, to surprise by a turn in the plot or an interruption to the boring events. That is, boredom is typically analyzed as the antithesis of interest, which is the

[5] For theory of mind, see Zunshine (2006). For the theory of world—a newer term, though it refers to long-standing conversations around the need to interpret-for-world in science fiction—see Gavaler and Johnson (2018).

typical focus of literary scholar's, well, interest. However, boredom's patronage over meaning and novelty deserves more attention as regards literary criticism, particularly if it involves a pressure to re-assess not just whether the boring object is worth our attention, but the further questions bound up in that: for example, what caliber or type of attention, or what is worth attention in general.

Finding answers to these questions might not, of course, work to defuse boredom. A reader focusing on the text's aesthetic experience—or its ability to be interesting—may look for such in the realm of novelty, interpretability, and wider worth. This could include the text's heuristic function, whether it is cognitively expansive or cathartic, or perhaps whether it can act as cultural cachet or entertainment. If such cannot be found, or found in a worthwhile 'quantity', boredom may be difficult to overcome. We may stop reading altogether or decrease the energy we put into the text by skimming or ceasing the more cognitively demanding activities of image-construction and contextualization. However, if we re-assess the text and affirm its worth to us, then we might overcome or lessen boredom, and even increase our pre-boredom interest levels. This assessment may include an examination of our own interpretive efforts, or the text's wider relevance to our lives and concerns. The boredom response can thus enhance our meaning- and interest-making by acting as a kind of distancing device. Moran (2003 quoted in Finkielsztein, 2023, p. 14), for example, argues that boredom helps to "develop a critical awareness of those activities which are ordinarily too banal or repetitive to merit attention." Consequently, overcoming or putting up with boredom could enhance the contextualizing aspect of interpretation. A density of information that cannot be adequately sorted in a particular moment can tip a reading towards boredom, but can be a later source of interest. We can put a text down out of boredom and honestly describe it as interesting. And, on the other end of the scale, we can devour a text in which we have relatively little interest because it appears to ask very little of us.

3. Climate Boredom

With some of the potentialities of literary boredom understood, we can turn to the phenomenon of so-called climate boredom to understand their crucial intersection in cli-fi, and indeed in wider climate art and discourse. Gardiner (2023), resonating with Anderson (2023), situates 'climate boredom' as a potentially defensive reaction to the oppressive scale of climate change. Figuring climate change as a hyperobject (via Morton), Gardiner (2023) suggests:

> In response to such singularities, one person's awestruck sublimity is (arguably, much more commonly) another's barely stifled yawn, mainly because problems that cannot be effectively managed cognitively, experientially, or practically are often instantiated as boredom (p. 4).

Boredom as a defense mechanism is indeed supported by the scientific literature: Finkielsztein (2023) notes several studies showing that "boredom [may act] as a defence/protection against, or disguise for less acceptable and more difficult emotions, such as rage, anger, anxiety, fear, concern or depression" (p. 13).

Gardiner (2023) also illustrates climate change as disempowering and desiccating: it "opens up a yawning fissure between self and world, the latter often appearing dull and lacklustre, bereft of possibility, emptied-out" (p. 7). He ties this implicitly to the conditions of capitalism,

and climate guilt's dulling of "all the experiences and things that are supposed to make modern life worthwhile and pleasurable […] effortless mobility, the cosmopolitan availability of exotic foodstuffs […] 'limitless' energy sources" (p. 7). Whether through hyperobject oppression or human nature, then, it is not only terrifying to take climate change seriously, but also boring. To do so asks for a detachment from society, from doing. And this goes beyond the purported impossibility of ethical consumption under capitalism, indeed beyond consumption itself. Commenting on a *Politico* headline that reads "Soak Up the February Sun? Not without Climate Change Guilt in California," Craps (2023) posits that "environmental guilt now even complicates simple pleasures such as enjoying the sun on an unseasonably warm winter day" (p. 324). Being part of the guilt-ridden necessitates not only that diminutizing emotion, but a further and corresponding reduction of the ability to engage in interesting or enjoyable activities.

Gardiner (2023) also draws attention to the boring potential of climate change's discursive culture: "endless reiterations of dystopian apocalypticism in mainstream narratives evince a monotonous similarity that eventually reaches a point, symptomatically, of psychic exhaustion, melancholia, and morose resignation" (p. 4). The normalization of apocalypse, he adds, partially by its being rendered as coherent and familiar, disappoints. Indeed, this might be a wider difficulty faced by cli-fi: Mark Bould (2024), in a talk given at the SFRA conference in Tartu, summarizes his reading of a very large corpus of cli-fi short stories as "terrifying, and immensely dull."

One the one hand, then, boredom can be the result of taking climate change seriously, a knock-on effect of emotions that imbue everyday life with climate sin and carbon counting. Resigning oneself to such sacrifices as necessary and inevitable may act against boredom by infusing these choices with meaning, however boredom clearly lurks not only in the reduction of available novelty, but in the knowledge that such novelties are still technically available to us. That is, the temptation of the forbidden dulls the gleam of the permissible. Refusing the boredom of climate change by designating the entire cultural artefact as boring, while clearly an undesirable response per its retraction of interest from environmental threat, may be the result of an individual utilizing the designation of 'boring' to protect themselves from more strongly negative emotions (climate change as shameful, as terrifying), by discouraging engagement with their root cause. Being bored also diminishes 'threat' emotions like fear, and may thus be a path for an individual to convince themselves that there's either no real danger, or that one's personal contribution—and attention—is meaningless. But such strong or definitive reactions are hardly needed to abrogate climate anxiety. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Zupančič (2024) argues that it is not climate denialism that predominates, but disavowal: "disavowal differs from denial; it doesn't deny facts but gladly announces knowing all about them, and then it goes on as before" (p. 2). Disavowal, she argues, derealizes "the nature and meaning of this something […] It affects its character of the real, as real – that is, as an extraordinary, surprising, shattering bit of our reality" (Zupančič, 2024, p. 14).

To generatively bring this understanding to *Ministry*, note the specific negative valance of the experience of climate change for those who take it seriously: guilt, terror, fear, even shame. Such negative emotions—even when borne for a believed-in cause—can be paralysing, discouraging of action when the scale of the problem supersedes an individual or group's self-

assessed ability to rectify it. That is, whether we resign ourselves to such, or steadfastly deny it, we must tussle with boredom's pressure to connect our choices to personally valued meaning, to actions that are worthy of our time and effort. The belief, then, that climate change cannot be affected by the actions of an individual, can clearly inculcate a boredom response to the laborious actions required to make such a difference. Thus, we should pay attention not just to the fact that *Ministry* may bore, but to the particular valance of such boredom. At the crossroads of boredom—whether we decide to continue giving our attention, or not—there may be a difference between boredoms: boredom as a turning away from something that overstimulates, that demands an attention whose only corresponding action is more attention; and the boredom arising from the long, difficult and complex efforts to fix such problems. There is the boredom enacted to ignore that trouble, and the boredom that comes from staying with the trouble. *Ministry*'s dull utopianism, then, where the one-step forward to two-steps back approach eventually leads somewhere, may harbor particularly effective affective potential.

4. *The Ministry for the Future*, and Narrating Climate Action

In this section I link the more conceptual discussions of boredom to the reading experience of *The Ministry for the Future*. In essence, I argue that the novel's eliding of now familiar cli-fi narrative techniques—which would connect the climate crisis to the human and lower the potential for readerly boredom through, for example, fuller characterization, denser plotlines, greater tension, and favoring 'showing' over 'telling'—may work to connect the reader to Robinson's vision for how climate change might actually be averted: through the mundane, through work. Outside of its highly affecting opening chapter, *Ministry*'s general policy of turning away from spectacle may align it with the kind of cognitive work required to understand the slow or slowed violence of climate change, and the similar slowness required to reverse it. At least, that is, for readers looking to find interest and meaning in such complexities, who come to the text armed with the interpretive frameworks to rise to such a challenge, or who otherwise value these types of cognitive experiences in the reading of literature. This section, then, also illustrates the interest-challenges of the novel as a novel, and how *Ministry*'s eschewing of aforementioned literary techniques may also be experienced as an eschewing of literariness: of the potential for a predominantly aesthetic, rather than informative, experience.

Ministry haltingly follows Mary Murphy, a former Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs and union lawyer, now head of the titular organization, charged with "defending all living creatures present and future who cannot speak for themselves, by promoting their legal standing and physical protection" (2020, p. 16). Our second main-ish character is the aforementioned Frank May, dealing with the debilitating trauma of having experienced, and survived, the Indian heatwave that opens the novel. Only about a third of the book, however, is focalised through these characters. The other two thirds are taken up by an eclectic variety of riddles, reports, academic papers, interviews, side plots and so on (Patoine, 2022, see p. 147). Moreover, many of the chapters that are character-focused—particularly Mary's—depict her receiving or giving information about the progression, causes, and effects of both climate change and the projects seeking to combat it. That is, they are not particularly personal: they concern Mary's wider world

moreso than her inner world. Several chapters, for example, are written as 'Notes for Badim'—summaries of meetings prepared for Mary's chief-of-staff.

Which is all to say that the novel is not particularly character-focused, and spends a significant amount of its not insignificant wordcount (the cited edition boasts 563 pages) on conveying climate data, real and speculative, to the reader. The major events which occur, including large ecoterrorist operations such as attacks on airplanes and cargo ships, are presented in summary to us, with the narrative interest not in the events themselves but rather in their effects on decarbonisation: more thought-experiment than tragedy. Indeed, the wider novel is characterised by a relatively low level of narrativity: the felt or experienced quality of a narrative that suggests an aesthetic interpretive stance, that is, that we read and respond to it differently than, for example, an academic paper (see Abbott, 2011, for a fuller definition and account of differing views). Meanwhile, dramatic events of high narrative interest, or high tellability,[6] riddle the background of the text, but the narrative directs attention away from such spectacle and towards speculation, with particular consequences for the novel's ability to serve as entertainment. In essence, Robinson opens the novel with its narrative climax, with the proceeding action then oriented around preventing a reoccurrence of another such climax.

The Ministry for the Future's potential to bore arises from two principal pressures: the existential and the narratological. The existential arises from what we have termed climate boredom, from a resistance to active engagement with climate change, both the sacrifice of its solving and the danger of not doing this. This comes part and parcel with the territory of cli-fi. The narratological arises from the specifics of the Ministry itself: its narrative choices, the means by which it tells its story. Or, more accurately, it arises from reader-text interactions at such sites. In short, compared to the level of narrative attention we would expect, *Ministry* 'undernarrates' the comparatively exciting and engrossing while signaling and directing attention to its own slowness (for more on undernarration, see Prince, 2023). Take, for example, chapter 85, which is comprised of a four-page list of various organizations working to mitigate climate change. *Ministry* thus deploys literary techniques that render it resistant to immersed reading—which may arise from plot tensions or strong identification with and investment in its characters—and thus cultivates what we might call a literary surface tension that, to run with the immersion metaphor, may support observance moreso than absorption.

Apart from the opening chapter, there are several other 'spectacular' events that we experience directly through a character, for example, the attempted assassination attempt of Mary, and the ensuing trek across the Swiss alps, or the kidnapping of Mary by Frank. In summary, the book could seem like a thriller: bombings, assassinations, drone attacks, mass abduction of the world elite, etc. If one sold the book on this description, however, the reader hooked by such may be disappointed. Though many spectacular things happen in the world of *Ministry*, there is little focal attention given to them. Of those that do get direct attention, most are bathetically undermined: Mary brews tea during her kidnapping; the abducted elites are

[6] Broadly, the features that make a story worth telling, as judged by both audience and storyteller. For fuller discussion, see Baroni (2013).

subjected to the torture of glamping and slide shows. It is the fallout of these events, the way they affect global systems rather than characters, that is the focus.

The real spectacles of the novel are reported to, rather than witnessed by, a focaliser. Moreover, Mary, our main 'traditional' focaliser, involves herself in the more radical aspects of fighting climate change by agreeing to be kept in the dark about the actions of what appears to be an eco-terrorist black-wing operating within the Ministry, seemingly run by her chief of staff, Badim. Thus we have a protagonist who has turned away from the spectacles for which she is at least partially responsible, meaning that we are also aware, as readers, that we are being denied Badim's likely more 'interesting' (novel, dangerous, tense) perspective. Our other traditional focaliser, Frank, attempts to involve himself in The Children of Kali, an ecoterrorist group, but is also turned away. We thus never receive an inside perspective on that organization. Frank moves to Zurich, to conduct a lone-wolf assassination of a 'climate criminal,' which he cannot bring himself to do. He instead holds Mary hostage for about as long as it takes for her cup of tea to go cold in order to plead with her to stop hiding behind "old bourgeois values" and do more with the Ministry (2020, p. 97). Both our protagonists, then, attempt to involve themselves—and thus the reader—in ecoterrorist activities, but are turned away from their spectacle-making. Mary needs plausible deniability to maintain her bureaucratic work, while Frank, unsuited to ecoterrorism, ends up spending a large portion of the novel working in a refugee camp, helping with the daily needs of those displaced by climate-change driven difficulties. What each character is turned towards is also, then, significant: the slow, the daily, the uncertain.

The most spectacular events consequently appear in summary, with significant narrative distance between the account of such events that we receive and those affected by the same. The most striking of these might be the ending of air travel, 'Crash Day,' when sixty passenger jets are downed mid-flight, followed several months later by twenty more. Robinson's narrating of this event is worth looking at in detail for the means by which it shrivels the event of its spectacularity, routing interest away from the event itself and toward its results, perhaps even toward the desirability of such results:

> So it was not really a surprise when 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, and the commercial flights that had gone down had been mostly occupied by business travelers. But people, innocent people, flying for all kinds of reasons: all dead. About seven thousand people died that day, ordinary civilians going about their lives (2020, p. 228).

In this first paragraph, the spectacle is immediately undermined by prefacing the story with the note that it was not, really, a surprise. The syntax is reminiscent of someone trying to remember a story, and the interjection of "although" immediately lessens the pathos of the tale, distancing the potential for readers situate themselves in those "private or business jets."

This pattern evolves in the second and third paragraphs below:

> Later it was shown that clouds of small drones had been directed into the flight paths of the planes involved, fouling their engines. The drones had mostly been destroyed, and their manufacturers and fliers have never been conclusively tracked. Quite a few terrorist groups took credit for the action in the immediate aftermath, […] but it has never been clear that any of them really had anything to do with it. That multiple groups

> would claim responsibility for such a crime just added to the horror felt at the time. What kind of world were they in? (2020, p. 228).

In the second paragraph, the back-and-forth syntax of the first is repeated, and the only definite datum we are given is that the attack was carried out by coordinated drones. The information is given inefficiently, with many modifiers and negatives: the drones are "mostly" destroyed, the perpetrators "never […] conclusively" tracked, the group behind the attack "never […] [made] clear." Note, however, how this will change in the third paragraph, where shorter sentences now account definitive truths: the message, the numbers involved, the result of the attack, the continuation of the story.

One message was fairly obvious: stop flying. And indeed many people stopped. Before that day, there had been half a million people in the air at any given moment. Afterward that number plummeted. Especially after a second round of crashes occurred a month later, this time bringing down twenty planes. After that commercial flights often flew empty, then were cancelled. Private jets had stopped flying. Military planes and helicopters had also been attacked, so they too curtailed their activities, and flew only if needed, as if in a war. As indeed they were (2020, see pp. 228–229).

Note, further, that we are not told of the lives lost, other than they were innocent civilians; but, even this is undermined by the "although" in the first paragraph, and the suggestion that those who died were targeted for their high carbon burn (with the insinuated guilt that carries). In terms of narrative pace, the average number of words per sentence in the first paragraph is 17.4, in the second 28.6, while that of the third is 12.1: the pace is raised for planetary consequence—suggesting that as the climax of the event—and lowered for what we might call human consequence, connoting—and perhaps imparting—a lower degree of urgency.

This chapter continues, recounting a number of other spectacular events potentially organized by the Children of Kali: the sinking of container ships, the mass-infecting of cattle herds with mad cow disease, the attacking of power plants. The chapter ends with "Kali was nowhere; Kali was everywhere" (2020, p. 230). The next chapter begins with a description of how Sikkim became a state with fully organic agriculture. This is not a recounting of the future, however, but the past. The narrative interest of the book is clearly not in the spectacular ecoterrorist events, at least not in their planning, execution or experience, but in the speculative propulsion they provide to global reorganization. One could easily understand, however, the unfulfilled readerly interest created by such narrative choices, indeed the narrative whiplash that may result from backgrounding the human, animal and environmental victims of such tactics.

Compare the above to the narrative interest given to the result of such acts, for example, the new slow travel to which we are given focal, experiential access via Mary. Her trans-Atlantic journey on The Cutting Snark is sold to the reader as an 8-day luxury: coffee on the deck, wind tousling hair in video meetings, dolphins leaping in the distance. Mary is the reader's stand-in here: "It was beautiful! And she was getting her work done. So— where has this obsession with speed come from, why had everyone caved to it so completely?" (2020, p. 419). This is even moreso the case in Mary's airship travel, which also documents her slow courtship of the airship captain Art, during which the novel almost generically shifts into a romance—to the point that it features the classic trope of the male love interest naming the stars, and recounting the stories of

their naming (2020, see p. 419). There is a sense that we, too, are meant to be seduced by this slow travel.

Ministry challenges a reader's interest due not only to the low arousal potential of much of its narrative, but the difficulty of interpreting the meaning of this within aesthetic frameworks. The importance of climate change is an easy interpretive framework to apply to the text, but it is a political one rather than an aesthetic one. For example, with regards to realism, *Ministry* significantly bucks interpretive expectations as regards interiority and character development. Patoine (2022) argues that *Ministry* is "largely dominated by collective and/or anonymous voices […] and by non-narrative discourses of knowledge […] leaving comparatively little room for the everyday life or heroic actions of individuals, for their emotions, ruminations and discussions" (p. 147). Interpretive expectations that focus interpretive efforts on personal or interpersonal development, may be dashed by such sections, and readers may struggle to interpret areas of such weak narrativity along aesthetic lines, figuring them as interruptions to the story rather than part of it. While noting that "realism remains the norm of 'serious' literature" (2022, p. 142), Patoine, drawing on Le Guin, casts Robinson's agencifying of climactic and geographical forces as a "realism of a larger reality" (2022, p. 155). Thus, while the character-focused interpretive frameworks of contemporary realism inform his reading of the novel, *Ministry*'s deviation from such expectations can expand that framework in a way that allows not only for it to be fruitfully applied to the novel, but also as a re-interpretation of other realist texts (making them, logically, realism of a smaller reality). Such resonates with Robinson's own words: in an interview with *The Chicago Review of Books*, he argues that "Earth is our extended body, and thus a major character in all our novels, whether the novelists realize it or not" (Brady, 2020).

In terms of interpreting for world, as opposed to interpreting for character or motivation, *Ministry* may seem more amenable to interpretive techniques honed on science fiction, particularly the science-heavy 'Hard' SF for which Robinson is best known. However, the ontological differences that distinguish *Ministry*'s world from our own are, it seems, purely temporal: the titular *Ministry* is set up in 2024, so present-day readers have already caught up with it. As the novel progresses, new technologies and developments are formed alongside our reading rather than preceding it, and thus we do not need to extrapolate a mental model of a radically altered world from piecemeal clues. So, while the novel is certainly focused on the textual world, Robinson is clearly using fewer SF-specific stylistic and narrative devices than typical of the genre (though his own *The Science* and the *Capital* trilogy is comparable). Thus the 'world interpreting' skills honed by SF readers will not be grappling with the usual literary extrapolative puzzle, but rather the actual extrapolative puzzle of how to address climate change. Reading for world is certainly rewarded in Ministry—per Patoine—but in quite a different way.

Before drawing to a conclusion, it will prove insightful to give some space to the bored, to the readers that did not, perhaps, appreciate the slow complexity of *Ministry*. Looking to reader responses here serves as more than a reminder of the reality of the lived experience of texts, but also aims to capture the embodied pressure of boredom in reading: how it is described, where we assign 'boredom blame,' and boredom's interpretive stakes—meaning, also, the stakes of slowness, complexity, and the expectation-bucking of new literary forms. Moreover, I want to highlight boredom as an interpretation: an assessment of a text against critical contexts that find

the text lacking. That is, boredom as a perceived failure of the text. For this, I turn to the review-aggregating website *Goodreads*.[7]

In a detailed review, user Aidan (2020), while praising parts of the novel as "compelling and even transcendent," describe such moments as surrounded by "a sea infodumps barely disguised as lectures or bureaucratic notes, a lightly-sketched-in protagonist with inexplicable persuasive abilities […], and frankly jarring interludes." User César Garro-Marín (2021) opines that "close to half the chapters are just information dumps that add nothing to the narrative." User Cathy (2020) writes that

> without a decent narrative or memorable, well-developed characters I simply don't care. If I want to read essays about possible solutions for climate change, I do that. […] Mary and Frank were not bad and I liked the Antarctic setting, there just wasn't enough of all that. Hence, boredom.

Or, as user Angela (2021) succinctly puts it, "What an enormous waste of my time reading this boring slog of a book full of rehashed utopian climate change theories presented as a low-boil hint of a narrative."

It is no great flourish to show that readers have, indeed, been bored by *Ministry*. What I am interested in here are the particulars of that reported boredom, which focus on perceived lacks in *Ministry*'s aesthetic qualities. Areas of low narrativity, such as the essays or meeting notes, are found by these readers to be egregious or unwanted, to the point that the novel seems to lose its novelistic status. This brings to light not just the types of expectations that readers have of fiction, but the kind of reading that such expectations cultivate. Clearly visible in these reviews are cli-fi's core narrative difficulties: per Clark, balancing the suprahuman (even suprahumanity) against human narrative interest. To Patoine, this is what makes *Ministry* realism of a larger reality. Per the bored reviewers, their inclusion seems like a category mistake: wrongly placed in a work of fiction.

This likewise underscores a particular difficulty of cli-fi that engages with the world in such a way: it requires efferent reading. Rosenblatt (1995) posits that we adopt a predominantly efferent interpretive stance when we read for information, for example, when reading instructions or a scientific theory. We adopt a predominantly aesthetic stance when we read for experience, for effect. We adopt such stances in relation to both personal goals—what one wants from the reading—and in response to textual affordances—what we judge is appropriate for the text. The chapter-to-chapter progression of *Ministry* affords quite different interpretive stances and, as per the reviewers above, the informationally heavy sections may annoy a reader looking for a narrative experience, who approached the book aesthetically. The interpretive transformation that Patoine demonstrates—of finding the aesthetic in the efferent—might be necessary for readers to enjoy works like *Ministry*. However, the stakes of literary boredom—against the backdrop of climate change's own potential to bore—risks incorporating cli-fi into the boring discourse surrounding the issue.

[7] I cite *Goodreads*' reviews according to the profile's username, which is liable to change. Users can edit reviews without the changes being flagged on the website, and the reviews may thus come to differ from what is cited here. I maintain an archive of the cited reviews, their bibliographical details, and their original wording at the time of access.

To balance this account out, it is worth noting that most readers on *Goodreads* rated *Ministry* at least somewhat favorably. At time of writing, almost 35,000 ratings averaged to a 3.9/5. Moreover, many of those who published written reviews of the novel, even when accounting experienced of boredom, showed the value of that experience to the wider novel. At time of writing, the most 'liked' review is positioned as a guide "on how to enjoy reading *The Ministry for the Future*." This user—Robert (2022)—warns that the novel is not focused on personal stories, and contains the "infamous infodumps," but advises that though it is an acquired taste, it is a taste worth acquiring. Referencing the interpretive expectations of Hard SF, Robert also warns against reading it as scientifically rigorous, but rather to see it as fostering "an understanding that solutions (plural) to climate change and global inequity are possible."

5. Conclusion: Staying with the Trouble

In Anderson's (2023) account of climate boredom, he draws on Erik Solheim's statement—in his role as Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)—that "The language of environmentalists has been boring, so uninspiring […] You cannot bore people into action" (p. 2). While Anderson pointed to *Ministry*'s opening chapter as having the potential to combat climate boredom, *Ministry*'s larger wordcount is not devoted to combatting the technojargon of politicians and scientists, but to seeing it in action, re-situating it in its natural home: work. While *Ministry* does more than this—including the proposing of several potential fixes and the speculative imagining of a better future—it does ultimately suggest that we learn to stick with the boring. At a time when many conversations around literature and climate fiction are oriented around how literature can make climate change real and exciting to readers, it may be a reminder of the danger of spectacle, and the necessity of the quieter consideration of meaning made by bored readers, who need to leave the text not only with the energy to take part in demonstration, but in more mundane activisms and curtailings too. It may also act as a counter-weight to the extravagant promises of, for example, tech fixes by tech billionaires, who tend to ask for more, rather than less, consumption.

While the double-bind of cli-fi is obviously beyond this article's solving, I hope that I can at least further illuminate the thread of boredom, whose role in the tangle of this knot is clearly significant. That readers are different should be a surprise to no one, less so that academic readers tend to have different priorities than lay readers. Focusing on the potential for *Ministry* to bore, however, directs attention to a number of generative intersections. First, we can consider the specific mechanics of turning away—through, for example, under-and overnarration—to re-route attention from spectacle to speculation. Consider how this redirects away from negatively-valanced spectacle. While at the potential expense of interest, such tactics redirect interpretive energy towards the slow, towards the positive. Even if it is more difficult to find high or continuous levels of interest in this arena, and if the reader experiences boredom as a result, this tactic can still work to positively valance boredom, as opposed to the oppressive boredom imposed by climate change and guilt. We can also point to how Robinson at least attempts to infuse such hyperobjects with a positive sublime: from slow travel to citizen movements to block chain. We could feasibly propose this as the utopian impulse of the text, not the society envisaged at the end, but the focus on imperfect bettering.

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