

Preaching to the Eco-Choir: Cli-Fi as Ideological Fiction

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Abstract

In this thesis, I analyze two recent works of American climate fiction, Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *New York 2140* and Daniel Goldhaber's film *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. I situate these explicitly anticapitalist works within the larger corpus of American radical literature, and read them through the lens of "ideological" fiction, using a narratological framework developed by Susan Suleiman and elaborated in the context of U.S. fiction by Barbara Foley. In doing so, I challenge the ecocritical status quo that dismisses transparently "didactic" fiction as ineffective, and argue that works of this kind can have a significant impact in motivating already sympathetic audiences to increase their level of commitment to climate change causes, and potentially to take action.

This work builds on Louis Althusser's influential theory of ideology and Raymond Williams's concept of dominant and emergent culture to explore how "ideological" cli-fi texts could provide a means to overcome "capitalist realism," a concept of Mark Fisher's that describes the seeming impossibility of imagining alternatives to the hegemonic economic order. I explore how this responds to the need Fredric Jameson identified for a new "political art" that functions within the "post-ideological" context of postmodernism, as well as Anton Jäger's more recent work on what he describes as our new age of "hyperpolitics," which is characterized by re-politicization without organization. I connect this to related debates in the environmentalist context, namely Bruno Latour and Nikolai Schultz's call for an "ecological class" to transform disjointed climate resistance movements into effective eco-political action, something that I argue "ideological" cli-fi texts can aid in calling into being.

Finally, I connect this literary-theoretical argument to theories of political influence and societal change from protest movements, particularly the research of Erica Chenoweth that establishes a "rule" that having 3.5% of the population actively mobilized correlates with the success of mass movements, as well as the work of Andreas Malm on uncovering the key role of a "radical flank" within these movements. From this background, I advance the claim that even though radical "ideological" cli-fi preaches to a small percentage of the environmentalist "choir," nudging this group to be more engaged in the climate struggle could have outsized effects. For these reasons, I argue that works of this kind should be taken seriously by ecocritics, and analyzed not by the standards of traditional literary realism, but on their own terms.

Acknowledgments

Ultimately, the origins of this thesis can be traced back to my family. I owe my love of reading and talking about fiction to my mom; to all the evenings she spent reading to me and my brother Luke, and the shelves full of books that were an essential part of my childhood. It's hard to imagine that I would have done first a bachelor's and now a master's degree in English Literature if not for this. My mom is also responsible for my early introduction to environmental fiction. She borrowed one of Carl Hiaasen's novels from the local library, and I was captivated by his blend of scathing humor and righteous anger at the venal business interests despoiling Florida's Everglades. I quickly read every one of his books I could find.

Through Luke and his friends, I started getting into punk music around the same time. I gravitated toward bands that had a similar critical attitude, like the biting political commentary of the Dead Kennedys and the furious screeds of the local anticapitalist and environmentalist hardcore band Tree, whose songs helped introduce me to radical ideas and openly oppositional aesthetics. I recognized this same tone—this “radical didactic” mode—in Professor Michael Lundbland's course on environmental fiction at UiO when we read Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *New York 2140*, and the idea for this thesis was born. Many thanks to Mike for advising me on this project, especially for offering guidance on theorists and critics to explore and helping sharpen my argument. Thanks also to my undergraduate professors at Wesleyan University for encouraging my continued studies, and to my good friend (and now two-time thesis reader) Chris McDonald for his thoughtful feedback.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: In defense of “didactic” climate fiction	1
1: Toward a red-green revolution: <i>New York 2140</i>	35
2: <i>How to Blow Up a Pipeline</i> : Inspiring eco-sabotage as self-defense	70
Conclusion: “Ideological” cli-fi for a world on fire	105
Works cited	111

“All art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda.” – Upton Sinclair

“My own feeling is that new forms of political art—if not a postmodern political art, then at least a political art within postmodernity—are so far to be felt dimly stirring in the general area of the didactic.” – Fredric Jameson

“No preaching in novels. No ideas in novels. To hell. Do it.” – Raymond Williams

Introduction: In defense of “didactic” climate fiction

In T. C. Boyle’s novel *A Friend of the Earth* (2000), the narrator, a jaded environmentalist living in “a world turned to shit” from the ravages of climate change (7) looks back from the year 2025 to the days before his ecological awakening, and directly implicates the reader in our shared culpability for what has come to pass. “I’m not preaching,” he says. “I’m not going to preach. It’s too late for that, and besides which, preaching never did anybody any good anyway. Let me say this, though, for the record—for the better part of my life I was a criminal. Just like you” (42). The next several paragraphs are a litany of the consumer goods he accumulated through his day-to-day life in the United States, the energy he wasted, and the trash he generated, all despite his vague sense of the environmental damage he was causing (42-43). Having provided damning evidence of his own environmental “crimes,” he returns to the reader: “And just like you—if you live in the Western world, and I have to assume you do, or how else would you be reading this?—I caused approximately two hundred fifty times the damage to the environment of this tattered, bleeding planet as a Bangladeshi or Balinese, and they do their share, believe me” (43). Despite the narrator’s assertions, the reader could be forgiven for taking this precisely as “preaching.” In this, Boyle’s novel is far from alone.

In *Green Earth* (2015) by Kim Stanley Robinson, the omnibus edition of his *Science in the Capital* trilogy, an early chapter opens with a list of catastrophic headlines that juxtapose the ravages of climate change with the excesses of human consumption, presented as though they have been ripped from the front pages of the real-world news: “*Extinction Rate in Oceans Now Faster Than on Land... Only 35% of tropical forests left... Two Billion Tons of Carbon Added to the Atmosphere This Year. One of the five hottest years on record, again,*” ending with an ironically optimistic note about how the U.S. economy is still growing (79, original emphasis). Later, a protagonist provides a helpful gloss about how capitalist economics drives global warming by automatically exteriorizing the cost of environmental effects, keeping oil “cheap” and thus ensuring the world remains dependent on fossil fuels (822-3). Shortly after, the recently elected president of the United States observes: “And yet capitalism continues to vampire its way around the globe, determined to remain unaware of the problem it’s creating. Individuals in the system notice, but the system itself doesn’t notice. And some people are fighting to keep the system from noticing... And on it goes, and soon we’re left with a devastated world” (941).

In Stephen Markley's 2021 novel *The Deluge*, the leader of an American environmentalist organization delivers a speech to a crowd rallied in downtown Washington, D.C.: "We are met with this unthinkable nightmare befalling our planet, and the hour has grown so late. We are only in the early stages of the devastation to come... All we have left to fight is our own oblivion" (500). Having established the stakes, she then makes a clear accusation of guilt: "We can tell ourselves that it's all of our faults, that we all share blame, but that's bullshit. Let's call it like it is: There are a *handful* of corporations and governments happily burning as much carbon as they can so that a *handful* of people can get obscenely rich," with the American government playing a central role in allowing the "elite" to keep "profiting from the genocide of our planet" (500, original emphasis). Rather than wallow in despair, she outlines an ambitious future comprised of a wish-list of progressive policies like "new energy infrastructure," universal employment in "meaningful jobs," and making "housing, health care, and education universal rights" as part of creating a "more just global order" that is the "solution" to this "crisis" (500). Finally, like a revivalist preacher, having frightened them with apocalypse and inspired them with visions of salvation, she then issues a rallying cry to her audience, and to us: "The problem is, in order to fulfill this vision, we need to take their money, and we need to take their power... It's as simple as that. Because that money is blood money, and the power fucking belongs to us anyway" (501).

As the global climate crisis worsens, as the Earth heats up and the weather becomes more and more extreme, as the threat of widespread destruction looms and a mass extinction event appears to already be upon us, people around the world are asking the same question of themselves and each other: "What is to be done?" The rising threat of climate change has inspired a global wave of responses from activists, scientists, artists, and (somewhat belatedly) politicians. Within the world of fiction, it has driven exponential growth in the number of novels, stories, and other fictional texts that thematize climate change and its actual or potential effects (Scheider-Mayerson, "Influence" 473, Woods 1143), leading to the rise of the loosely defined genre known as climate fiction, or "cli-fi" (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 1-2). As the excerpts from the recent American cli-fi novels that I cited above illustrate, it has also inspired some bracingly direct and political writing, as authors of fiction try to do their part to create what journalist Claire Armistead pithily (and optimistically) described as "Stories to Save the World."

The idea that reading climate fiction can somehow translate to real-world action is a common one. While most ecocritics would likely agree that articles in the popular press about cli-fi's world-saving power can be "hyperbolic," there is a general consensus that fictional

narratives have the power to affect people's perceptions, attitudes, and levels of awareness (Schneider-Mayerson et al, "Introduction" 5), which can then help impel societal-level change (Schneider-Mayerson, "Influence" 475, Milkoreit 1-4, Tiwathia et al 15). This "instrumentalist" approach to literary theory that foregrounds texts' real-world effects (Seymour 26) and the purposeful search for cli-fi texts that display this potential (Milner and Burgmann 50) is part of ecocriticism's history as an "activist" discipline (Egan 287-8). However, this instrumentalism in literary theory has generally not translated to support for climate fiction texts that take a transparently instrumentalist approach to literary practice.

The works I've cited here all display one or more of the literary sins that ecocritics Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra identify as "pitfalls of polemic" that authors of cli-fi are advised to avoid if they wish to "galvaniz(e) readers into action" without "alienat(ing)" them, namely "preachiness," "info-dumping," "hectoring," and being to "message-y" (8-9). Texts that do deploy these tactics have not yet been formally theorized, but are sometimes collectively referred to as "didactic cli-fi" (Hennig 181). Such texts, which indulge in the desire to be "explicitly polemical," are thought to risk "grow(ing) less convincing through being less imagined" (Eavan Boland, quoted in Nixon 57). In addition to objections to their form, the content of "didactic" cli-fi also draws critique, whether for being too simplistic or reductionist in portraying capitalism as the ultimate villain behind climate change (Trexler, *Anthropocene* 191), or for advocating for forms of protest that are beyond the bounds of acceptable environmentalist action, such as acts of "ecoterrorism" (Buell, "Ecoterrorism" 164). Ecocritics have thus tended to dismiss such "didactic" works due to the dubiousness of their aesthetic quality, effectiveness, and eco-political arguments, as well as on the practical grounds that they appear to be unpopular with a significant number of readers (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 8-9).

However, as I will attempt to show in this thesis, "didactic" cli-fi can actually be much more formally sophisticated—and effective—than is commonly assumed. These texts function in a distinct way for a narrow audience that renders these ecocritical concerns moot, as their primary persuasive function is not to attempt to convert skeptical or apathetic readers to a more ecological worldview, but to "preach" to readers who are already in the environmentalist "choir" to help sharpen their convictions and inspire them to action. Their self-conscious breaks with the norms of the realist tradition are not, I argue, aesthetic failings, but formal strategies that open up opportunities for conveying oppositional ideological messages that are beyond the reach of more traditional and "dialectical" texts. This includes advocating for fundamental change to hegemonic capitalist structures, and calling for a

“radical flank” of the climate change movement that embraces violent direct action, which may be necessary to compel a change in the status quo (Malm 47-51). While it is no doubt true that these texts and their messages appeal to a much smaller audience than more mainstream works, research from political science indicates that protest movements only need to activate a small percentage of the total population in order to achieve change (Chenoweth 1), and that rallying partisan supporters is more politically effective than attempting to persuade people to change sides (Kleinfeld 165). This suggests that climate fiction that works to motivate an already sympathetic audience and to nudge even a small number of readers to do more about climate change could make a big impact.

Failure to recognize the significance of “didactic” cli-fi texts thus carries a potentially significant cost. Particularly if we embrace ecocriticism as an activist, instrumentalist discipline, it is imperative that we appreciate the potential power of “didactic” cli-fi texts. Otherwise, we risk committing the same error as the Marxist critics of the 1930s, who understood in theory that art could be a “weapon” in the struggle to change the world for the better, but who in practice “warn(ed) off” writers who wanted to contribute to that struggle from deploying any textual forms that too closely resembled “weaponry,” thus remaining trapped in the same “bourgeois” conventions that also dictated the ideological structure of society at large (Foley 156-60). In the context of climate change, this means allowing environmental discourses that naturalize capitalism, such as “green growth,” or corporate discursive strategies like “greenwashing” that seek to further obscure chains of responsibility and opportunities for resistance, to remain essentially unopposed. If the fundamental structure of neoliberal capitalism must be changed in order for us to achieve a more sustainable future, or if violent direct action is actually necessary in order for the struggle against climate change to succeed, then we may need more radical “didactic” cli-fi texts to help us imagine the system that can replace it, and inspire the radical actions that are required to help get us there.

Ultimately, I believe that ecocritics should think differently about “didactic” cli-fi texts. These hitherto unloved, unrespected, and undertheorized climate fictions, however ungainly, naïve, or transparently propagandistic they may seem, have the potential to help change the world. We should take them seriously, which means not subjecting them to the standards of bourgeois realism, but studying them on their own terms.

In this introductory chapter, I will make my case for “didactic” climate fiction and present a framework through which it can be productively analyzed. I will begin by reviewing current ecocritical approaches to analyzing cli-fi’s representational techniques and persuasive effects, and identify weaknesses or gaps in their treatment of “didactic” fictions.

To address this, I first situate these works within the larger traditions of the “social protest novel” and radical American fiction, then use this context to map “didactic” cli-fi texts onto the genre of the *roman à thèse*, which I will refer to by its English name, the “ideological” novel (Suleiman 1-2), and offer a short overview of the structuralist model for textual analysis this provides. I will then review some particular challenges faced by cli-fi texts that challenge dominant ideologies and hegemonic structures that are not commonly included in ecocritical discussions, but which may be decisive for their effectiveness in a postmodern/late capitalist context, with a particular focus on Mark Fisher’s concept of “capitalist realism” and Anton Jäger’s work on “hyperpolitics.” I will conclude my theoretical background with a review of contemporary theories on mass movements and political change, and use this to illuminate how the narrow audience focus of “didactic” (or, more precisely, “ideological”) cli-fi texts plays a potentially vital role. Finally, I will introduce the two primary texts that will be the focus of my analysis in the subsequent chapters, Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *New York 2140* (2017) and Daniel Goldhaber’s film *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (2023), as examples of contemporary, radical, “ideological” climate fiction.

Ecocriticism & climate fiction: Instrumentalist aims vs. didactic forms

In introducing a recent roundup of eight new novels that thematize the ongoing climate crisis, author Scott Guild observes that “[n]ot very long ago, a description of our current moment would have read like a dystopian premise: a planet afflicted with deadly weather events, with rising oceans and global migration crises, with animal species rapidly going extinct.” Indeed, during only the two years I have spent researching and writing this thesis, the apocalyptic weather events of some “near-future” cli-fi novels, like the deadly heat wave that opens Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) or the extreme rainfall and flooding of *A Friend of the Earth*, have already started to come to pass. While the precursors of cli-fi can be traced back to the early 1980s (Milner and Burgmann 26), when NASA scientist James Hansen helped introduce the term “global warming” into popular American discourse (Bellamy and Szeman 192), the growing obviousness and urgency of climate change since the turn of the 20th century is likely behind the recent rise of “[f]ictions of global warming” (Woods 1143), which have become a “major trend,” resulting in a catalog of works that is “too long to count” (Schneider-Mayerson, “Influence” 473-4).

The recent wave of cli-fi in the United States can be understood within a larger history of creative works that deal with the risks of ecological disaster (Goodbody and

Johns-Putra 3-4). Looking back over the 20th century, we can identify periods of concern around nuclear fallout, chemical contamination, the ozone layer, toxic pollution, oil spills, and emissions, and find examples that thematize these concerns in novels, stories, films, plays, movies, television, and other media. Writing in 1995, Lawrence Buell noted the looming threat of “[e]nvironmental holocaust” and a corresponding “contemporary tradition of environmental apocalypse literature” dating back to the 1960s, a body of “oppositional” writing which was notable for its potential “long-range impact” on “social attitudes” or “public policy” (*Environmental* 51). One such work was Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), the publication of which helped spark a campaign to ban certain classes of pesticides that threatened to decimate animal and plant life, and to inspire the modern American environmentalist movement (Buell, *Environmental* 10), or at least play a significant part in its “radicalization” (Buell, *Environmental* 285). Prior to that, concerns about nuclear fallout also conjured visions of a human-instigated ecological collapse, notably captured in Nevil Shute’s novel *On the Beach* (1957), which is credited with raising awareness and influencing opinions in ways that ultimately helped bring about the nuclear test ban treaty of 1963, leading to the use of the term “Shute effect” for a fictional work that has a notable impact on public sentiment and policy in the real world (Milner and Burgmann 50, Milkoreit 10).

In the field of literary studies, ecocriticism emerged from the 1990s onward as a field that engages with figurations of the environment and environmentalism in texts (Garrard, “Introduction”, Nixon 254), functioning primarily as an activist pursuit that seeks to contribute to positive ecological change (Nixon 233). The increasing output of climate fiction has been matched by a corresponding growth in scholarly criticism (Schneider-Mayerson, “Influence” 473-4). It is acknowledged by ecocritics that the presentation of scientific fact alone is insufficient to develop the kind of clear, compelling, and credible calls to action necessary to impel eco-political action in response to climate change (Mehnert 336-40). It is also widely believed that fictional narratives have the power to help bridge this gap by aiding the development of “deeper” environmental consciousness which in turn could contribute to progressive political change (Schneider-Mayerson, “Influence” 473), as in the case of the historical examples of Carson and Shute. Theorizing the connections between environmental text and environmentalist consciousness, and the potential linkage between ecological narrative and ecopolitical action, has thus been a significant area of focus in ecocriticism and related fields. I will briefly review some of the key theories and concepts here.

Lawrence Buell, who is commonly regarded as the “dean” of contemporary American ecocriticism (Garrard, “Introduction” 17), proposed the concept of the “environmental

imagination” which has been influential on much later work. It describes how “environmentally oriented” narratives work on their readers unconsciously and can play a part in shaping an “emerging culture of environmental concern” that goes beyond simple “awareness” of environmental threats (*Environmental* 3-4). Focusing on the “constructive potential” of the pastoral (*Environmental* 32), and primarily on nonfiction texts, Buell finds an example in Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) of a work that “create(s) a symbiosis of art and polemic” to increase the receptiveness of the reader to environmentalist ideas, using lyrical descriptions of natural beauty to “lull the reader into an idyllic mood” before introducing a “controversial critique” and proposing solutions (*Environmental* 40). This is similar to Daniel Philippon’s “ecological way of seeing,” in which nature writing like Leopold’s implicates the reader in the natural world and celebrates aspects of it beyond economic growth, helping lay the foundation for oppositional environmental narratives (393, 399). Another, more dramatic, approach for breaking through to the reader that Buell identifies is the use of apocalyptic narratives, which allow authors like Carson to invent a “doomsday” that has not previously been conceived (*Environmental* 295), the effectiveness of which depends on the text’s ability to impel the reader to perceive the gravity of a crisis that has not yet come to pass (*Environmental* 285). In both lyrical and apocalyptic approaches, a central factor Buell identifies in activating the environmental imagination is the sense of place, noting also that a “personal commitment to a specific place” could be seen as a necessary condition for forming an environmentalist relationship to it (*Environmental* 252-3). In contrast, Buell hypothesizes that a more distant, “cosmopolitan” perspective may be associated with greater “pessimism,” and links this feeling to the (then) emerging and “inherently unmanageable” problem of global warming, the causes of which, as Bill McKibben noted, “come from *everywhere*” (*Environmental* 295, original emphasis).

This challenge of linking individual (embodied and emplaced) subjectivity and agency to the massive scale, both in space and time, of climate change has since emerged as a central problem in ecocritical approaches to cli-fi. Adam Trexler’s comments are representative. He states that “[i]magining climate change is an enormously difficult task” due to its complex and dispersed nature, and that traditional approaches to fictional forms are inadequate to address this challenge (“Mediating” 205). Instead, authors must embrace a much greater degree of “entanglement” and new, hybrid strategies of mediation that blend description with ideas, characters and things, and nature and society (“Mediating” 220). Antonia Mehnert echoes this claim. Citing Greg Garrard’s suggestion that complex environmental crises call for alternative means of narrative construction that can “cope with

with indeterminacy, long timescales, complex problems of agency and responsibility” (Mehnert 343; Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 149), she offers examples from cli-fi novels by Robinson and Boyle that combine short-term human perspectives and long-term ecological perspectives by “blurring” the distinction between past, present, and future such that they become “inseparably intertwined,” clearly illustrating how the risks of the future are connected to the present day, and establishing narrative relationships between human and environmental time (345-6). She argues that works that do this successfully can “translat(e) hypothetical situations so that the reader can emotionally relate to and critically reflect upon them” (334), ultimately making the problem of climate change less “elusive, invisible, and distant” and more immediate, relatable, and actionable (344, 359-60). Environmental humanities scholars like Manjana Milkoreit and Matthew Benjamin Cole have since worked to deepen these ecocritical theories using concepts from political science, connecting the influence of fictional constructions of climate change on individual imagination and shared beliefs through the concept of the “climate imaginary” (Milkoreit 3-9, Cole 132-3).

While these theories describe the potential of cli-fi novels to increase audience entanglement and agency, in the face of the apparent lack of cohesive climate action so far (Bellamy and Szeman 193, Milner and Burgmann 192-4), some scholars have started to ask whether they actually work in practice. The research of Matthew Schneider-Mayerson in the recently established discipline of empirical ecocriticism offers support for the concepts of the environmental imagination and climate imaginary to some degree. In surveying American readers of cli-fi, he found evidence indicating that “literature can be quite effective at enabling or compelling readers to imagine potential futures and consider the fragility of human societies and vulnerable ecosystems” (“Influence” 495). This is particularly true of narrative approaches that link stories set far in the future but that “explicitly draw connections to our actions in the present,” and/or call attention to the “embeddedness” of human beings in our ecosystems and the “social, cultural, and political repercussions of climate change” (“Influence” 482-6). He identifies risks and opportunities related to different framings of climate change. For example, presenting it as an “encroaching disaster” without clear avenues for individual response can make the audience more likely to feel negative and demobilizing emotions such as helplessness, fear, guilt, shame, and sadness, and to try to ignore or avoid the subject rather than feeling compelled to act on it, while inciting anger has the potential to fuel “personal or political action (Schneider-Mayerson, “Influence” 490). While it was not possible from his study to determine whether these changes to reader affect actually resulted

in “meaningful changes in behavior or politics” (“Influence” 495), his findings nonetheless have clear implications for reader positioning and narrative framing in cli-fi texts.

One key element that these theories of cli-fi have in common is an emphasis on its implied goal: to influence readers’ perceptions about climate change and (perhaps) influence how they act (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 6-7; Mehnert 334; Bellamy and Szeman 192; Schneider-Mayerson, “Influence” 474). Derek Woods goes so far as to identify “didactic purpose” as one of two key features of cli-fi as a genre (1144). This focus on the power of ecological storytelling to help shape collective visions of the future that can spur social change (Milkoreit 1-4) goes back at least as far as Buell, who argued that the “environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity’s relation to it” (*Environmental* 2). While Nicole Seymour has critiqued this post-Buell tradition as an “instrumentalist approach to environmental art” (26), which she links to the “didacticism” that characterizes mainstream environmentalism more broadly (4-5), ecocritics in general continue to embrace it as a key element of the discipline. As Gabriel Egan reminds us, “ecocriticism is inherently an activist field of inquiry,” which has endeavored from the start to “bring to the study of literature the concerns of ecopolitics” (287-8). One result of this activist impetus that differentiates ecocriticism from literary criticism as a whole is precisely its concern with the real-world effects of texts in addition to their aesthetics.

However, despite this broad ecocritical interest in analyzing climate fictions for their potential for ecopolitical impact, opinions about texts that manifest their persuasive and educational intent explicitly in their narrative content are predominantly negative. Goodbody and Johns-Putra provide some representative examples of this view, citing examples of comments from authors, critics, and readers that list “preachiness,” “hectoring,” being too “message-y,” “info-dumping,” and “lecturing” as the aforementioned “pitfalls of polemic” to be avoided when writing cli-fi (8-9). Their assumption is that these modes of address are alienating to readers, and that writers should take care to balance their desire to “galvaniz(e) readers into action” against the temptation to use their writing as a “vehicle for protest” (8) that might lead them to engage in “crude didacticism” (15). Rob Nixon identifies three similar pitfalls of ecological fictions, “predictability, sentimentality, and a political outrage or self-righteousness that supplants depth of character,” implying that texts make political commitments explicit at the risk of their “dynamism” (57). Likewise, Garrard notes that “overtly environmentalist” works risk being evaluated negatively for their “political agenda” (“Introduction” 16-17). Meanwhile, Woods, despite identifying didactic intent as a defining

element of cli-fi, acknowledges critics who sympathize with cli-fi's activist mission but who "rightly" (emphasis mine) refuse to "reduce art to didacticism" (1160).

Ecocritics have thus tended to dismiss the more overtly "preachy" elements in cli-fi texts, or to pay less scholarly attention to works that are explicit in their political aims, relegating "didactic" cli-fi to the status of undertheorized "other." There have been a small number of isolated attempts to address the subject directly, but these have remained provisional and disjointed. Timothy Morton's brief discussion of the "ecodidactic" is extremely literal and narrow in scope, describing the ways in which ecological writing "points us in the direction of nature" through textual injunctions to look at or engage in it physically (61-2). It is also negatively coded: the example he offers from Thoreau is of the narrator "apparently screaming in our face" (63). In contrast, Martin Ryle's article "Neo-pastoral Eco-didactics: Ali Smith's *The Accidental*" offers a more positive take on the "eco-didactic," as well as concrete examples of didactic effects, such as Smith's use of epigraphs to reinforce key messages, and the use of "types" (adopting Georg Lukács's term) in place of well-rounded characters (8-9). As with the more critical ecocritics I cited above, he links the novel's didactic approach to its "implicitly political address," though in his analysis this is a positive feature of the text: it "challenges and implicates" the liberal middle class (that is presumed to be its core readership) by calling attention to their complicity in the consumer capitalist system that is helping drive the global environmental crisis (8-9). Finally, in his chapter on "Didactic Cli-Fi," within the volume edited by Goodbody and Johns-Putra, Reinhard Hennig notes the divided critical reception of Jostein Gaarder's novel *The World According to Anna* (first published in Norwegian in 2013), which many literary critics and readers criticized for "neglecting aesthetic qualities in favour of didactic elements," including by centering the novel on characters that were "too flat and too implausible to invite any identification" (184). Hennig observes, however, that this negative view was not unanimous, and that others "highly welcomed the attempt to disseminate knowledge about climate change and environmental degradation in the form of a novel, and found the text thought-provoking and even a motivation to action" (184).

One common feature that emerges in each of these critic's analysis of "didactic" fictional texts is that their function is not simply to convey facts about environmental threats, but to transmit a worldview. In this, they begin to sketch the complex valences of didactic cli-fi texts that cause some readers to encounter them as both "info-dumps" and as "preachy;" as both "lecturing" and "hectoring." Didactic fiction is not just educational, but motivational; not simply informational, but ideological. It is precisely in this second sense of the didactic

that they engender censure from ecocritics for running afoul of literary norms. While we can find evidence of ideological influence being an instrumentalist goal of environmental fiction as far back as Buell's comments on the pastoral's potential to activate "green consciousness" (*Environmental* 31), as far as ecocritics are concerned, this is best accomplished by inspiring dialectical engagement (Mehnert 334, 351) rather than through direct didactic address. Science fiction theorists, who have also made significant contributions to the study of cli-fi, posit a similar mechanism through which works can spark "cognition" in the reader (Milner and Burgmann 26). In this insistence on dialectical and cognitivist instead of didactic and hortatory aesthetics, both of these theoretical traditions ultimately rest on the conventions of literary realism (Schneider-Mayerson, "Influence" 487, Woods 1144). There are, however, other literary traditions that may be useful to consider in the context of cli-fi, and which can reveal important features of how "didactic" texts do in fact work on certain audiences.

Hennig's analysis of *The World According to Anna* is significant not only for situating a cli-fi novel within the category of "didactic fiction," but also for alluding to how it could be studied as an "example of an environmental *littérature engagée*" that illustrates the tension in cli-fi texts between questions of aesthetics and the dissemination of knowledge from a politically motivated standpoint (185). While it does not tie this idea to any larger conceptual framework, this reference to *littérature engagée* at least points toward a field of literary study where such analytical models for the didactic do exist. As Bellamy and Szeman observe, the "possibility of narrative to generate change" has been "a longstanding dream of writers across the political spectrum" (193), stretching back far beyond contemporary cli-fi. In this spirit, for a clue to where we can find a suitable framework for talking holistically and analytically about the ideological aspects of "didactic" climate fiction, I will turn to an author from the early 20th century whose works are sometimes considered to be within a larger definition of environmental literature, Upton Sinclair, as a pathway into the genre that holds a prior claim on his work, American radical fiction, and connect this to the metagenre of the "ideological" novel. Through this discussion, I will make the case for how this analytical framework reveals the true vocation of "didactic" cli-fi, which is not to teach, but to preach.

Radical literature & the "ideological" novel

During his long career, Sinclair published more than 80 books, mostly considered to be within the "muckraking" tradition (Taylor 166) or the "literature of protest" (Minter 44). Several of his novels take on themes that could make for a promising jumping-off point for

works of contemporary environmental fiction, such as the detailed exposé of the early 20th century American petrochemical industry in *Oil!* (1926) or the industrial animal cruelty of *The Jungle* (1906). The primary focus of Sinclair's work, however, was illustrating the inhumane treatment of the working class under industrial capitalism (Mack 84). A similar observation can be made about some contemporary works of cli-fi, such as *New York 2140*, that use climate change as a theme to call for revolutionary changes to the capitalist economic system (Khan 2, Milner & Burgmann 161-2). While some critics have pointed out that Sinclair's politics were ultimately more progressive than revolutionary (Rideout 13-19, Aaron 66, Lundblad 118), his socialist impulses and aesthetic approaches led scholar Walter Rideout to include his work within the history of the radical novel in the United States (221), which he defines as "one which demonstrates, either explicitly or implicitly, that its author objects to the human suffering imposed by some socioeconomic system and *advocates that the system be fundamentally changed*" (12, original emphasis).

This is a tradition to which, I claim, contemporary cli-fi writers such as Kim Stanley Robinson, an avowed socialist (Milner and Burgmann 192) who also speaks openly about his desire for his novels to contribute to changing real-world political and economic structures (Robinson, "Socialism"), also belong. Similar to contemporary hopes for the power of cli-fi, many literary radicals of the early 20th century believed that art forms of this kind would "play a vital role" in advancing their revolutionary cause in the real world (Foley 64, 118). Rideout notes that Marxist critics of the early 1900s saw then-contemporary radical works as directly connected to and influenced by earlier waves of politically and socially engaged fiction, with books such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), a seminal text of the abolitionist movement, held up by Marxist thinkers in the 1880s as a model of the effective anti-capitalist novel that was yet to be written (Rideout 10). While ecocritics have made connections to earlier texts that can be classified as "environmentally oriented" *avant la lettre*, such as *On the Beach*, they have not embraced the linkage to the radical novel tradition. This is a gap my thesis aims to address. As Rideout notes, the radical fiction authors of the 1930s have not only "ancestors," but also "descendents" up to the present time (3).

The comparison between contemporary cli-fi and radical fiction from earlier generations can help put ecocritical perspectives on didactic art in historical context. Authors of radical socialist novels often came into conflict with established aesthetic norms in the American novelistic tradition, which, even in radical circles, tended to prize literary realism (Minter 167), and disdain "formulaic plots" (Foley 129) that used the form of the novel as a mere "framework for 'orations and essays'" about the "evils of capitalism and the virtues of

Socialism” (Rideout 28). In embracing the instrumentality of cli-fi while dismissing overt didacticism as “crude,” Goodbody and Johns-Putra’s comments can thus be seen as the latest salvo in a long-running debate on whether “engaged” (or “leftist,” or “activist”) literature should be art or propaganda (Suleiman 3, Minter 47, Aaron 256-7). In siding with “art,” they hew to what has effectively become the “party line” of American literary criticism from at least the early 20th century onward, echoed by mainstream and radical critics alike (Foley 37, 130-1). Ironically, this has meant expecting radical fiction to adhere to bourgeois aesthetic standards that would serve to “tame” and “blunt” their protests (Minter 159, Foley 131). Even committed Marxist critics who believed that art was a “weapon” in the class war generally did not want it to look (or read) like one (Foley 159), while non-radical literary critics have also found these works lacking on a range of aesthetic grounds. William Bloodworth, for example, dismissed Sinclair’s work as being “utilitarian,” primarily concerned with “educating his readers” about political causes the relevance of which was limited to the historical moment of their writing, rather than writing about “universal problems,” which, critic Leon Harris concurs, relegates his work to the category of “lesser art” that “eventually disappears from public view and interest” (quoted in Taylor 166-7). One could imagine a similar assessment of some of Robinson’s cli-fi texts, with their extensive descriptions of contemporary environmental issues and political agendas, in a few decades’ time.

As with any party line, there have been notable dissenters; authors and critics who embraced didactic fiction as a tool in the battle of ideas. For his part, Sinclair made his own views on the ideological nature of art famously clear. He stated in his book *Mammonart* (1925): “All art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda” (9). Sinclair, one assumes, would place his own writing, with its pointed critique of the political and economic status quo of turn-of-the-century America, in the “deliberate propaganda” camp. Tracing the word “propaganda” back to its original meaning as a rhetorical form that “promotes belief and ideology leading toward conversion and action” by “limit(ing) options for discovering truth” (Soules 5), Marshall Soules notes that it can either support conformity with established structures and norms or agitate toward revolution or social change (7). Taken in this sense, Sinclair’s commentary on “propaganda” appears to prefigure elements of Marxist critical theory related to ideology by Louis Althusser and Raymond Williams. According to Althusser’s influential work, ideology is the essential element to reproducing (or challenging) the material relations of production that underpin human society (180-1), and it is embedded in and constantly recreated through practices and structures (184-7), such as the writing of

literature itself (188-9). Althusser observes that ideology interpellates subjects and reproduces itself both within the hegemonic capitalist system and its related legal, moral, scholastic (etc.) structures (191-2) as well as through oppositional movements (193). Meanwhile, in Raymond Williams's framework for the dynamic interplay of cultural systems, emergent ideologies that are "substantially alternative or oppositional" must struggle to avoid "incorporation" by the dominant ideology (463-4), which would effectively defuse their revolutionary potential. This is not only true of emergent political movements and class formations, but also radical literary movements, such as leftist proletarian writing, which struggled to escape from the limitations of "received literary forms" (Williams 464). It would thus seem that any truly oppositional writing would necessarily be "deliberately" ideological, as its very creation would be an act of resistance; part of the "combat for the reproduction of the dominant ideology" that "is never over" (Althusser 219).

Mapping Sinclair's comment onto the discussion about the didactic above, I propose that the distinction between "unconscious" and "deliberate" propaganda is reflected in the difference between "naturalistic" and "didactic" fiction: both convey an ideology, but only the latter does so both intentionally and transparently. The danger of the naturalistic approach is that it risks reifying dominant ideologies rather than offering real opposition to them. In contrast, the directness of radical didactic fiction is fundamental to its "oppositional aesthetic," which Fredric Jameson has argued provides a necessary response to the commodifying and atomizing force of postmodernism by offering texts that allow "potentially revolutionary drives to remain intact" (quoted in Ross 55). According to Reagan Ross (writing about the didactic in popular film), oppositional didactic texts represent a "critical step in injecting new frames of reference for mass audiences, to perhaps begin (or continue) the process of seeing through the hegemonic surface to the underlying, smouldering 'real'" (61). Jameson, who has written extensively about the challenges to traditional Marxist conceptions of ideology and political organization within postmodernism, appears inclined to agree, as he has stated that his "feeling" is that "new forms of political art—if not a postmodern political art, then at least a political art within postmodernity—are so far to be felt dimly stirring in the general area of the didactic" (*Geopolitical* 188).

This mode of deliberate and transparent oppositional writing clearly has its appeal, both to writers and readers—or, at least, to some of them. How else could we explain the popularity of Upton Sinclair's works during his lifetime, or the fact that bestselling contemporary writers like Robinson churn out one "didactic" cli-fi novel after the other, and readers continue to buy them? My point in this thesis is not to argue that all cli-fi is explicitly

didactic, or to convince ecocritics that didactic cli-fi is effective on all audiences. Rather, what I aim to accomplish is to explore precisely how didactic fiction works to address already sympathetic audiences, to “preach to the choir,” to reinforce their existing or incipient convictions and commitments, and nudge them toward action. To do so, I propose introducing to ecocriticism a narratological framework that facilitates structuralist analysis of these texts, that of the “ideological” novel. Existing scholarship on Sinclair’s work offers a specific point of connection that I will use to embark on a brief overview of this form.

Christopher Taylor discusses various didactic techniques in Sinclair’s fiction, including his exhaustively detailed “technical explanations” of “aspects of industrial America” (Taylor 167), passages which I find analogous to Robinson’s painstaking “info-dumps” about high-frequency trading and global financial capitalism in *New York 2140* (17-19, 318-9, 327). Taylor observes that while these could be read as examples of the “documentary logic” of the naturalist tradition, they are more properly understood as “didactic, crusading elements” that place Sinclair’s texts in the tradition of the *roman à thèse* (167-8), which is also known in English as the “‘ideological’ novel” (Suleiman 2). While originally defined by Susan Rubin Suleiman in the context of French literature of the late 1800s and early 1900s (Suleiman 16), the “ideological” novel was theorized from the start as a genre that can be applied to other national literatures and time periods (Suleiman 5), and has proven to provide a useful structural framework for understanding the shared characteristics, political messages, and didactic effects of leftist American literature from the same period (Taylor 169), particularly through the work of Barbara Foley on U.S. proletarian novels of the 1930s. The central element that distinguishes the *roman à thèse* from the broader category of *littérature engagée* is the “willingness to foreclose all but one possible meaning” (Taylor 169-70). This communication of, and repeated insistence on, one “correct” message, which Sinclair used to educate his audience about “the nature of global capitalism and the possibility of sweeping reform,” is designed to lead the reader “inexorably” toward the knowledge the text wants to convey (Taylor 170), which is not simply factual knowledge, but a worldview. Returning to Hennig and cli-fi, I argue that texts ecocritics describe as “didactic” in the sense of being “preachy” or “message-y” are thus more properly understood as examples of “ideological” fiction.

In *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (1983), Suleiman outlines a structural theory of the “ideological” novel and analyzes various examples from both left- and right-wing literature, ranging from outright propaganda to more nuanced (or more “artful” or “literary”) works, as some novels are more strongly ‘à thèse’

than others” (Suleiman 8). Echoing Sinclair’s distinction on propaganda, she notes that her use of “ideological” is not meant in the wider, potentially unconscious, sense (in which all works of fiction could be said to reflect and promote an ideology) but the narrower sense “in which we might call a discourse ideological if it refers explicitly to, and identifies itself with, a recognized body of doctrine or system of ideas” (1). It is this narrow meaning of “ideological” that I will use when discussing texts in this thesis, unless otherwise indicated.

Suleiman’s working definition of the “ideological” novel is: “*a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine*” (7, original emphasis). The value system an “ideological” novel presents refers to doctrine(s) that exist outside of the novel and is necessarily “unambiguous” and “dualistic” (or “monological,” using a term of Bakhtin’s), meaning that it leaves no opportunity for middle ground between right and wrong. In addition to unambiguously signaling the “correct” interpretation of their ideological messages (Suleiman 9-10), the texts also contain “an explicit rule of action addressed to the reader” (either openly stated or inferred), such that their intent is not just to inform but to motivate (Suleiman 54, 58-61). This model is ultimately grounded in the *exemplum*, a rhetorical figure from ancient Greece (also found in Biblical parables) in which the narrator uses allusion to historical or fictional events to offer conclusions or lessons related to the reader’s present (Suleiman 27-8). While this may seem old-fashioned, a return to “one of the age-old functions of art—the pedagogical and the didactic” has also been proposed by Jameson in his attempt to outline a pathway to “a new radical cultural politics” within postmodernism, with the observation that leftists have been too quick to repudiate this “teaching function of art” based on received wisdom from “bourgeois cultural traditions issuing from romanticism” (*Postmodernism* 50). As I noted earlier, ecocritics are also implicated in this trend.

Reader positioning is a key component of Suleiman’s framework. The relationship between the “ideological” novel and the reader is characterized by how the text “manifests its intention of being read in a particular way” (Suleiman 25). The fundamental effect of these novels is “demonstration” of the validity of the ideological argument it presents, which is coupled with “exhortation” to behave in a way that is in alignment with this ideology (Suleiman 26). Foley refers to these as the “didactic” and “hortatory” strategies of these texts (283). The reader of an “ideological” novel is thus encouraged to occupy the position of the listener or student in relation to “an orator, a teacher, or a preacher” (Suleiman 27). But while speeches, lectures, and sermons (or nonfiction texts, for that matter) may convey their

arguments directly and logically, in attempting to achieve the same didactic effect through fiction, “ideological” novels run into several challenges, such as “slippage” in the narrative that allows for “incorrect” or divergent interpretations, or variations in the “competence” of the reader to understand the “correct” meaning (Suleiman 35), and example of which could be the “misinterpretation” of *The Jungle* that helped inspire American reforms to food processing standards rather than labor rights. In order to function as a story that, in the words of Roland Barthes, “expressly entails a meaning” (quoted in Suleiman 37), “ideological” texts rely on what Barthes calls “redundant” discourse, in which “meaning is excessively named” in order to reduce ambiguity (quoted in Suleiman 55).

Redundancy in this sense is not unique to “ideological” novels, but is a fundamental aspect of language and communication more broadly (Suleiman 55, 150). What is unique about redundancy in “ideological” novels is that it is deliberately deployed to ensure that the meaning of the text, once it emerges, does not “flicker,” or become “multiplied,” “broken up,” or “reversed.” Instead, the meaning is sharpened as the text proceeds, until only one correct interpretation remains (Suleiman 55-56)—at least in theory (Suleiman 150). Suleiman categorizes the “generic redundancies” of the “ideological novel” through a structuralist framework: whether they function on the level of “story,” the level of “discourse,” or between these two levels (152-3, 159-70). In narratology, these terms refer specifically to two distinct analytical levels (sometimes also referred to as “*fabula*” and “*sujet*” from the Russian Formalist tradition): “discourse” is the larger field of modes and conventions of narrative address, which includes “narration,” “focalization,” and “temporal organization,” while “story” is constituted by the “building blocks of narrative,” namely “actions” and “events” (Foley 265-7). As both “story” and “discourse” also have common meanings that are distinct from their specialized narratological usage, I will use quotation marks to indicate where I am specifically referring to them in their structuralist sense.

An example of “story”-level redundancy is “narrative doubling or tripling,” where the same “kernel” event happens to more than one character, or to a single character multiple times (Suleiman 159-60), forming a didactic pattern through the text such that the “implication” of these incidents “becomes overwhelming for character and reader alike” (Foley 294). “Discourse”-level redundancy includes narrators that engage in a repeated mode of contact with the reader, such as being consistently “moralizing” or “chatty,” (Suleiman 165) or injecting political commentary to contextualize the events of the “story” (Foley 300-2). Finally, an example of redundancy that operates between these levels is when “an event is redundant with the interpretive commentary which the narrator makes about it,” a

category that includes “openly didactic” narrators that tend constantly to interpret events before, during, and/or after they are told (Suleiman (167-9). The relative weight of these redundancies is related to the positions that certain protagonists and focalizers hold within “ideological” novels, with heroes and villains being more likely than in realist fiction to be assigned personal qualities that are redundant with their “actantial function” (their role in the narrative) and with omniscient narrators and “correct interpreter” or “spokesperson” characters such as mentors and converts playing a “privileged” roles in establishing the “interpretive line” of the text (Suleiman 185-8). The significance of these two structural levels relates to their epistemological and ontological functions: “discourse”-level redundancies help transmit the ideological message and connect it to a larger context, presenting the reader with the world as as it “ought” to be, while “story”-level redundancies ground the message in the “reality” of the narrative, revealing that text’s worldview to be something that already “is” in existence (Foley 271-5). Together, they work to transform a protagonist’s experience “into didactic argument” (Foley 300).

Having outlined the structure of didactic redundancy within “ideological” novels, Suleiman then describes two narrative models that reinforce the dualistic logic of the genre (63-4), which we can also call its “paradigmatic plots” (Foley 268). The “structure of apprenticeship” connects the ideological novel to the *Bildungsroman*, based on Georg Lukács’s definition, in which the protagonist undergoes two parallel transformations: “from *ignorance* (of self) to *knowledge* (of self)” and “from *passivity* to *action*” (Suleiman 64-5, original emphasis), a form which encourages the “virtual identification of the reader with the protagonist” (Suleiman 72-3). In the “ideological” novel, the protagonist may choose to either adopt the values supported by the doctrinal system that underlies the novel or refute them; what is important is “the presence of two separate and opposingly valorized ideological fields” and the structure of redundancies that clearly indicate which side is “correct” (Suleiman 69). Meanwhile, the “structure of confrontation,” which links to popular genres such as the war novel to their “common ancestor” the epic (Suleiman 64), is fundamentally “Manichean,” meaning that a “right” and a “wrong” side are set in opposition to each other (Suleiman 101). A key genre feature is that the two adversaries are “not on the same ethical or moral plane,” and their conflict is not merely for “glory” or “personal advancement,” but rather it acquires existential significance as a battle between “good” and “evil” (Suleiman 102). Unlike apprenticeship narratives, it is not the hero’s personal development that is important here, but the outcome of the conflict they are engaged in (Suleiman 112). While the structure of apprenticeship depends on “virtual identification,” the structure of confrontation

functions instead through “cooptation.” The reader, like the protagonist, “is presumed to be *already* on the “right” side when the story begins.” The “correct” values in these narratives are not discovered or arrived at through personal growth, but presented as truths that are already known. The reader is structurally aligned with the protagonist, positioned so as to desire the victory of their side of the struggle (Suleiman 142-3, original emphasis).

Barbara Foley, who applies Suleiman’s theory to American novels in her book *Radical Representations: Politics And Form In U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (1993), makes several useful refinements that I will also apply to my analysis of contemporary cli-fi. In investigating the didactic potential of these works from a leftist perspective (Foley 250), Foley investigates a key question: can literary forms inherited from the bourgeois literary realist tradition, such as the *Bildungsroman*, be used to contest bourgeois ideas and to articulate and incite radical political ideologies (a question also raised by Rideout (25)), or are radical forms were required (Foley 249-50). Foley thus recognizes a power differential that Suleiman, who writes from a perspective that is suspicious of “authoritarian” texts from any side (Suleiman xvi), omits: “ideological” texts that work to reinforce dominant ideologies would likely meet fewer representational challenges than those that attempt to oppose them. To address this, Foley’s approach distinguishes between traditional and experimental novelistic modes as well as between single- and multi-protagonist narrative structures, and hypothesizes that specific combinations of “revolutionary” form and “left” politics are more effective in resisting “bourgeois ideology” (Foley 261). Given that a common target of cli-fi texts is capitalism (Trexler, *Anthropocene* 121), which underlies the dominant ideology of postmodernism in the western context (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 6, 49), this question is very relevant for cli-fi’s potential as “ideological” fiction.

For Foley, the construction of a collective (or class) identity in the text plays a key role. What distinguishes “bourgeois” from “radical” single-protagonist forms, which frequently use the structure of apprenticeship, is the latter’s attempt to present the protagonist's journey not as the development of an individual self, but as their recognition of and ascension into their place in a collective self (such as the revolutionary proletariat) through a process that the reader is invited to replicate (Foley 284). Meanwhile, multi-protagonist “ideological” novels subordinate the growth and development of individual characters to the larger social conflict represented in the text (Foley 363) and privilege collective identities to the extent that they can be depicted as greater than and different from the sum of the characters who make them up (Foley 400). Considering the cli-fi context, where both the eco-political issues at hand are larger in scope than an individual protagonist’s

experiences, we could conjecture that similar formal solutions may be required. Indeed, Kim Stanley Robinson has referred to the radical 1930s novels by John Dos Passos as an inspiration for some of his multi-protagonist works (Abbott 1135).

Radical “ideological” texts also frequently use experimental aesthetic devices to disrupt the narrative, rupturing the illusion of “seamless transparency” that characterizes bourgeois realist fiction, encouraging the reader to engage in critical reflection and cognition regarding the interconnection of elements that make up the “social totality,” and calling attention to the discursive status of “historical actuality” (Foley 400, 420). This includes “frequently assert(ing) direct documentary links with the world of the reader,” such as through references to actual events, people, and cultural and political phenomena from the real world (Foley 400-3). In radical “ideological” texts, these techniques disrupt the constraints of traditional novelistic forms and connect the limited perspectives of the novel’s protagonists to larger historical forces, including oppositional doctrines and movements that already exist in the real world, but which are suppressed by the dominant discourse (Foley 402, 420-1). These texts thus attempt to create an opening in the hegemonic discursive frame in which the reader is enmeshed, and construct an emergent “reality” that challenges the dominant ideology’s definitional power over what that reality is or can be.

Throughout this thesis, I will rely on Suleiman’s framework for analyzing how “ideological” cli-fi works through patterns of narrative redundancy to convey “correct” messages and impart “rules of action,” while Foley’s interventions will be particularly useful in exploring how these works confront specific representational-ideological-political challenges that they face as oppositional texts. Beyond the difficulties of representing climate change per se, which have been discussed extensively by ecocritics, key challenges that emerge are representing the complex social and economic forces that drive it, presenting believable alternatives, and manifesting a collective identity that can be mapped onto a real-world movement capable of taking the action this change requires. This is particularly true of radical “ideological” cli-fi texts that establish their “villain” as what is, at least in the U.S. context, perhaps the most dominant ideology of all: neoliberal capitalism.

Capitalist realism, hyperpolitics & collective eco-political identities

In proposing “ideological” fiction as a useful framework for reading cli-fi, given the Manichean logic that is a fundamental characteristic of the genre, an obvious question becomes what the nature of the ideological confrontation these texts attempt to engage in is.

As my summary earlier in this chapter suggested, much ecocritical thinking on climate change representation in fiction focuses on constructions of climate change's environmental, ecological, and social effects; less so on its underlying economic causes. Similarly, in the opening to his book *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*, Jason Moore observes about the field of environmental studies that while it "was widely accepted" on an abstract level that "capitalism is the pivot of today's biospheric crisis," this connection was only marginally represented on an analytical level (xi). While it has been quite common from Buell onward for ecocritics to acknowledge the role of capitalism (and related phenomena like imperialism and industrialization) as a primary driver of climate change and ecological destruction (Buell, *Environmental* 3; Milner and Burgmann 32-3), it is far less common for the construction of economic structures to figure centrally in their aesthetic theories or textual analyses.

This ecocritical lacuna stands in sharp contrast to the reality of contemporary cli-fi production. There is no shortage of environmental novels that address economic forces head on. We can see this in the villainous business interests behind the damming of Glen Canyon in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) and the polluting of Boston Harbor in *Zodiac* (1988), the relentlessly profit-driven loggers of *A Friend of the Earth* and *The Overstory* (2018), and the explicit critique of consumption of *The World According to Anna* and *Ecotopia* (1975), to give just a few examples. The two contemporary cli-fi texts I will analyze in the following chapters, *New York 2140* and *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, also fall into this category. In proposing that "ideological" texts of this kind establish a "monological" opposition between capitalist forces as the side of "evil" pitted against a "good" side whose exact contours vary per text, it becomes essential to address the specific challenges this anticapitalist framing entails for oppositional texts, which are at once representational, ideological, and political.

As Amitav Ghosh writes in *The Great Derangement*, what fiction makes possible is to "conceive of (the world) as if it were other than it is... it makes possible the imagining of possibilities. And to imagine other forms of human existence is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis" (128). In addition to the difficulties of mediating large-scale environmental processes like climate change that Ghosh and other ecocritics have addressed, capitalism, especially postmodern or "late" capitalism, is itself notoriously challenging to represent (Jameson, *Postmodernism* xvii-xx). For an anticapitalist "ideological" cli-fi novel to succeed, then, it would seem to need to render both the environmental problem and the economic problem relatable to the reader and present them with a coherent pathway to action and feeling of agency. However, while climate change is increasingly recognized as a real phenomenon that inspires increased environmental concern (Schneider-Mayerson et al,

“Introduction” 2, Milner and Burgmann 1), particularly among readers of cli-fi (Schneider-Mayerson, “Influence” 487), and both its more immediate physical effects and strategies for mitigation or adaptation can be represented fairly directly in fiction (Milner and Burgmann 28), credible alternatives to capitalism remain almost impossible to countenance (Fisher 2). This may thus be the most difficult and most pressing representational challenge for anticapitalist cli-fi novels, as the “other forms of human existence” they can inspire readers to imagine could very well succeed from an environmental and scientific perspective while failing utterly from a political and economic perspective.

A key element of this challenge was deftly described by Mark Fisher in his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009). Extrapolating from a phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism,” Fisher presents a theory of “capitalist realism,” which he describes as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (2, original emphasis). This theory is given additional support in the cli-fi context by Manjana Milkoreit, who links it to the reification effect of existing reality, in which the past success and continued presence of capitalism makes it “seemingly impossible” to conceive of either a credible alternative system or a believable means for arriving at it (8). Within the tradition of Marxist theory, this could also be described as the functioning of capitalism as a dominant ideology, the most elementary function of which is imposing the “self-evidence” or obviousness of its structures and our subject positions within it (Althusser 189). As such, capitalist realism does not need to rely on overt propaganda, but exudes a pervasive influence, like a kind of “atmosphere” that conditions and constrains thought and action (Fisher 16). Significantly, the ideological atmosphere of postmodern capitalism positions itself as “post-ideological” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 12), encouraging cynical dismissal of the idea of “ideological truth,” passive consumption of anti-capitalist messages within commercial entertainment products, and a position of ironic distance that obscures the ways in which we reify capitalism with our actions, even if we may oppose it in our attitudes (Fisher 12-13). This atmosphere can affect the worldview of even the most committed anticapitalists. For Jameson, this makes the naturalization of capitalist market thinking “the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time,” which “cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged,” lest alternative systems become effectively delegitimized (*Postmodernism* 263-4), a struggle that can be taken up through “a new political art” (*Postmodernism* 54).

Returning to Sinclair's remarks about literature and propaganda, it is clear that novels can serve as one site of reinforcement of capitalist realism, without necessarily proclaiming an explicit ideological intent. Antonio Gramsci argued that cultural texts are in fact more effective at maintaining the dominant social order than coercive means, as they work on political, social, economic and psychological levels to condition us to "see the status quo as 'normal'" (Ross 61). Buell made a similar observation about the pastoral form, which can just as easily support capitalist ideologies as activate "green consciousness" (*Environmental* 31-2). Texts can serve this reifying function even in cases where they contain narrative elements and plotlines that appear to oppose the status quo, so long as they do not do anything to cause the reader to fundamentally question the inevitableness of capitalism (Fisher 12), or its status as the de facto reality and worldview through which the text can be understood. This is the case of the reformist proletarian novels discussed by Foley (261), and potentially also in the socialism-inspired cli-fi novels referenced by Milner and Burgmann that nonetheless reflect a worldview in which labor power is largely absent (192). Effective challenges to capitalist realism can only come through showing it to be "inconsistent or untenable," by revealing its "ostensible 'realism'" to be "nothing of the sort" (Fisher 16). As radical writers and theorists have long argued, the very idea of what is "realistic" is itself political, and for oppositional ideologies to succeed they must first disrupt the "appearance of a 'natural order,'" reveal that which is accepted as natural and obvious to be simply historical contingency, and make what the dominant ideology deems to be impossible appear to be not only possible, but attainable (Fisher 16-17). In this way, radical fiction invites us into a new reality, a worldview in which our grim capitalist reality is not inevitable and eternal, but in fact "ripe for revolution" (Foley 284), and in so doing establish an anticapitalist realism.

How can anticapitalist "ideological" cli-fi texts in particular work to counter capitalist realism? Fisher hypothesizes that environmental issues such as climate change may in fact be well positioned as sites of attack, as they point to a traumatic "real" that capitalist "reality" needs to suppress in order to sustain its appearance of unassailability: that "far from being the only viable political-economic system, capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment;" that is intrinsically, inextricably, and causally tied to eco-disaster; and is fundamentally opposed to sustainability "by its very nature" (18-19). By invoking this "real," Fisher suggests, texts can reveal a significant crack in the facade of capitalist realism (18), and even the "tiniest tear" in this "grey curtain" has the potential to open up new horizons of possibility (80). Fictions that combine thematization of the climate crisis with anticapitalist critique may be exactly the kind of "weapon" that we need.

However, as with anticapitalist critiques in general, environmentalist messages can also be reabsorbed into consumer entertainment forms and effectively neutralized (Fisher 18). Facts themselves are not enough to spark a revolution. Neither, for that matter, is revolutionary outrage. Without coherent pathways for channeling it into political agency, this anger can simply dissipate into the air, or rather peter out in the digital vacuum of cyberspace (Jäger, “America” 13-4), where momentary outbursts of radical enthusiasm can easily become just another kind of clickbait content and/or an exercise personal branding (Klein 321). In describing our current age as “hyperpolitical,” characterized by “a form of politicization without clear political consequences” (Jäger, “America” 13), Anton Jäger identifies a key challenge: people living within our western postmodern context can still be very engaged and mobilized by political ideas (and indeed, even the smallest consumer choices can become intensely politically loaded), but they are generally not politically organized, whether into parties, unions, or coherent mass movements (Slettholm). As a consequence, the seemingly constant churn of outrage, protest, and recrimination that characterizes a substantial subset of public discourse, particularly on the Internet, brings negligible to no political results (Slettholm, Velo). This can be seen as a continuation of challenges that have long bedeviled leftist movements in the U.S., particularly the postmodern fragmentation into “micropolitical movements” of the “utopian impulses of the sixties” that goes some way to helping explain why Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia* failed to crystalize a mass political movement as earlier leftist utopian novels had done (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 160). However, according to Jäger, the problem now is even more acute, as our extreme atomization leaves us unable to create lasting change (Velo).

Jäger describes hyperpolitics as “re-politicization without re-socialization” (Velo, my translation), and part of his project is an attempt to outline to radical leftist movements how they can once again achieve results through a return to political organization (Slettholm). This is closely aligned with the analysis of Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz in their book, *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class* (2022). They argue that in order for “political ecology” to be effective, the movements involved must politicize ecological thinking by analyzing the underlying conflicts of interest (and ideology) beneath disputes over environmental measures, and use them to effectively draw battle lines “on their own terms” (2, original emphasis). Ultimately, building on lessons from successful ideological-political movements of the 20th century like socialism, political ecology must “define a common horizon for collective action,” by clearly defining an “ecological class” and drawing up “clear fronts between friends and enemies” (Latour and Schultz 5). The formation of such a

self-aware ecological class may address the problem identified by Mark Fisher about the response to climate change, that the “collective subject” that the global crisis demands does not exist yet (66), while also addressing the problem of hyperpolitics by re-socializing political environmentalist ideas into a coherent mass movement.

In *Climate Change as Class War* (2022), Matthew Huber also proposes a class-based eco-political approach that centers on mobilizing and organizing the majoritarian power of the working class (6-7) and reorienting the climate change struggle around the “means of production” in a larger sense, that encompasses every aspect of the human relationship to the natural world (3). Latour and Schultz likewise remark that their vision of the ecological class cannot be reduced to a simple extension of “anti-capitalist” struggles (9), but that it broadens the area of concern from struggles over “production” and “reproduction” to “the habitability conditions of planet Earth” (11). This aligns with Buell’s vision of a “global culture” catalyzed by environmentalism and opposed to unlimited “technoeconomic growth” (*Environmental* 2-3). It also offers an alternative to dark paths of deep-ecology-inspired radical movements that would destroy human civilization in order to restore the planet to a “natural” state, by calling us to “fight for the *possibility* of civilisation” (Malm 156-7 original emphasis) instead of the end of it. Andreas Malm, for his part, is forthright in positioning his vision of militant environmentalist resistance as leftist and anticapitalist (127, 157), and furthermore insists that this positioning must be made clear, otherwise the movement risks losing supporters to more radical (and potentially nihilistic or reactionary) groups that actually “dare to speak the name of the enemy” (128), and in so doing draw the battle lines that Latour and Schultz call for but fail to clearly define themselves.

Radical literary history can help illuminate what is at stake here, while the “ideological” novel form provides a solution. As David Minter observes in his study of the proletarian novels of the 1930s, the failure of “victims” to accurately “name their enemies” had clear consequences, as it made it impossible to “map effective strategies for opposing them” (182). Much mainstream western environmentalist discourse is characterized by a similar failure, particularly in its focus on personal choices that emphasize the responsibility of the individual consumer without challenging the underlying system of production and consumption (Huber 10-15). The neoliberal ideology that underpins capitalist realism serves to make agency and responsibility appear diffuse (Huber 10), obscuring the direct culpability of corporations in environmental destruction and turning avenues for redress or resistance into “a bewildering transnational maze,” clouded by doubt and uncertainty that is deliberately amplified by capitalist actors (Nixon 39-40, 46), including through “greenwashing”

campaigns. Obviously, the reality of transnational capitalism is quite complex, and any attempt to define “villains” or “enemies” inevitably becomes an exercise in simplification. But, as Latour and Schultz make clear, talking about class “always means getting ready for battle,” and defining a new “class” is not only descriptive but performative (5). The act of naming both the “ecological class” and its opponent provides a new ideological frame in which people can position themselves and their foes, transforming discourse in order to transform the world (Latour and Schultz 5). As the recent example of the Occupy Wall Street movement and its “We are the 99%” slogan illustrates, these categories do not have to be 100% accurate in order to be politically useful; they just have to be true enough that people can recognize themselves and their situation in them. The descriptive and performative act of defining “friend” and “foe” is one of the core functions of “ideological” fiction, and an area where it can make a clear contribution to framing the struggle over climate change.

Recent ecocritical research suggests that there is a pressing need for texts that “highlight possibilities for collective action and structural transformation” in order to counteract the “prevailing conditions” of hegemonic late capitalist ideologies, namely the “atomization, depoliticization, powerlessness, and alienation” that otherwise foreclose or obscure pathways for participation in “transformative action” in response to ecological threats (Cole 137). As Jäger, Latour, and Schultz have argued, a precondition for effective collective action is a politically organized collective identity. This is true of the fight against climate change whether we view it through the lens of anticapitalist struggles or not. “Research findings” and representations of climate science are not “a social force of ‘power’” in and of themselves—to become a “social force,” they “need to be socially organised” (Milner and Burgmann 192). While Naomi Klein has proposed the act of engaging in mass protest itself as a pathway to collective consciousness (and a climate change resistance movement), through a process she calls “unselfing” (324), without an “ideological” framing that provides a clear message and cohesive “us” that the masses can rally around, and an organized political movement to connect that identity to, this approach also seems doomed to meet the same fate as so many other recent and short-lived spontaneous uprisings in the United States (Jäger, “America” 14-5).

In presenting ecological issues through a transparently ideological and politicized lens, and inviting readers into a position of engagement and agency, anticapitalist cli-fi texts provide a framework for social and political organization of the struggle against climate change. They also strike at heart of one of the self-ascribed “virtues” of capitalist realism, the “turn from belief to aesthetics, from engagement to spectatorship” that is presented as a

“shield” protecting us from the “perils of belief” and “immunizing” us against the “seductions of fanaticism” (Fisher 5) that would seek to disrupt the stability of the status quo. As the audience for cli-fi texts is largely made up of readers who are already concerned about climate change (Schneider-Mayerson, “Influence” 478), it seems reasonable to assume that some percentage of them would be receptive to explicitly anticapitalist messages delivered through an environmentally oriented narrative. In addressing their readers as potentially radical ideological subjects, these cli-fi texts try to overcome the defenses of the capitalist-ideological immune system, and infect us with revolutionary fervor. This is what the influential Marxist critic and novelist Mike Gold meant about the “indispensable” ingredient of proletarian fiction not being facts, but “revolutionary élan,” or, as Foley describes it, their “capacity for arousing revolutionary insight and instilling revolutionary will” (320), which leaves readers with “increased determination” to commit themselves to the struggle to bring a new reality into being (Foley 135).

Of course, when faced with the monumental task of upending the capitalist system, even just in a single country, ecocritics could rightly ask how “ideological” cli-fi novels—which are, per definition, designed to address an audience that is already sympathetic to or convinced of the worldview they propose—could help bring about a change that necessarily involves the whole of society. Surely, even among liberal audiences who are concerned about climate change, the number of people who want to read “preachy” novels about capitalism is small. To reveal why this small effect could nevertheless be significant, I will briefly review recent theories on activism and political change, and demonstrate the value of “preaching to the choir” through “ideological” fiction.

Why preach to the choir: Political change & the power of hortatory texts

Through his empirical ecocritical research, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson has found that cli-fi is much more effective at reaching readers who were already sympathetic to environmentalist ideas, but was not likely to convince skeptics or climate deniers (“Influence” 492). He also found that the audience for cli-fi in the U.S. context is primarily made up of people who are both concerned about climate change and politically aligned with the left, with more than 80% of cli-fi readers expressing “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of concern about the climate and more than 50% identifying as “liberal” or “very liberal,” compared to only 17.1% who identified as “conservative” or “very conservative” (“Influence” 478-9). He notes that as this audience is not exclusively made up of liberal climate activists, these texts are “not

merely preaching to the liberal choir” (“Influence” 478, emphasis mine). However, given the marginal percentage of conservative readers and the ineffectiveness of cli-fi in changing the minds of the unconcerned or skeptical, it would be fair to argue that “preaching to the choir” is primarily what these texts are engaged in. The question, from an instrumentalist perspective, is whether this is a limitation or a strength.

To begin with, if we consider environmentalism in general, and climate change activism in particular, to be examples of social protest movements, it can be useful to understand how mass movements work and how much popular support they actually require to succeed. The work of political scientist Erica Chenoweth offers potentially useful insights. The book she co-authored with Maria J. Stephan, *How Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (2011), has become quite influential in activist circles (Malm 56) for its empirical defense of the effectiveness of the nonviolent tactics, including “boycotts, strikes, protests, and organized noncooperation,” that “civilian populations” have used “to exact political concessions and challenge entrenched power” (6). One of their central arguments for why nonviolent movements are more successful than violent ones is that they enjoy a “participation advantage,” as the “commitment barriers” to participation are noticeably lower, “facilitat(ing) the active participation of many more people,” and higher participation is a key contributing factor to movement success (10). In their calculations, participation is not passive sympathy or support for a cause; it is “the active and observable engagement of individuals in collective action” (31). While mass participation of this kind may sound like a high threshold for a resistance movement to meet, Chenoweth’s larger body of work offers hope: her analysis of data on 323 mass resistance movements between 1900-2006 supports the general “rule” that all movements that have mobilized a peak participation of at least 3.5% of the population have succeeded, as governments are not able to withstand a popular challenge of this magnitude (Chenoweth 1). The number of people a U.S.-based movement needs to mobilize, while still formidable (more than 11 million (Chenoweth 2)), nevertheless appears to be realistically within reach. Chenoweth’s “rule” figures directly in the action of the first cli-fi text I will analyze in this thesis, *New York 2140*, in its construction of a green anticapitalist uprising (Robinson 400, 531).

Chenoweth and Stephan’s work has come under fire from more radical environmentalist circles in recent years. In his book/manifesto, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World of Fire* (2021), Andreas Malm challenges the dogmatic belief about the absolute effectiveness of nonviolent protest that their research has helped codify by engaging in his own historical analysis of successful mass protest movements of the past. He

argues that each of them—almost without exception—either consciously used “violent” actions as a tactic, or benefitted from a radical flank or fringe that did so (39-40, 47). Malm calls the fetishization of nonviolent protest “sanitised history” (61), and likens it to religious faith more than rational analysis (31), citing Nelson Mandela (basically the patron saint of “strategic passivism”) who stated that nonviolence was only a “tactic” that should be “abandoned” as soon as it ceased to work (53). Faced with a notable lack of success in opposing climate change through peaceful protest, Malm argues that escalation is required (8). Particularly interesting for the subject of this thesis, Malm makes it clear that the debate over the meaning of “violence” and the legitimacy of violent protest is an ideological struggle. He argues that the conflation of property destruction with terrorism is a deliberate discursive move by the “repressive state apparatus” (107-8), and that the insistence on civility and peaceful resistance has become “dominant not only in the climate movement, but in most Anglo-American thinking and theorising about social movements” is not accidental. Rather, it is the result of the real history of “revolutionary politics” being “defamed,” “unlearned,” and “turned unreal” since the 1980s (Malm 61), which we can perhaps see as parallel to or an extension of the suppression of the radical literary tradition from the 1930s.

Chenoweth and Stephan briefly address the idea of the “radical flank” in their book, noting that “[o]ften those who employ violence in mass movements are members of fringe groups who are acting independently, or in defiance of, the central leadership” (12). Given that the large majority of these movements are not part of this “fringe,” they permit themselves to characterize them as “principally nonviolent” (12). Taking Chenoweth’s 3.5% “rule” as a baseline for overall participation in climate change resistance, we could then assume that the number of people needed to participate in the radical flank that Malm calls for would be quite low indeed. There are already examples of environmental literature that have inspired this kind of “violent” direct action in the past, notably Edward Abbey’s novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. I will explore the legacy of this work and the influence of Malm’s ideas in the second cli-fi text I analyze in this thesis, Daniel Golhaber’s film “adaptation” *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*.

In mapping these ideas from political science onto climate change movements in the contemporary American context (and the “ideological” cli-fi that may support them), it is important to consider the difference between the “maximalist” nonviolent campaigns that Chenoweth studies, the goals of which may include “overthrowing a government or achieving territorial independence” (Chenoweth 3) and the civil resistance movements that Malm describes, which are more properly speaking reformist or progressive in nature, as they

attempt to change an aspect of society without overthrowing the entire system itself (with some exceptions). Returning to Jäger's insights on hyperpolitics, the latter category of resistance movement depends on political organization to make an impact, which in the U.S. context means they ultimately need to translate popular mobilization into pressure on political parties and, in the final instance, success at the ballot box (Jäger, *Hyperpolitik* 129). Looking more closely at this element of societal change that relies on the democratic process can also provide clues to where the potential supporters for the nonviolent and violent resistance actions described above are most likely to come from.

It is a common misconception that the "swing" votes that U.S. presidential elections so often hinge on are "persuadable" voters who might be convinced to switch from one party to the other, when in reality it is "irregular" voters, who are already sympathetic to one party but who may choose not to vote due to feelings of apathy or alienation from the political process, who are much more significant (Brownstein). It is for this reason that both Republican and Democratic campaigns focus primarily on turning out voters who are already inclined to support their parties (Kleinfeld 165), also known as "mobilizing the base," more so than on convincing voters to change sides. Beyond elections, this focus on mobilization of partisan forces can also function to change (and perhaps radicalize) the platforms of the parties themselves, by rallying "highly partisan" party members to engage in primaries or other internal processes, thus gaining an "outsized influence" on the party from within (Kleinfeld 170). While active participation in the kinds of liberation struggles Chenoweth and Stephan describe may well draw on (and require) a broad cross-section of society (11), I would argue that the narrower movements Malm focuses on, such as the climate change struggle, benefit more from strategies focused on mobilization rather than conversion. This seems likely to be true in regards to inspiring "active participation" in a radical fringe, and is almost certainly the case when it comes time to cast a vote in a two-party context.

With this distinction of persuasion vs. motivation in mind, we can return to the form and function of radical "ideological" fiction. According to Foley, a distinguishing characteristic of truly revolutionary didactic novels is the directness with which they address the reader ideologically (in the narrower sense). They do not abandon the reader to achieve heightened consciousness (or not) through individual cognition. Instead, they exhort the reader to engage directly with radical ideas (Foley 281-2, 382). While many critics (including some Marxist ones) found this style "jarring," there was general consensus that in order to be successful in conveying revolutionary political ideas, these novels needed to be explicit about their ideologies, and whether that was perceived as positive or negative was primarily a

matter of the reviewer's politics (Foley 135-6). This leads to an important point about the audience of these novels: "most literary radicals described their audience as the class-conscious segment of the proletariat and/or the proletarianized petty bourgeoisie," not the "average" person. Thus, the authors of these works could assume that the majority of their readership would have a "sympathetic understanding" of the general terms of proletarian ideology, and "the key issue to be addressed was not the knowledge or theory of class struggle, but practice: would the reader take sides and get out into the streets?" (Foley 396).

In this self-selecting, sympathetic audience we can see some clear parallels with the readership of cli-fi, which is significantly "more liberal" and "more concerned about climate change" than the average American. This means that for the majority of readers, cli-fi novels, which typically announce their thematic concerns (and thus their ideological positions) right on their covers, were not likely to function as "Trojan horses" smuggling new ideas into readers' subconscious (Schneider-Mayerson, "Influence" 478). Rather, a more accurate metaphor might be like placards at a protest march, reminding the reader of what they already believe, and reinforcing it through a pithy turn of phrase. This helps "nudge" the already "concerned" reader in the direction of greater alarm, and potentially toward ecopolitical action (Schneider-Mayerson, "Influence" 478). Reflecting back on Schneider-Mayerson's insistence that cli-fi is "not merely preaching to the liberal choir," the evidence of its effectiveness on sympathetic audiences is an invitation to take a closer look at this "dead" metaphor, which in common use is understood to be a total waste of time and breath. But why do preachers preach to the choir? As Foley's arguments about the hortatory effect of "ideological" fiction suggest in theory, and as voter mobilization campaigns and Schneider-Mayerson's cli-fi research confirm in practice, they do it because it works. It is not a matter of repeating what people already know, but of strengthening that belief and compelling them to act on it. And if Chenoweth and Malm are correct about the relatively small percentage of people that large-scale social and political change requires, getting the members of the environmentalist choir fired up could make all the difference.

Reading contemporary American cli-fi as "ideological" fiction

I began this introduction by outlining the current state of ecocritical theory on representational strategies for thematizing climate change that can facilitate a change in reader perceptions and actions, and discussed the seeming paradox between the instrumentalist nature of ecocritical theory and the widespread dismissal of explicitly

instrumentalist (or “didactic”) aesthetic strategies in climate fiction. After reviewing the scattered attempts by ecocritics to address “didactic” cli-fi, I proposed situating it in the longer tradition of the radical novel in the United States, and outlined a structuralist framework through which these texts can productively be read, as works of “ideological” fiction, to provide greater insight into how they convey a specific “message” and “rule of action” to sympathetic readers. From there, I identified two additional challenges faced by anticapitalist cli-fi texts: overcoming “capitalist realism” and constructing collective identities that can be mapped onto coherent real-world movements in our “hyperpolitical” age, and proposed that “ideological” texts are particularly well suited to these tasks. Finally, I reviewed theories of social and political change and argued that the “hortatory” effect of these texts can play a key role in mobilizing audiences that are already concerned about climate change to take action. With this theoretical framework, historical background, and guiding argument in place, we are now ready to read cli-fi as radical “ideological” fiction.

The two primary texts I will focus on are Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *New York 2140* and Daniel Golhaber’s film *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. Both are examples of American climate fiction published within the last decade that are set in the United States, a geographic and temporal scope that allows me to focus on texts that reflect real-world debates and ideological streams within American environmentalism and climate change discourse during a time period when the reality and threat of climate change has already become abundantly clear (Milner and Burgmann 26). With consideration to Suleiman’s definition of the “ideological” novel, both texts fit within the realist tradition, in a broad sense that embraces Robinson’s remark that science fiction is “the realism of our time” (Woods 1155-57) so long as it is set in the near future, represents believable extrapolations from our present, and depicts political, social, and environmental concerns that are clearly connected to current debates (Woods 1155). My narrow geographic focus also helps to reinforce the realist aspects of these works, particularly for an American audience that may be more likely to find narratives to be “realistic” when they can “identify with the work’s setting” (Schneider-Mayerson, “Influence” 487-8), as well as finding their representations of politics and political actors to more interesting and “plausible” (Milner and Burgmann 65-66), which has implications for their effectiveness as “ideological” texts.

I have also selected these texts due to certain narrative elements and structural traits that align with the ecopolitical themes and challenges related to “ideological” cli-fi I have identified in this introduction. Both texts feature constructions of climate change-related activism that are tied to distinctly anticapitalist ideologies, both address contemporary

theories of mobilization and social change directly in their diegetic content, and both feature multi-protagonist structures and experimental narrative effects. Taken together, these aspects facilitate an investigation of their formal challenges to the aesthetic conventions of bourgeois realism and their related ideological challenges to the discursive boundaries of capitalist realism. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I have selected these cli-fi texts for the way in which they appear to announce themselves as expressly didactic and explicitly “ideological”; for their clear intent to engage audiences in ecological and economic ideas, and to do so in a way that invites them to take sides—to take *their* side.

I will begin my in-depth readings in chapter one by examining *New York 2140*. Through analyzing patterns of redundancy and other narrative effects, I will expose the ways in which this “near-future science fiction” text works structurally to present climate change unambiguously as a Manichean struggle against neoliberal capitalism. I will explore the role of the novel’s “talkative” narrator in elucidating an anticapitalist ideology and challenging capitalist realism, and analyze how Robinson uses “mentor” and “apprentice” protagonists to connect the “ought” of doctrine to the “is” of action, as well as to unite ecological and economic concerns into a coherent collective identity. While I find some flaws in the text as an “ideological” novel, I argue that it ultimately presents sympathetic readers with a coherent lesson and practical “rules of action” that can be applied to climate change struggles in our current place and time.

In chapter two, my reading of *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* addresses how the film adapts Malm’s incendiary ideas about the need for climate change activists to engage in violent action into an “ideological” fictional form. In doing so, I draw connections between Goldhaber’s film and the novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (and thus to the genre of the “ecological caper”) to illustrate how didactic fictional texts of this kind function as “how-to” manuals for ecological sabotage. In particular, I look closely at the film’s treatment of two central protagonists, one who represents a mainstream environmentalist perspective (and is opposed to direct action) and one who begins the film already radicalized, and what this implies for its target audiences, “rules of action,” and real-world effects.

While my analysis in this thesis will be primarily limited to these texts, my approach is intended to be broadly applicable across a spectrum of cli-fi texts that display “didactic” or “ideological” tendencies to varying degrees. Other texts I considered that fall more clearly in the “purely” didactic category include those cited at the beginning of this chapter—*A Friend of the Earth*, *Green Earth*, and *The Deluge*—as well as *The Great Transition* (2023) by Nick Fuller Googins and several other works by Kim Stanley Robinson, such as *Antarctica* (1997)

and *The Ministry for the Future*. Cli-fi texts that deploy some didactic elements, but which ultimately hew closer to traditional realist norms (including in magical realist variants) could also be a fruitful area of study, such as *The Overstory* by Richard Powers or *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* by Karen Tei Yamashita. Looking beyond cli-fi to the larger category of environmental fiction, classic environmentalist novels such as *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Ecotopia*, eco-crime/thriller novels such as *Zodiac* by Neal Stephenson and the works of Carl Hiaasen, and environmentally oriented postcolonial novels like Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) could all be productively analyzed in this context.

Through my analysis, I hope to offer a model for reading “ideological” cli-fi on its own terms, and in doing so reveal what is interesting about these texts from an ecocritical perspective and what is valuable about them in the fight against climate change. Ultimately, I argue that we should take these texts seriously as objects of study and recognize—not dismiss—their “ideological” tendencies. Texts that deploy didactic and hortatory strategies can help audiences transcend the epistemological limitations of capitalist realism and point them in the direction of another worldview, one in which radical change is possible; where they can be part of the side of “good” that makes this radical change a reality. They do not just seek to inform, but to agitate, to get the reader fired up and ready to act. If enough of these “ideological” cli-fi texts find the right sympathetic readers, then the cumulative effect of all these individual nudges could be enough to turn the tide.

1: Toward a red-green revolution: *New York 2140*

In Kim Stanley Robinson's 2017 cli-fi novel *New York 2140*, it is too late to stop climate change. Catastrophic sea-level rise caused by melting glaciers and ice caps has already inundated New York City, leaving a significant section of the city fifty feet underwater, as well as wiping out untold miles of coastline (and millions of lives) worldwide (Krafft 2). It is not, however, too late to save the world from the root cause of this global crisis: capitalism.

In the novel's climax, Amelia, an environmentalist influencer, is broadcasting from an airship drifting above Manhattan, showing scenes of devastation from the recent storm surge and contrasting the refugee camps in Central Park to the empty luxury towers uptown, when she suddenly interrupts her descriptive voiceover to address her worldwide fanbase directly. "I'm sick of the rich," she declares. "I'm sick of them running this whole planet for themselves. They're wrecking it! So I think we should take it back, and take care of it. And take care of each other as part of that" (526). She argues that "revolution" "[w]on't be that hard" as long as everyone joins in: "Just don't pay your bills!", and let the "[o]verleveraged" banks crash and be taken over by the people (527-8). After Amelia's speech calling for a global "householders' strike" is broadcast through the cloud, the narrative breaks to bring in a larger perspective, as the next chapter opens with a laundry list of civil disobedience tactics:

Strategic defaulting. Class-action suits. Mass rallies. Staying home from work.

Staying out of private transport systems. Refusing consumer consumption beyond the necessities. Withdrawing deposits. Denouncing all forms of rent-seeking. Ignoring mass media. Withholding scheduled payments. Fiscal noncompliance. Loud public complaining. (531)

This seemingly narrator-less passage is followed by a reference to the influential political science book *Why Civil Resistance Works* and a short summary of its arguments about the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance (531). We then return from the abstract of theory to the concrete of the story, as the text tells us that "in the summer of 2142 people started doing all of those things," an initially "spontaneous" and uncoordinated response to the local catastrophe in New York that quickly "spread around the world" (531). And just like that, in the space of a few pages, a global economic revolution is underway, in a moment that calls to mind both the climactic "confrontations" of radical American novels of the 1920s and 30s (Foley 268) and the contemporary anticapitalist protest tactics of our present day (Kabo 264). By the end of the novel, the "neoliberal global order" has been "overturned" and the results are universally positive (Robinson, *New York* 602-3). New York is still flooded, but upending

its foundational economic structures has transformed it from climate change dystopia to climate change utopia (Milner and Burgmann 158). And since, the novel tells us, New York City is representative of “all the cities in the world” (495), we are encouraged to imagine that the same utopian transformation has taken place around the globe.

This sequence is emblematic of the text as a whole. It includes convincing descriptions of ecological devastation and high-tech climate change adaptations, and alternates between the action-packed escapades of ten interconnected protagonists, biting anti-capitalist opinions delivered diegetically through the voices of the characters, and extradiegetic commentary from a disembodied narrator-character that connects the local to the global and the specific to the universal. It also encapsulates what would be, in the eyes of traditional literary critics in general and ecocritics in particular, several of the novel’s fundamental flaws. The most obvious “problem” here is Robinson’s flagrant violation of “bourgeois” realism’s prohibition on using novels as vehicles for explicit political arguments (Foley 156) and its injunction to present the world as it is (Lukács 33, Suleiman 11), rather than how you think it ought to be. This aesthetic line is also the consensus view among American ecocritics, who object to turning fictional texts into “crude(ly)” didactic “vehicles for protest” (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 8-9, 15), despite their support for “instrumentalist” readings of cli-fi texts in a theoretical sense (Seymour 26). In addition to being aesthetically objectionable, works of this kind are generally regarded as less effective than those that follow realist norms (Garrard, “Introduction” 16-17).

Beyond its means of delivery, the content of *New York 2140* also invites critique. Environmental novels that explicitly present an oppositional political and/or economic agenda have been criticized by ecocritics for their “heavy-handed style” (Anderson 38) as well as the insufficient depth of their political and economic analyses and solutions themselves (Trexler, *Anthropocene* 170), which offer an “implausible coherence” in place of the “distributed, systemic” complexity of the Anthropocene (Trexler, *Anthropocene* 197-9, 202). Looking beyond the bounds of ecocriticism proper to cli-fi scholarship from science fiction and utopian studies, Andrew Milner and J. R. Burgmann describe the climax of *New York 2140* as “‘utopian’ in the pejorative sense of being hopelessly impractical” (161), for offering “wish fulfilment” in place of a believable alternative to the capitalist structures it critiques, or a credible process for getting to the postcapitalist futures it imagines. Finally, from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, the novel’s sweeping conclusion can be read as extending what Janet Fiskio calls the “history of diaspora and environmental racism” (52). While the climactic revolution extends far beyond the borders of the United States, the reality

of other places and their people is simply not present in the text in any meaningful way, making it part of a trend of cli-fi narratives set in wealthy Western countries (Trexler, *Anthropocene* 2) that offer nominally “global” discourses which rest on “homogenizing narratives” that flatten out differences between the global north and south, and in doing so obscure the persistent effects of imperialism and capitalism (DeLoughrey 321, Krafft 13).

Given all of these potential objections, ecocritics may be tempted to dismiss *New York 2140* as overly reductionist, or even problematic, in addition to being excessively “didactic.” But I think that it is exactly its didactic nature that makes Robinson’s novel more interesting than one might think, and more politically potent than the objections I have sketched above may lead ecocritics to expect. To understand why requires that we unpack the term “didactic” a bit. As I outlined in my introduction, when viewed through the lens of Susan Rubin Suleiman’s concept of the “ideological” novel, and the work of Barbara Foley in adapting Suleiman’s framework for American proletarian fiction of the 1930s, “didactic” fictional texts are revealed not to be primarily instructional or persuasive in the sense of addressing the uneducated or uninitiated, but interpellative and hortatory in their address to already sympathetic readers whose beliefs they confirm and sharpen, and to whom they issue a call to increased commitment or concrete action.

While works of this kind have often been dismissed as simplistic, I will use Robinson’s novel to explore how “ideological” novels are effective because of, not in spite of, this tendency: It is exactly through distilling complex problems down to Manichean struggles, as battles between “good” and “evil,” that they derive their persuasive power (Suleiman 101, 137). In the context of climate change, this means taking globally dispersed processes and systems in which agency (and responsibility) appear as impossibly diffuse and transforming them into a coherent framework in which there is a clearly identified “them” that is primarily responsible for perpetuating climate change that a collective “us” can struggle against. This is because of a key difference between “ideological” cli-fi and cli-fi in the bourgeois realist tradition. The latter, according to Trexler, should “sensitize” readers of varied ideological backgrounds and levels of environmental awareness to the reality of climate change in all its nuance and complexity (*Anthropocene* 170), effectively functioning as a cognitive form of discourse in which a reader’s political arousal may arise from their encounter with the “truth” (Foley 154-5). “Ideological” cli-fi, on the other hand, offers positive affirmation to readers who are already concerned about climate change (members of the environmentalist “choir”) that they are on the “good” side, and prepares them to fight.

While “ideological” novels may well offer “impractical” visions of revolution, this does not necessarily limit their effectiveness in inspiring real-world change. This has been demonstrated by historical examples from the tradition of American radical fiction, such as Edward Bellamy’s utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888), which was “rudimentary” in its constructions of politics and social transformations (Rideout 12), but which nevertheless resulted in a rush of socialist fervor and real-world change in the United States (Rideout 4). A cli-fi novel that could inspire a similar real-world response, regardless of how “implausible” it may appear on a textual level, would seem to provide exactly the kind of “Shute effect” that Milner and Burgmann, as well as climate scientists and activists the world over, are searching for (50). For ecocritics, moving beyond the reflexive bias against didactic fiction is imperative, so that we can better appreciate the power of “ideological” cli-fi on the climate imaginary and climate change agency in general, and more readily recognize those specific texts that have the greatest potential to inspire collective action.

In this chapter, I will analyze *New York 2140* as a work of “ideological” climate fiction, exploring to what extent it manifests this potential, where its limitations are, and what we can learn from it that can inform the search for and creation of impactful cli-fi texts. Ultimately, I argue that *New York 2140* is more interesting, and potentially much more effective, than ecocritics might think, and that much of its power comes precisely from how it “preaches to the choir.”

“The problem is capitalism”: Establishing the us vs. them

In the United States, the genre of the radical novel has been strongly associated with Marxist, socialist, and communist movements, with an explicit or implicit goal of fundamentally changing oppressive socioeconomic systems (Rideout 12). Kim Stanley Robinson’s comments on his own work invite us to situate it in this tradition, through his acknowledged inspiration by writers like John Dos Passos (Robinson, “Socialism”), who was one of the most famous socialist writers of the early 20th century, and Edward Bellamy (Robinson, “Imagining”), as well as his stated desire to create literature that helps readers imagine a pathway to a socialist utopia (Robinson, “Socialism”). In her work *Radical Representations*, Barbara Foley showed how Susan Suleiman’s “ideological” novel framework can be productively applied to the U.S. radical novel context to analyze how these novels engage and motivate leftist readers as ideological subjects. In this section, I will begin my analysis of *New York 2140* as an “ideological” cli-fi novel by looking at how it reduces the complexity of

climate change into a struggle between two opposing sides, which Latour and Schultz argue is essential for effective mobilization and action that can overcome the “paralysis” that has characterized the left’s response to the climate crisis (6, 17-18).

In order for a text to function as “ideological” fiction, it has to embrace a “monological” mode of discourse, presenting an “ideological supersystem” that orients the reader toward a single-minded reading in which “ideas are either affirmed or refuted, with no middle ground possible,” with the result that one ideology is clearly “right” while others are discredited (Suleiman 71). This framing establishes the terms of conflict within the novel, and positions the reader in alignment with the “right” side (Suleiman 1, 10). Provided that the novel is able to establish a connection between the opposing sides in the fictional text and their nonfictional referents, the reader is encouraged to apply this mapping to their political engagement in the real world (Suleiman 146), which can aid in drawing battle lines, recognizing shared (class) interests, and choosing sides.

In reading *New York 2140* as “ideological” fiction, a key question is thus where and how it draws its battle lines. The clues that the primary site of the novel’s ideological struggle is capitalism are not long in coming. Before we even get a glimpse of *New York 2140*’s post-climate-apocalypse setting, the text begins with a discussion of value and who created it, written in the style of an instructional dialog from an oppositional economics textbook. Jeff explains the situation to his friend Mutt: “The prices are always too low, and so the world is fucked. We’re in a mass extinction event, sea level rise, climate change, food panics... It’s not just that there are market failures. It’s that the market is a failure,” because “things are sold for less than it costs to make them” (4). Here, the novel clearly lays out its terms, following the structure of Jeff’s opening screed: a) Neoliberal capitalism is fundamentally flawed, b) this is due to the way the system determines value, and c) the result is environmental and social catastrophe (Krafft 5). In case the reader has not gotten the message, Robinson has Jeff spell it out: “look, the problem is capitalism” (5), a sentiment that Robinson himself has echoed in interviews about his cli-fi texts and perspectives on climate change (“Socialism”), providing intertextual support to the “correctness” of this statement. This message is echoed and reinforced throughout the text that follows, cementing the status of Mutt and Jeff as “correct interpreter” characters who present the “global interpretation” that accounts for the “whole story” or the moral of the novel, a structural device privileged by “ideological” novels (Suleiman 183-4).

In contrast, when the financial trader Franklin Garr is introduced shortly after, the novel immediately sets him up as an economic foil. Narrating his own thoughts and actions in

first person, Franklin presents himself to the reader unselfconsciously, even gleefully, as almost a caricature of a heartless and self-absorbed capitalist villain (Krafft 11). His inner monologue gushes about his work “betting on sea level rise” and “buying (the) fear” of people in the Philippines who are about to be struck by a typhoon (19). Reflecting on the disaster that led to the flooding of New York in the first place, he remarks to himself: “Am I saying that the floods, the worst catastrophe in human history, equivalent or greater to the twentieth century’s wars in their devastation, were actually good for capitalism? Yes I am” (118). Later, he exclaims “Oh no!” at the news of a local building’s collapse, not because of the “scores of people, maybe hundreds” who have likely died, but because of the potential impact it could have on his profits (125, Krafft 11). Even his short-lived relationship with another trader, Jojo, takes on a strangely comic edge, as their shared moment of sexual passion is accompanied by equally passionate exclamations made up of trading terminology (71, Krafft 11). As Naveeda Khan puts it, “Franklin speaks as the market” (8), not a person.

Within Marxian aesthetic theory, we can read Franklin’s character as a source of estrangement in the Brechtian sense (Krafft 11): making fictional characters seem less natural, so that they appear more “remarkable to us” (Brecht 446), thus prompting the audience to reflect critically on the character’s actions and beliefs. However, without the addition of an accompanying ideological message, the reader would be left to work through this critical reflection (or cognition) on their own, as in the model of “cognitive estrangement” proposed by Darko Suvin that serves as a foundational analytical framework within science fiction theory (Suvin 20). Within the system of the “ideological” novel, however, this characterization of Franklin is an example of “story”-level redundancy, in which a “negative exemplary” character with traits that align with the object of the text’s critique is used as a contrast to our heroic protagonist(s) and the “correct” ideology they embody, thus further reinforcing the text’s didactic message (Suleiman 87-8, 98). This also puts a specific face on the “them” of the text, to which the “us” is opposed, which the novel names the “rentier” class (151, 399). While caricatures of this kind may be crude and reductionist (as Jameson notes, “Marx never tired of saying” that “no one... thinks all businessmen are individually wicked (*Postmodernism* 347)) they can serve an ideological purpose by helping to denaturalize capitalism, revealing it not to be some nebulous, impersonal, and inevitable system, but rather to be made up of human beings who can be disagreed with, struggled against, and perhaps even persuaded to change course, thus opening a crack in the wall of capitalist realism.

Moving beyond Franklin, it becomes clear that seven of the novel's ten protagonists/focalizers are engaged in narrative arcs that are primarily driven by economics. This includes Charlotte (a building co-op head fighting off a hostile real estate bid), Mutt and Jeff (former finance industry "quants" now committed to disrupting the global financial system), and "the citizen" (the disembodied, collective-ish voice of New York putting things in historical context with a decidedly leftist perspective). We do encounter a few other protagonists whose concerns are initially more specifically environmental, most notably Amelia, the daring and confessional reality star of the "cloud" (basically futuristic YouTube), who is primarily intent on trying to "save" what is left of nature, but otherwise the novel's characters treat their flooded world as the precarious environment in which they have to survive, and the terms of their survival are explicitly economic. Most significantly, all of the protagonists rally behind the global revolution in the end, which takes the form of a "rent strike" against the capital class. This reinforces the novel's message, aligned with the socialist tradition that Robinson is clearly inspired by, that the primary ecological struggle is the "rentier" (aka "parasitic" or "vampire") class vs. everybody else (or "labor") (Robinson, *New York* 435, 502, 547). While all works of fiction implicitly reflect an ideology to some degree, the way Robinson's novel "formulate(s), in an insistent, consistent, and unambiguous manner, the thesis (it) seek(s) to illuminate," inscribing the "'correct' interpretation of the story... in capital letters" (Suleiman 9-10) marks it unmistakably as an "ideological" novel of the kind Suleiman describes, one which presents the reader with a clearly delineated "good vs. evil" confrontation and invites them to identify with the "correct" side.

Reframing an environmental struggle as an economic one is no small discursive task; one that even a cast of ten characters might struggle to accomplish at the level of "story" alone. To achieve it, Robinson deploys one of the most common "discourse"-level devices of the "ideological" novel genre, the "talkative" narrator (Suleiman 168), a role that is played in *New York 2140* by the figure of "the citizen."

Opinionated narrators & documentarism: Establishing the bigger picture

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson's research suggests that the large majority of readers of climate fiction are already concerned about climate change ("Influence" 478). As an "ideological" cli-fi novel that seeks to establish the economic realm as the primary site of the climate struggle, *New York 2140* would not need to focus on informing the reader about climate change itself. That capitalism is a significant driver of climate change would likely also be

obvious to most of Robinson's readers on some level. Though, as Jason Moore observed in relation to the discourse of the Anthropocene, this connection has had a tendency to become quite diffuse (xi), making it difficult to establish as a site of political struggle. In its more concrete form, it is often reduced to a simple question of consumerism that places the burden on the individual choices while obscuring (and reifying) the structural capitalist forces behind them (Trexler, *Anthropocene* 189, Huber 12), leaving individuals trapped in capitalist realism. Robinson has expressed his love for the "red-greens" of eco-Marxism, a "fusion of ecological concerns with political leftism," and stated that his work has been centered on bringing these concerns together (Robinson, "Interview"). A primary ideological task for *New York 2140* would thus appear to be connecting the presumed ecological concerns of the reader with a broader and more rigorous anticapitalist worldview in a way that makes alternatives appear believable, and that offers a pathway to collective political agency.

The primary means that *New York 2140* uses to carry out this work is "the citizen" (alternately "a citizen," "that citizen," and "the city smartass again" (32, 76, 205, 262, 318, 495). This complicated focalizer is at once one and multiple, and exists both within the universe of the story and beyond it. It is a distinctly "New Yorkese" voice (sarcastic, bombastic, ironic; both archly critical and fiercely partisan of NYC) that sets the action of the novel's heroes in a global and historical perspective, with an unmistakably anticapitalist slant, while also helping to ground it in a specific place and time that contemporary readers can relate to. This focalizer is an example of what Suleiman calls a "'talkative' or openly didactic narrator," who offers interpretation of every event while telling it (168-9). Narrators like this serve a didactic function by establishing a bond with the reader "based on presumably common values and beliefs" and articulating the ideological values of the text through commentary on characters, events, and ideas that the reader is predisposed to "have confidence in" (Foley 269). Robinson thus uses the citizen to engage the reader directly to help ensure that they both receive and believe the political messages of the text.

The first time the story proper is interrupted to introduce the citizen's voice, it is to provide background on the novel's setting by describing the geographical and geological peculiarities of New York and relate the future history of the global floods (32-5). This helps establish the novel as a work of post-apocalyptic climate fiction, while also connecting the novel's ecological theme to its economic motif, calling the city "the capital of capital" that people won't abandon due to "the tyranny of sunk costs" (33-4). The citizen also immediately reveals to the reader the relationship between the text's own "discourse" and "story" levels, contrasting the citizen's own "grandly sweeping overview" with the "melodramas describing

individual fates” found in the character-driven chapters (34). This meta-textual move appears intended to allow the citizen to serve as the kind of intrusive/discursive narrator described by Foley and Suleiman, while also attempting to forestall accusations of authoritarian didacticism by showing the author’s hand in advance, letting the reader in on the trick as part of an invitation to make their own judgment, to (hopefully) arrive at agreement with the text’s message through a dialectical process of cognition. However, when we consider this move as a didactic effect in itself, it could instead be more like the magician who reveals one trick to obscure the workings of another.

Throughout the novel, the citizen continues to play a strongly didactic function, connecting the events of the “story” to larger political, social, economic, and environmental ideas, including the climate change concerns of the present day. For example, the citizen draws a parallel between Hurricane Katrina and the novel’s future floods, and lampoons the shortsightedness of people (like us) who, despite the clear and alarming warnings from scientists (and “a few canny and deeply thoughtful sci-fi writers,” in a playful nod to Robinson himself), “went on torching the planet” through relentless use of fossil fuels (140), directly implicating the reader in the collective inaction that brings about the novel’s future. While the second citizen chapter still has a primary focus on place, describing the history of the Met Life tower and its surroundings (77-80), the third, which tells the history of the First and Second Pulses that raised sea levels around the world (139-145), also marks a turning point from the citizen’s focus from ecology to economy. A description of how the melting of Antarctica and Greenland’s glaciers were key tipping points is capped off with an observation that “[t]he one percent get nasty when their assets are threatened” (143), an allusion to the “99%” slogan of the Occupy movement, while the chapter’s closing cites Bertolt Brecht (145), a nod to Robinson’s Marxian aesthetic influences. In a later section, “that citizen” highlights how environmental crises affect the wealthy much less than the masses, due to their ability to simply relocate in pursuit of the next place that can offer them the “highest rate of return” (205-7), an argument which calls to mind Rob Nixon’s argument in *Slow Violence* about the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on the poor (Nixon 5-6, 16). The citizen explains that this is made possible in part by governments subsidizing capitalist interests, as is evidenced by the massive bailout of the financial sector following the housing crash of 2008, which “served as the model” for the bailout that followed the Second Pulse, and which seemed to mark a “decisive victory for capital” (206-7).

The housing crisis of 2008, including the anticapitalist protests it inspired, emerges as a central narrative and ideological element of the novel. This is primarily through the

discursive work of the citizen, supported by “story”-level redundancies. An interstitial citation from an (obviously unheeded) 2002 International Monetary Fund report that warned of a potential housing crash is the novel’s first concrete allusion to this real-world event, and is accompanied by a concise bit of extradiegetic commentary: “clueless? prescient? both?” (64). This citation and aside foreshadows the action of Robinson’s novel, in which crashes and bailouts play a key role. It also helps reinforce the reader’s critical position toward the financial sector that Franklin has already inspired, by connecting him and the industry he represents to a real-world event that contemporary American leftist readers could be generally expected to have strong negative feelings about, further cementing their role as the text’s primary villain. Following this quote, references to the 2008 housing crisis occur regularly throughout the text. Franklin refers to how ratings agencies still give AAA ratings to bad debt, maybe not for “subprime mortgages” (like in the years leading up to 2008) anymore, but definitely for “submarine” ones (122-3), in another economic/ecological pun. The anonymous author of *Diary of a Very Bad Year: Confessions of an Anonymous Hedge Fund Manager*, an insider exposé of the 2008 crisis, is offered by the citizen as a rare example of a “wise” person working in finance (319).

The 2008 housing crisis also serves as part of the inspiration for the householders’ strike that occurs at the novel’s climax, the theoretical and practical groundwork for which is laid within the “story” by Franklin explaining the concepts of liquidity and illiquidity of assets (and how banks profit off the relationship between the two) to Charlotte in the context of debt defaults that incited the confidence crash of 2008 (347). Between the levels of “story” and “discourse,” a dialogue between the “correct” interpreter characters, Mutt and Jeff, on the parasitic rentier class explains that there are many more of “us” than “them,” and argues that “conditions are ripe” for revolution (399-401). Meanwhile, on the level of “discourse,” the citizen provides explanatory glosses on unregulated high-frequency trading markets that put our livelihoods at risk without human oversight (318-320), and how government interference in the market is welcomed in response to acute crisis (378), despite the fealty of mainstream economists to the “neoliberal turn” and their fanatical belief in market-based solutions (379-80). This functions simultaneously as critique of what actually occurred in 2008 and as a map for an alternate course of action for when the next bubble pops, both for the characters in the novel and for readers in the real world: nationalize the banks to make them serve the masses instead of the global capitalist class.

What is notable in the “city” segment in which the novel’s local uprising is transformed into a global financial revolution, which I cited in my introduction to this

chapter, is that the sarcastic, bombastic tone of the “citizen” is absent. So, while it fills the structural role (and sequential place) of those chapters within this numbered part of the novel, its discursive function is of a different character. Here, all pretense of masking or softening the instructional/persuasive nature of the text is stripped away, leaving only direct didactic address. That Robinson has saved this mode for the novel’s revolutionary climax is unlikely to be accidental. On the contrary, it is also a kind of climax of the pattern of commentary that, while decoupled from the temporality and embodiedness of the story proper, is nevertheless grounded by a sense of shared place and ideology, which also creates the impression of a shared stake in the story’s outcome. As a discursive strategy, establishing this regular pattern of didactic commentary in the voice of the quasi-character of the citizen helps prime the reader for the city chapter where that voice becomes collective, and the reader is invited to be swept up in the flow of history as it is made, and invited into the novel’s “us.” Had Robinson deployed this collective didactic voice earlier in the novel, it would have been more jarring and unearned. Here it supports the impression of the collective revolutionary movement as—in true Marxist form—inevitable.

This “city” chapter also helps to illustrate another of the novel’s didactic approaches, namely the way in which it introduces the reader to additional activist texts. In this one chapter alone, the reader is referred to *Why Civil Resistance Works* and *Riot. Strike. Riot*, two books that offer an introduction to the theory and practice of resistance. Looking at the novel as a whole, the list of references from Robinson becomes quite long and diverse, including radical economists like Frank Ackerman, author of *Can We Afford the Future?* (15), and Thomas Piketty (152), radical theorists like Gilles Deleuze (414, 428) and Fredric Jameson (540), radical artists like David Wojnarowicz (376), and radical activists like Abbie Hoffman (37). In littering the text with these citations, authors, and titles, both within and outside of the narrative, Robinson has produced a novel that serves as a kind of radical reading list (Krafft 9). For those readers who are not interested in learning more about critiques of capitalism, theories of resistance, or alternative socio-economic models, these references are perhaps merely background details or narrative hiccups, while for readers who are primed to engage more deeply with these ideas, they offer pathways for further study, and ultimately development of radical consciousness.

Beyond this potential extratextual pedagogical function, within the reader-text relationship of the novel, these references and citations to radical thinkers can also be seen as a kind of “documentary” didactic effect. This radical formal technique was sometimes deployed in proletarian collective novels to connect the fictional world to “the world of the

reader” through insertion of fragments of actual texts, references to real-world people and events, news stories, songs, slogans, and so on (Foley 402). When used in collective novels, this technique “generally produces an effect of extensive totality” (Foley 402), which can help position the novel “on the borderline between fact and fiction” and “reinforce its representation” of class-based struggle and justice (Foley 421), thus further helping transform its anticapitalist ideological perspective from a wish to a reality. This is, I argue, a different kind of effect than the “empirical-realist function of science fiction” that Kabo identifies in Robinson’s text (264), in that these metatextual insertions are frequently not integrated into the “story” in a realist way, but instead attempt to break open the narrative to “signal larger historical processes and forces and suggest a context beyond the immediate environment of the characters” (Foley 402). In her analysis of American radical literature of the 1930s, Foley notes that “much of what passed under the rubric of ‘experimentation’ in the proletarian project entailed a search for innovative means of injecting political commentary into fictional narrative” in an effective way (282). Robinson’s experimentation in *New York 2140* appears to spring from the same motivation, and may even be directly inspired by some of the radical writing from that tradition. While there are several potential pitfalls in deploying the didactic strategies described above, the use of a hortatory approach opens up possibilities beyond those offered by fiction that restrains its political ideas to the level of “story.” These techniques invite the reader to “enter such texts in their own right, as narratees to whom political doctrine is directly imparted,” an invitation to contemplation of how those ideas relate to and shape the narrative (Foley 281), which can help prevent the reader’s engagement from remaining passive, and potentially even draw them into “battle” in the real world.

Through these didactic strategies, *New York 2140* uses the vehicle of climate fiction to attempt to persuade its readers of the “correctness” of a coherent leftist critique that situates the blame for both climate change and the large-scale suffering of the masses firmly within the workings of the global capitalist system, identifies specific aspects of that system that are vulnerable to resistance, and provides strategies for collectively resisting them. However, as Foley observes, while it is on the level of “discourse” that a text’s values are clearly articulated (269), it is only by connecting this to the level of “story” that these values are made “real” (274), transforming it from fantasy of how the world “ought” to be to how it “is.” In order for *New York 2140* to be effective as a radical “ideological” cli-fi text, in the instrumentalist sense, it needs to not only demonstrate the correctness of its analysis of the problem, but also encourage readers to believe that they can be part of the solution. To do so, it needs to embed its ideological message within the narrative itself. To explore how

Robinson's novel does this, I will look at some of the protagonists in greater depth, focusing particularly on Amelia and Charlotte, both of whom represent significant points of connection to key segments of the environmentalist readership of cli-fi texts.

Apprenticeship & mentorship: Embodying ideological lessons

To the extent that it has dealt with the novel's protagonists in detail, much of the current scholarship on *New York 2140* has focused on Franklin Garr (see Khan, Klata, Ortiz). There are good grounds for this, as Franklin serves both as the novel's personification of the financial sector and ultimately as the architect of that sector's downfall (Robinson, *New York* 527). Franklin is also notable for being the only focalizer whose chapters are narrated in first person, a perspective that gives the reader direct access to the character's thoughts, and which can either invite identification with a character or impel alienation from them (Klata 116, Krafft 11). In reading *New York 2140* as an "ideological" novel, it would thus be tempting to foreground Franklin as an example of an "apprenticeship" narrative, a paradigmatic plot in which a character (frequently a protagonist) develops toward awareness of and/or engagement in the "correct" ideology over course of the text (Foley 268). In this structure, a protagonist's movement toward revolutionary consciousness "embodies in microcosm the change that is occurring, and must continue to occur on a larger scale" for the movement to succeed, and readers "presumably carry the text's implied lessons over into their own lives" (Foley 327). Readers who identify with Franklin's worldview at the beginning of the novel would thus be encouraged to follow his exemplary path, while those who were repulsed by his initial villainy could cheer his conversion and find hope in it for the possibility of winning over the other side to the cause (Krafft 12).

However, if we consider the novel as a whole, in which "confrontation" is the primary paradigmatic plot structure, as evidenced by the way it lays out its "good vs. evil" opposition in its opening pages, the likely ideological impact of Franklin's apprenticeship arc is reduced. In stories of this kind, the "good" values are given from the start, and the reader "is presumed to be *already* on the 'right' side when the story begins" (Suleiman 143, original emphasis). As I explained in my introduction, "ideological" fictions primarily work to activate sympathetic readers, not to persuade skeptical ones. Even if a Franklin-like reader happened to crack open Robinson's novel, the chances of their identification with his transformation seem slim. Given that the American audience for climate fiction skews both toward readers who are concerned about the environment and who are more likely to be aligned with the

political left (Schneider-Mayerson, "Influence" 478), it seems unlikely that turning financial traders into anticapitalist revolutionaries is a primary goal of the text. The inclusion of Franklin's apprenticeship arc, which Khan describes as "corny" (8), is better described in the terms that Marxist critics used for stories of this kind: "wish-fulfillment" (Foley 156).

Amelia: Connecting the ecological to the economic

Amelia offers an example of a different kind of apprenticeship, and one that is very relevant to the likely audience for Robison's novel. Her transformation is not from villain to hero. She is already firmly in the "good" camp when the novel begins. Indeed, she is the closest the text comes to representing a traditional American environmentalist, one who is inspired to protect (non-human) animals and (non-urban) nature. She hosts a "cloud show" that is about "assisting the migration of endangered species to ecozones where they were more likely to survive the changed climate" (38). In addition to literally freighting animals from one part of the world to another using her airship, her show features extended sequences of nature observation and descriptive commentary that are identical to television nature documentaries from our time. These sequences provide the novel's richest glimpses of the "natural" world that exists beyond New York, through which we learn that much of the continent still "look(s) like wilderness," at least from the sky (38). The novel makes it clear that while Amelia's focus is a kind of wildlife preservation, she is not an anti-human fanatic from the fringes of Deep Ecology. She perceives the Manhattan ecosystem as "amazing" and "sublime" in its massive complexity and admixture of human and nonhuman forces (41). She is likewise not a radical conservationist obsessed with "purity," like the Defenders of the Earth group that would rather see animals go extinct than introduce them to non-native habitats (45, 260), but instead embraces the "mongrel" world as already inescapably hybrid (259). In this, she speaks to readers who, like her, are concerned that we are living through the "sixth mass extinction event in Earth's history," who are upset that "[w]e caused" it, and who want to do something to help "nurse the world back to health" (259), but without denying the right of humans to exist; a holistic mission that ultimately includes non-human animals, Anthropocene ecosystems, and ourselves.

Amelia also serves as a representation of traditional environmental activist tactics. While her work of helping relocate animal species to more hospitable environments brings a concrete benefit to the animals themselves, its larger purpose, as evidenced by the fact that it is done as part of a live-streamed, professionally produced broadcast, is communication. She is engaged in mediating what remains of the "natural" world to a global audience for the

purpose of engendering appreciation for it and thus support for her cause. As she puts it, “what matters is getting people to pay attention, and then to act” (159). This places her in the realm of real-world activist groups that leverage visual spectacle, nonviolent action, and emotional appeals through media campaigns to call attention to specific causes in order to increase awareness and engagement (Weik von Mossner 25-6), which can then be directed toward various ends, such as fundraising, lobbying, or voter mobilization. In Amelia’s case, the attention she generates, which is presumably monetized in some form, seems to support her own assisted migration project. She does not appear to be connected to a larger movement in any formal sense; while the text implies there are others involved in assisting the polar bear migration (101), this all seems to be arranged by her producers (44), not an environmentalist group, suggesting that the overlap between activist spectacle and celebrity-driven entertainment has become complete. The text lightly mocks this by presenting Amelia as a (deliberately) “silly” figure (259), whose producers engineer situations that highlight her TV-friendly combination of haplessness and resourcefulness (39-40) and play off her sex appeal (259). This does not read as a full condemnation of Amelia’s work, but rather an opening for constructive critique,

Significantly, unlike spectacle-focused environmentalist groups like Greenpeace, which became famous for staging “David vs. Goliath”-style confrontations with concrete foes that represented discrete elements of the ecological harm that industry/capitalism causes (Weik von Mossner 28), the primary “villain” in Amelia’s cause is difficult to locate. We do see her opposition to the Defenders of the Earth, but this is more like an environmentalist fringe that is ultimately fighting against the same diffuse foe that she is—climate change—though with a vision of defense of “purity” that she strongly disagrees with (260). Late capitalist civilization is, for her, just another aspect of the environment. Amelia is in awe of New York and the human-made urban modernity it represents (43), without any obvious qualms about the environmental cost of the social or environmental costs behind its construction. While she is well aware that “[e]verything’s in trouble” (45), she does not articulate any understanding of the root causes of the accelerating ecological crisis or any interest in changing them. In her telling, humans have been changing the world continuously since they “left Africa” (259), and the contemporary situation is simply an extension of that trend. Instead, she focuses on addressing the specific problem of extinction (101) through climate-change adaptation, one set of animals at a time.

Amelia is brought in contact with the larger group of protagonists by a circumstantial turn of events that leads to Franklin offering her life-saving advice on how to deal with her

escaped cargo of hungry polar bears (157-9). Through this connection, Amelia becomes aware of the threat facing her own home, the Met Life tower, and in parallel her understanding of the world begins to change. Following the dramatic killing of the newly migrated polar bears by an Antartican “green purity” group (258), Amelia experiences a personal crisis. She gets some commiseration from Charlotte (334-5), and responds enthusiastically to Charlotte and Franklin’s discussion about launching a strike that will end “financial civilization” (347-9), but mostly out of confused feelings of rage and despair (349) that inspire her to want revenge against the green purists (351), not structural change. After a chance encounter with a grizzled environmentalist reframes her life’s work as mere “stopgaps” to a problem that can only be solved by changing “everything” (357), she seeks to expand her own perspective. In a scene that works didactically both on her and the reader, operating between the levels of “story” and “discourse,” she listens to a recording of an “evolution and ecology theorist” who explains the psychological phenomenon of “monocausotaxophilia, the love of single causes that explain everything” that leads people to simplify complex realities into “master rules” (360), and that it is the master rule of contemporary capitalist economics that “more is better” that has ultimately “put us into a mass extinction event” (360). As an alternative, the theorist proposes the maxim of American environmentalist Aldo Leopold (a frequent touchstone of both Robinson’s writing and ecocritical thought (*Green Earth* 760; Buell, *Environmental* 40)), “What’s good is what’s good for the land,” and encourages her (and the reader) to reflect on the meaning of this phrase (360-1). In the pages immediately following, we can already see the early effects of Amelia’s consciousness raising. When she comes across a foundering skyvillage (a floating mobile community held aloft by balloons), her first instinct is to help save it (362-4). Her second instinct, which is new, is to use the incident as an occasion to tell all of her viewers to “join the Householders’ Union,” because the global situation is just as precarious and “out of whack” as the tilted and falling skyvillage, and “we need to organize” to “get through the emergency we’re in” (364). From this moment, Amelia embraces a larger mission: to “change the big rule,” and “fight” not just to save individual animals, but to save the world (365).

Thus inspired, Amelia sets a course to return home to the Met Life tower, and the culmination of her radicalization process. When the storm surge hits New York, she arrives at the same idea as Charlotte: to relocate the suddenly homeless masses to the empty luxury towers (524), and she becomes angry at the asymmetric impact on the majority of the city’s residents and the rich (525). When she spots a pile of bodies of animals that have been killed in the storm, her ecological concern crystallizes into anticapitalist rage (525), leading her to

launch into the “I’m sick of the rich” tirade with which I opened this chapter, and her ensuing call for “an everybody strike” (526) that pits the people of the “land” (extended from the Leopoldian sense to encompass urban spaces like New York through Amelia’s embrace of hybridity) against the glittering symbols of the global rentier class that sees land as just another kind of property to exploit and/or invest in.

For Amelia’s audience, which presumably watches her show due to interest in the environment, not the economy, this sequence offers a model for how to leverage that environmentalist interest and transform it, connecting ecological concerns to economic ones so that action that directly addresses the latter can be more easily understood as supporting the former. For readers whose starting point is similar to Amelia’s environmentalist worldview, her “apprenticeship” arc offers a didactic and hortatory lesson that can be carried over into the real world. According to Foley, embedding an arc like this in a multi-protagonist novel like *New York 2140* can be more effective than a single-protagonist form like the *Bildungsroman*, as it reduces the reliance on “any single character’s political odyssey” as the sole example for the reader to learn from, instead spreading the responsibility for conveying political ideas across a series of characters (373). This allows characters like Amelia to undergo their radical apprenticeship in a more realistic way, as their “dialectical development” can be shown in its complexity, as one part that contributes, even if imperfectly, to the revolutionary whole (Foley 384). Amelia’s revolutionary call to arms is far from perfect, whether viewed from the standpoint of doctrinal or oratorical coherence, and veers into rambling improvisation before ending abruptly with the injunction to “quit while (she’s) ahead” (Robinson, *New York* 527-9), but when nested within an interwoven web of textual redundancies that reinforce its message, it doesn’t have to be.

Charlotte: Putting the doctrine in the “story”

As the examples above show, Amelia is nudged through her apprenticeship toward conversion by a variety of experiences and encounters. One of the most influential of those is her interaction with Charlotte, who introduces Amelia to the concepts of unions and strikes and provides her with a concrete ideological framework and plan of action that allows her to turn her anger over ecological destruction into meaningful economic action (346-9, 525-9). Charlotte plays a similar role for Franklin, going from being his ideological opposite to his mentor in left-wing politics and lover. This kind of transformation is typical of proletarian novels, in which characters are gradually radicalized by a variety of factors, but the crystallization of their generalized dissatisfaction with the capitalist system into revolutionary

class consciousness comes through direct encounters with socialist political ideas, often through a character who serves as a “mentor” (Foley 305-6). As Foley explains, mentor characters “occupy a special rhetorical space in didactic fiction”:

To the extent that they articulate the doctrine informing the text, they engage in dialogues and speeches that function as part of “discourse” rather than “story.” Yet mentor characters are also characters, not narrators. Everything they say is framed within the text’s represented world and is therefore part of “story.” The mentor character’s function is therefore somewhat different from that of the intervening narrator. The political debate introduced by the mentor character is itself an event at the same time that it is privileged to illuminate and explain the text’s other events. While the general truth the mentor purveys is, *qua* generalization, abstract, it is on an ontological par with the concrete elements of lived experience embodied in character and event. (Foley 305-6, original emphasis)

Thus, in scenes where Charlotte’s speech helps to expand and inform the worldview of Amelia and Franklin, helping them to realize, for example, that “financial civilization” and “civilization” are “not the same thing,” that ending the former not only does not end the latter but may even be to its benefit (346), and that a collective entity like the Householders’ Union may have the leverage to help bring this change about (347-9), she is simultaneously speaking to these characters as part of the novel’s “story” and speaking to the reader as a form of “discourse.” Through her “intense interactions” with Amelia, Franklin, and others, Charlotte helps reveal to them “what revolutionary theory actually means” on both the level of intellect and affect (Foley 308), translating abstract concepts into personal commitments and plans for action. For the reader, this has the dual purpose of further clarifying the novel’s message, but in a way that both makes it less like “lecturing” or “hectoring” and more like statement of actual belief: As elements of the “story,” her radical ideas are part of the novel’s reality: the world as it “is,” not simply as it “ought” to be. In this way, the text once again works against capitalist realism, both in its didactic structural techniques and by presenting the reader with an already radicalized character who invites reader identification and association with really-existing radicals in the world beyond the book.

The anticapitalist realism of Charlotte’s character is further reinforced by her own ideological transformation and personal growth. She both becomes more radical herself, going from wanting to protect her own home to wanting to “bring down financial civilization” (346), and overcomes her reflexive distaste for organized politics to become engaged in it (225, 552). This change in Charlotte’s character, and the overlapping patterns of

influence between multiple characters, each of whom are shown affecting the worldviews of the others, is another illustration of the strength of the novel's radical, multi-protagonist form. In more traditional single-protagonist novels, mentor characters often "constitute the text's only means of bringing in revolutionary theory 'from the outside'" (Foley 332). This can result in them being perceived as transparent plot devices or mere "discourse"-level effects, rather than as characters inhabiting the "story" in their own right. With multi-protagonist novels, in which the "narrative canvas" is expanded, mentor characters play a different role, since less weight is placed on an individual character's conversion (Foley 373). Mentors exist as one element in the social mix, though an important one, as they attest to "the existence of articulate revolutionary forces" that already are present among us waiting to be recognized (Foley 375), which the limited perspective of bourgeois realism might otherwise obscure in its normative depiction of society, or dismiss as fringe elements and "others." Radical novels can thus show multiple characters' ideologies developing in dialogue with each other, rather than attempting to co-opt the reader's assent by offering the adoption of a revolutionary consciousness as a given, while also presenting the existence of already radicalized characters as "natural."

Being a mentor character gives Charlotte a privileged structural position in the text. The reader is encouraged to perceive her as a "correct interpreter" of the novel's message, just as the other protagonists do (Foley 305-6, Suleiman 183-4). This gives extra weight to the apprenticeship that Charlotte herself undergoes over the course of the narrative, in her conversion from radical political outsider to Democratic member of Congress. In the next section, I will argue that this transformation is a key to understanding one of the central messages and "rules of action" for *New York 2140* as an "ideological" text and part of its potential for nudging American environmentalists toward effective political action.

The rule of action: From protest to politics

While Robinson's text is full of socialist ideas and clearly draws on aesthetic approaches from the Marxist tradition (Krafft 8-9), the actual "revolution" it depicts is essentially an amplified version of the Occupy Wall Street protests with an important twist: the successful transition from protest action to political effect. The movement Robinson's protagonists help spur is quickly institutionalized (in the U.S.) by the Democratic Party and government appointees, helped by a "progressive" sitting president "in the line of FDR" (231) and a Congress willing to pass a "Piketty tax" to radically reduce inequality (602). While many

individuals contribute to making this history happen, most of the anticapitalist victories that seem likely to result in lasting and widespread impact are carried out by Congress through standard legislative processes (602-4). Financial systems are thus radically changed, while political structures remain essentially the same as they are in our time (Cole 140). As Charlotte points out, even the “radical” changes aren’t really that new or unprecedented: many of them are essentially a repeat of Roosevelt-era policies from the Great Depression (562). For Milner and Burgmann, this is perhaps the most unrealistic part of Robinson’s work. As they put it, “[t]he notion that either of America’s two pro-big business parties could ever be converted to ecosocialism is simply radically improbable” (161). But if we read this less as a literal recipe for revolution and more for its didactic and hortatory potential for a specific audience, we may be closer to understanding the intent and potential of the text.

One clear message the text offers is a vindication of the power of mass protest and collective action. The novel presents us with a mass movement that is made up of the actions of countless independent groups of people pursuing an endless variety of protest tactics (531) that are not initially bound together by any formal political platform but by a shared sense of injustice, and which ultimately come together to form a revolutionary wave (603). The novel thus posits a sense of human history as a kind of “particle/wave” duality, as the citizen deftly puts it (603), in which individuals both shape and are shaped by their historical moment, and the individual actions of people, local groups, networks, organizations, scientific bodies, and a multiplicity of other actors all matter, insofar as they are united by a broadly shared worldview or intent that allows them to combine, through the inscrutable physics of history, into something greater than the sum of its parts. Particularly in its construction of both the power and the joy of collective action (cited by Chenoweth and Stephan as a factor that enhances participation (36)), in which, like “everything that is really worth doing, it’s always the more the merrier” (Robinson, *New York* 528), *New York 2140* proffers a positive vision of activism in which collective meaning is ultimately achieved through doing rather than doctrine. It is clearly less important that Amelia’s rallying cry be theoretically sound than that it is effective in actually rallying people to act around a general idea (Robinson, *New York* 528-9). This resonates with the vision of “unselfing” that Naomi Klein offers as a potential way out of postmodern atomization, through transcending our individualized identities and finding connection and purpose in collective action (324, 333). Part of the novel’s hortatory address to readers in the environmentalist “choir” is thus a call to get out the door and onto the streets, or into a meeting of their local community group, a radical theater troupe, or whatever; the important thing is to get out there and do something together. A significant part

of its didactic message is to provide an ideological framework through which the actions of these discrete groups can then cohere into a larger meaning and movement (unlike in Klein, whose concept of “unselfing” does not address how the resulting collective consciousness aligns with an specific ideology, but instead leaves it up to individual “cognition”). I will explore the specific collective identity *New York 2140* outlines in detail in the next section.

Returning to the “rule of action,” it is often said that science fiction, especially utopian fiction, reflects the concerns of its time (Sergeant 5; Jameson, *Archaeologies* 11). In *New York 2140*, this can be seen in Robinson’s shift away from a focus on science-based climate change mitigation strategies, which were represented as having a similar aggregate particle/wave effect in his previous near-future cli-fi work, the *Science in the Capital* trilogy (*Green Earth* 532, 699, 926), and towards mass activism, in line with the general consensus that scientific knowledge alone has been insufficient to drive climate action (Mehnert 336-40). But it is important to consider this construction of mass protest in the wake of the 2008 financial crash from which Robinson’s novel takes inspiration (Robinson, “Interview”). The Occupy movement succeeded in sparking a global movement but quickly fizzled out without leaving behind lasting structural change, in part due to the protesters’ decision to deliberately spurn engagement with establishment politicians (Jäger, *Hyperpolitik* 98), a decision which is symptomatic of the contemporary hyperpolitical situation that Jäger describes, in which intense bursts of political feeling do not result in societal change because they are not politically organized (*Hyperpolitik* 54). From this example, it is clear that mass protest by itself is also not enough. While I think the novel’s positive message about protest is important, ultimately, I see it as supplementary to another “rule of action” that is essential for transforming protest actions into structural results: engagement with organized politics.

The significance of this message is reflected in what kind of political actors are actually foregrounded in Robinson’s text. In *New York 2140*, the revolutionary masses appear primarily in the background, as a force that is mobilized off screen and that bursts forth in the text as an undifferentiated “human storm surge” speaking with one anonymous collective voice (551), while the focalizers are part of a “vanguard party” (506) that includes individuals in positions of some power or influence, whether it be organizational, social, economic, or political. The same is true of Robinson’s other near-future cli-fi novels. In the *Science in the Capital* trilogy, the main characters are scientists, policy advisors, and the U.S. president himself. In *The Ministry for the Future*, the central protagonist is the head of an international governmental agency responsible for protecting the rights of future generations, and the supporting cast is largely made up of her executive team. In each of these novels,

while the mobilization of the masses plays a role in inciting action, radical societal and economic change is ultimately carried out through normal political channels: votes are cast, bills are passed, negotiations are held, treaties are signed, and so on. It would perhaps be overly optimistic to posit an ideological reading of *New York 2140* that rests on the hope that the real-world analogues of these influential characters might read and be directly influenced by Robinson's text (though the cover of the Orbit paperback edition of *The Ministry for the Future* does proclaim it to be "One of Barack Obama's favourite books of the year," so perhaps there is hope after all). A more realistic message and didactic lesson for the average cli-fi reader is to leverage, not spurn, the power of existing political parties and structures.

This message is exemplified by the arc of Charlotte's character, who goes from dismissing the invitation to run for a congressional seat as a Democratic candidate as "dumb" and "quixotic" due to the party's history of crushing or ostracizing outsiders who did not adhere to its rigid hierarchy and orthodoxy (225-6) to ultimately changing her mind and running as "a Democrat for lack of anything better" (552), when she finally recognizes organized politics as a valid avenue for change. The paragraph in which Charlotte justifies her decision—to potential voters, to herself, and, I argue, to the reader—would be immediately familiar to progressives and leftists from their qualms with the Democratic Party of today. This suggests that part of the lesson this scene is intended to impart is not just that leftists should embrace politics as a "necessary evil," but that they should also be willing to work within the established party structure out of practicality, rather than indulging in the schisms and doctrinal disputes that have doomed so many left-wing movements of the past. It is also an encouragement to recognize the power that insurgent groups within the party itself, such as Charlotte's "Rad Dems" (Robinson, *New York* 552), can have on radically reshaping the party's priorities and willingness to enact systemic change, something that activists on the right have used to much greater effect, as evidenced by the transformation of the Republican Party by the Tea Party and MAGA movements (Jäger, *Hyperpolitik* 108-10).

The way this change in Charlotte occurs, as well as the larger way in which the strike comes about on a local level, with all internal contradictions and conflicting ideas and emotions on display, helps avoid the shortcomings of many confrontation plots in proletarian novels, which often co-opted the reader into agreeing to the "truth" of the conclusion rather than convincing them that it could be true, or indeed already "is." By showing the dialectical process rather than suppressing it, *New York 2140* invites readers to engage with the arguments themselves, rather than simply "acknowledging the correctness" of a given party line or practice (Foley 388), and hopefully (with the help of didactic cues) arrive at a similar

conclusion to that of the text, that working with or through the Democratic Party, for all its flaws, is the only option available without totally upending the existing political structure (which, realistically speaking, is something that none but the most radical of contemporary U.S. readers would actually want). In this pragmatic approach to American politics, which mirrors recent leftist eco-political thinking by writers such as Matthew Huber (3, 46), the novel offers one pathway out of hyperpolitics by embracing the frequently discouraging but potentially effective work of protest, lobbying, and legislation instead of the momentarily gratifying but ultimately futile cycle of internet-mediated outrage (Jäger, *Hyperpolitik* 118).

In addition to this injunction to work through established political channels, Robinson's novel also presents the reader with specific political policies and strategies that could be achieved through this approach (a didactic function), which might make it more appealing to progressive readers and may inspire them to advocate for similar policies in the real world (a hortatory function). As I have argued earlier in this chapter (and as Robison has stated in interviews (Robinson, "Interview")), the housing crisis of 2008 is this novel's *idée fixe*. A key political message proposed by the text is to not repeat the mistakes from 2008 the next time the U.S. government needs to respond to a crash or other severe economic crisis brought about by the "rentier" class, but, as Charlotte tells Larry flat out: "When the bubble comes, nationalize the banks" and put them in the service of the people (432). This message is reiterated in various forms by numerous focalizers throughout the novel (348, 432, 562) until finally, helped along by all of this "story"- and "discourse"-level preparation, it actually happens (601-2). Rather than simply offering this as a "pie in the sky" policy proposal, the novel also offers documentary examples of successful nationalizations of industry that occurred in the United States, both during the 1930s (561-2) and of General Motors in 2008 (348). By showing how these nationalizations resulted in clear benefits for the American people as a whole (Krafft 9), the text overcomes resistance to capitalist realism by revealing that not only could an idea like this actually work, it already has.

With this message, Robinson does not simply present one concrete pathway to reach the desired utopian future through existing political channels; he also tries to instill an awareness of the increased leverage that appears in times of crisis, when the contradictions and weaknesses of the system are exposed. Raphael Kabo connects this to the idea of "disaster utopia" proposed by Rebecca Solnit (259) and to "disaster communism," a similar term proposed by the Out of the Woods collective (262). These terms respond to the concept "disaster capitalism," coined by Naomi Klein in her book, *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), to illuminate how neoliberal capitalism takes advantage of catastrophic events to advance an

agenda of privatization and deregulation (an idea which Robinson also directly references in his novel through the voice of Charlotte (*New York* 502)). These utopian/communist variants offer the political left a means to leverage the same insights to advance progressive causes. A key difference between the two terms is that while Solnit is concerned with cataclysmic disasters that open brief windows for utopian communities that last only as long as it takes for neoliberal forces to reassert themselves (Kabo 259-61), *Out of the Woods* recategorizes everyday life under neoliberal capitalism as an “ongoing” disaster (Kabo 262), a system that is not stable, but fundamentally weak, a position that creates an opening for a “mobilization” that can help stop the “unfolding catastrophe of global warming” (Kabo 262), an approach that echoes Fisher’s call to leverage ecological threats to undermine capitalist realism.

For Kabo, *New York 2140* presents a world ripe for this kind of disaster communism, in which “neoliberalism is disintegrating everywhere at once under the weight of climatological disaster and its own overambitious desire” to profit off the commons (269), an over-leveraged position (Robinson, *New York* 560) that reveals its underlying weakness (à la Fisher), and where a combination of a slow, ongoing disaster and several momentary disasters combine to create the opening for change (Kabo 263-4). While I find Kabo’s analysis compelling, I suggest that what Robinson presents us with in this novel is not so much “disaster communism” and the full-scale societal transformation that term suggests, as much as disaster progressivism; maybe disaster democratic socialism at best. Robinson’s public statements support my analysis. To him, the most realistic and effective way to walk back from the brink of the looming “mass extinction event” of the climate crisis is “[o]ne step at a time... first a refusal of austerity and neoliberalism, by way of Keynesian stimulus; then social democracy; then democratic socialism; and then on from there” (Robinson, “Socialism”). Radical or not, this is still valuable discursive and ideological work. Kabo connects it to Ernst Bloch’s idea of “anticipatory illumination,” through which science fiction texts like *New York 2140* allow “subjects to see different and diverse forms of concrete social life beyond those presented by the ongoing present,” which in turn helps us identify strategies that can be used to start “building concrete utopias in the present” (263). Another way to put this is that it helps us to see beyond capitalist realism to another present (or near future) that could be within reach. What is novel in Robinson’s approach, and which I think goes some way to counter Milner and Burgmann’s critique of the “impracticality” of his novel as a utopian text, is his positive vision of collective action that leverages existing political frameworks, while also offering a cornucopia of leftist tactics and anticapitalist theories that can be deployed at local community level, offering something for every progressive taste.

Instead of mandating a specific “blueprint” for radical change, Robinson thus creates a space for the reader to “participate in planning the specifics of these social changes” (Kabo 265), while also nudging them in the direction of organized political action on a larger scale.

In this analysis, the audience for *New York 2140*, when read as an “ideological” novel, is not the outraged, apocalyptic revolutionaries at the far left and right, coming together at the tips of the radicalism horseshoe (“Horseshoe Theory”), that Michael Lapointe alludes to in his critical review of Robinson’s novel. Instead, they are left-leaning Americans concerned about climate change who could be motivated to join in local activist groups, to vote for progressive candidates in the Democratic Party, and to support economic policies that, while they may not appear to have anything to do with climate change on the surface, could work to address some of its root causes (Krafft 14). This target audience and rule of action may not be particularly exciting for more revolutionary readers (who may instead draw other conclusions from the text), but it could be politically effective. In recent decades, U.S. presidential elections have often been decided by a very small margin, frequently attributed to the choices of swing voters. However, the “swing” that this phenomenon describes is not primarily due to “persuadable” voters who might be convinced to switch from one party to the other, but “irregular” voters, who, while they already sympathetic to either the Republican or Democratic parties, would just as soon choose not to vote, due to feelings of discouragement, that their vote doesn’t matter, or that their voice isn’t heard (Brownstein). Offering compelling messages to environmentalist readers about the effectiveness of channeling the energy of protest through the Democratic Party could help avoid a repeat of the 2000 presidential election, in which the (relative) success of Green Party candidate Ralph Nader may have played a decisive role in Al Gore’s loss (Herron and Lewis), a “catastrophe” that set the global response to climate change back by decades, if not irreversibly (Trexler, *Anthropocene* 199). Voter turnout in presidential elections also affects which party gains control of Congress, in which the possibility of electing leftist, progressive, and even democratic socialist candidates is achievable, and indeed already has been achieved, not just with the “Rad Dems” of *New York 2140*, but in our reality through the Democratic Socialists of America. This strategy of radicalization from within can also be supported by targeting participation in party primaries, typically “low-turnout contests with highly partisan voters” in which “small factions can gain outsized influence over a mainstream party” (Kleinfeld 170). These examples from real-world politics suggest that a didactic strategy aimed at getting leftist environmentalist voters to recognize the value in engaging in the democratic process and motivating them to turn out to vote Democrat (and ideally also participating in

the various forms of activism that would push the party in a greener and leftward direction) could actually contribute to tangible results (Robinson, “Socialism”).

Some ecocritics might object that my reading of this rule of action is too literal. However, recent environmental communication research on the longitudinal impact of climate-related themes in narrative fiction appears to offer support for the importance of presenting audiences with characters and situations that can be mapped fairly directly onto their lives. Anirudh Tiwathia et al found that American viewers watching a climate-themed episode of a television show led to statistically significant increases in support for the specific kinds of political action relevant to the issues the episode depicted (13). On the other hand, it had no noticeable effect on beliefs about whether individual people already are or should be taking action on climate change; an outcome that the authors hypothesize is due to the gap between the characters depicted in the episode (“highly influential members of government”) and the audience, which is presumably primarily made up of “normal individuals” (15). Applying these findings to *New York 2140*, the effectiveness of the text in compelling readers to follow its “rule of action” would seem to depend on the extent to which they are able to identify with the protagonists in the text and the actions they carry out. Given the positions of comparative power or influence that several of Robinson’s protagonists inhabit, this last point could appear to pose a problem. However, if we read Robinson’s novel as a text not with multiple protagonists, but as a novel with a collective protagonist, this can also help us to look at the ideological work of the text in a broader way.

In the next section, I will explore how *New York 2140* functions discursively to help draw the outlines of an collective identity, not by describing a class that already exists, but by helping to call it into being, serving to “enrich the climate imaginary” by offering grounds for hope that a non-apocalyptic future can be achieved through an “ethos of cooperative action and shared responsibility” (Cole 147-8). One of the primary ways that it does this is by linking economic and ecological concerns to the idea—and defense—of “home.”

Toward an eco-nomic class: Collective identity & agency

In my discussion of the work of Latour, Schulz, and Jäger in my introduction, I identified the formation of an organized collective identity as a crucial element in enabling effective anticapitalist environmentalist movements. I also proposed that “ideological” novels can support the formation of such identities by sketching their contours and the opponents that they are arrayed against. In attempting to determine the extent to which *New York 2140*

succeeds in constructing a “red-green” class of this kind, I will first analyze it using Foley’s framework of the collective novel, a multi-protagonist novel in which the sum of the characters is shown to be greater than its parts (Foley 355). This collective protagonist is defined by a unifying principle, such as membership in a common class or movement (Foley 400-406). In the proletarian novel context, this meant that “the masses” ultimately became the novel’s “new protagonist,” a formal move that echoes the Marxist conception of class struggle as a whole, which “transcends any group of people participating in it” (Foley 410), ultimately subsuming individual action to collective action in a historical moment.

In analyzing a pair of more experimental collective novels from the 1930s, Foley explains that “individuals clearly matter” as without their activity, “there would be no class struggle. But what matters most of all is the activity of the class; the text’s design forces the reader to abandon conceptions of individual heroism and to focus upon the social effects of individual deeds” (406). This can both help the reader see and understand the bigger picture, and reduce the need to put too much weight on one individual character’s actions (there is less textual need for individual heroics to “save the day”) and thus help emphasize the significance of smaller actions that may otherwise seem insufficient in the face of the momentous task of changing history. We can see this exact same Marxist sentiment in Robinson’s novel, when our trusted know-it-all narrator, the citizen, sums up the worldwide wave of progressive political and economic changes brought on by the Householders’ strike:

Note that this flurry of social and legal change did not happen because of Representative Charlotte Armstrong... Nor was it due to any other single individual. Remember: ease of representation. It’s always more than what you see, bigger than what you know.

That said, people in this era did do it. Individuals make history, but it’s also a collective thing, a wave that people ride in their time, a wave made of individual actions. (Robinson, *New York* 603)

The question then becomes: Is there a specific group identity that we can discern in this collective “wave” that Robinson’s novel depicts, and which the reader could potentially link to a doctrine, class, or other organizing framework in the real world? The centrality of the Householders’ Union to the text’s revolutionary moment points to one potential candidate. Khan argues that *New York 2140* positions the “household” as a “material asset, which, if informed by a sufficiency of a communal spirit, may transform capitalism” (13), and that it is householders as a collective group that hold the promise of reducing the power of the market to act on individuals invisibly (13-14). This is particularly true if they “stop thinking of

themselves as individuals and think of themselves as a group,” or “even better as a collective,” which would allow them to wield real economic power through the kind of rent strike Robinson’s novel describes (Khan 6).

Kabo’s analysis of *New York 2140* also suggests a “home”-based collective identity. As he explains, the text does this through its “representation of small, close-knit communities of people creating utopias” (266) and by showing the “accretion” of these individual utopian spaces and radical forms of organization into larger groups and structures (Kabo 264-5), such as the Met Life co-op and the Lower Manhattan Mutual Aid Society (LMMAS), a kind of “umbrella organization” for the “drowned zone” (Robinson, *New York* 51). The strike that sets off the financial and societal revolution in the novel is led by the Householders’ Union, which Amelia encourages “everyone” around the world to join (Robinson, *New York* 525), thus placing the household quite literally at the center of the action of the text. This reading is also supported by Robinson’s own statements about the strong influence of the 2008 housing crisis on the novel (Khan 5), as well as my analysis earlier in this chapter of the housing crisis and subsequent protests like Occupy Wall Street as fundamental to the didactic lesson.

When set in opposition to the capitalist rentier class that is the novel’s primary villain (151, 399), we can see the battle lines being drawn on not just economic terms or ecological ones, but a combination of the two: the struggle in *New York 2140* is between those for whom their living space (their environment) is a habitat that they depend on as a fundamental precondition for life, and those for whom it is nothing more than a source of profit, a financial abstraction, an infinitely fungible asset; just one in an endless sequence of physical spaces (whether natural or built) that vampire capitalism can bleed dry and cast aside. Read in this way, Robinson’s novel encourages us to broaden our perspective of the household to include the environment in which it is situated, as seen in Amelia’s rhapsodic passages about the hybrid “ecosystem” of Manhattan (40-3) combined with the citizen’s declamations about the “robust,” insuppressible, and incommmodifiable “Life! Life! Life!” that will explode into the sterile “dark pools” of financial trading and “bring back the commons” (320), which connects to the idea of “home” through the original definition of the commons as shared land belonging to a community. As such, this collective householder identity is simultaneously a new economic class and an ecological one, in which the “eco” from both terms returns to its shared Greek roots in the sense of “home” (Trexler, *Anthropocene* 203). Following Trexler, we could perhaps call this an eco-nomic class.

In addition to being supported by patterns of redundancy within the “ideological” novel framework, this reading also aligns nicely with contemporary theorizing in and beyond

ecocriticism about formation of political commitments in our “post-ideological” age. For example, the “householder class” is oriented concretely around shared “space,” which Jameson suggests is “necessarily” the “fundamental organizing concern” of any model of political culture appropriate to our postmodern situation (*Postmodernism*, 50-51). It also very vividly evokes “place,” which Buell identified as an essential element of instilling personal environmental commitment (*Environmental* 252-3). The radical reconception of how humans inhabit the environment have been central to other eco-nomic utopian futures, *Ecotopia* being one notable example, so *New York 2140* is far from alone in establishing the household/home as a key site of anticapitalist resistance. There are also countless real-world examples of “other ways of organizing society” and living spaces along communitarian lines, like the “cooperatives, neighborhood associations, communes, squats” and so on that Robinson rattles off in his novel (*New York* 209), which demonstrate that the formation of political and social movements around the axis of housing is not inherently unrealistic. Certainly, groups like this have existed in the real world, do exist now, and could spring up in greater numbers in the wake of future economic and/or ecological crises. Informing the reader of this creates a further documentary link that supports the novel’s didactic project. Particularly in the U.S. context at the time of the novel’s writing, the text also presents a potential avenue for taking the broad mobilizing power of the rage at the rich that characterized the Occupy movement and connecting it to environmental concerns, creating an eco-nomic nexus that could be more powerful and lasting than either movement on its own.

Theoretically speaking, Robinson’s novel thus seems well crafted to help instill a more radical collective consciousness based on the defense of one’s home, in various senses, against the predations of capitalism, and which could establish the political context required to rally readers around the “rules of action” I have described. But, to return to the potential problem I raised earlier about the unique characteristics of the novel’s protagonists, it is worth asking whether these can actually be mapped onto a larger collective identity, or if they may instead undermine the effectiveness of the text as a collective novel. This particular area of tension is symptomatic of a larger issue: the attempt of the text to move from the particular to the universal. In the next section, I will review what the shortcomings of *New York 2140* in these areas imply for the novel both as a realistic and an “ideological” text.

A global revolution: The problems of universalization and closure

It is easy enough to picture the residents of the Met Life building having broadly shared concerns about their housing situation, given that all residents are also co-owners, positioning them believably as members of a common, if hyperlocal, “householders’ class.” One could also potentially extend this group identity to residences of other similar buildings in the intertidal region of Manhattan, given their proximity and connection through LMMAS. What life is actually like beyond that narrow geographical area, however, is largely beyond the descriptive scope of the text (Krafft 13). As a result, the protagonists’ claim that the tower’s residents form an “actor network” that only appears to be a suspiciously convenient “heist movie”-style supergroup with exactly the right mix of abilities and connections to bring down capitalism, when in reality “[e]very building in lower Manhattan is the same” (399-400), comes across more as aspiration than evidence. When this presumption of sameness is extended to around one billion people living in all the flooded buildings located in “something like two hundred major coastal cities” around the world who are “all pissed off” at the U.S. government (400), it reads as a sweeping generalization (Krafft 13).

The citizen works to forestall this criticism from early on in the book, mocking the stereotypical New Yorker attitude that their city is the “center of the universe” (35-6). This theme is taken up again in the citizen’s retelling of the history of the Met Life tower and Madison Square, which is presented as “a kind of magical omphalos of history” only for that impression to be dashed a sentence later, as the narrator informs us that “no. Not at all. In fact it’s a perfectly ordinary New York square, mediocre in all respects” (80-1). The lesson here—not to let “ease of representation” lead you to assume that the “amazing” is a unique case, but to see it as only one example in a larger pattern that is beyond your immediate perception—is central to the idea of the text as a collective novel with a global scope. In order to move from the concrete and particular of these specific characters to the larger revolutionary movement they are part of, the reader needs to be able to map what might otherwise seem like incredible and heroic actions of exceptional individuals onto the historical moment they are simultaneously helping to bring about and being swept up in. The problem is that the protagonists in Robinson’s novel are far too singular and exceptional for this to be believed. How many apartment buildings in the world, let alone New York, could possibly contain a union leader who is the ex-wife of the country’s most powerful governmental financial official, a pair of hackers with exactly the right background and skills to disrupt the world’s financial network, and a reality star whose reach and influence is

sufficient to launch a global popular revolution instantaneously? If the success of the text as an “ideological” novel depended entirely on reader identification with a group of this kind, it would seem doomed to fail to all but the most select set of readers.

Another related aspect of the novel that is particularly striking (and potentially dubious) is the speed and scale of the collective action Robinson constructs in the climactic Householders’ strike and the apparent universality of revolutionary sentiment this implies. While, as I have described above, the novel is fairly careful in embodying the protagonists’ progress toward radicalization in lived experience, the sudden movement to nationwide resistance is much less grounded in concrete detail, meriting little more than an aside in the “city” chapter about riots up and down the coastal U.S., scattered protests and demonstrations across the country, and nonpayment of rents by householders’ unions and individuals that, taken together, are somehow enough to create a “powerful sense” of change in the “global civilization,” a sense that “history was happening” (532). In this move, the novel appears to indulge in “spontaneism,” in which on the collective level the decision of the masses to commit to a revolution “is sudden, even apocalyptic,” and based almost entirely on their experience rather than on revolutionary theory (Foley 318-9). In analyzing *New York 2140*, Khan finds it to be “utopian” in that “a collective will is relatively ready at hand to facilitate the actions necessary to bring about post-capitalism” (3). How this collective will has come into being beyond the narrow confines of the Met Life tower and its neighbors in the intertidal is not convincingly shown. We are not introduced to any characters in any of these other multitudes of householders’ unions that have apparently sprung up around the U.S., or even the members of Charlotte’s union outside of the novel’s inner circle, let alone any of the others around the world who follow Amelia’s injunction for “everybody” to join in the householders’ strike (Robinson, *New York* 527). As such, any individual variations and local concerns are drowned by the totality. By obscuring the potential complications in this movement from the local to the national and global, the novel presents a simplistic view of the formation of class consciousness and the broader revolutionary process and attempts to co-opt the reader into agreement, creating one potential site of reader resistance.

This presumption of universal anticapitalist sentiment and widespread willingness to be subsumed by the collective seems in part to spring from a broader universalizing tendency of the text, that of individual characters into the undifferentiated “masses,” and how that erases or smooths over various kinds of difference, whether racial, national, or otherwise. This is tied to both a strength and weakness of the “ideological” novel form: if we assume that part of the didactic function of the text rests on the reader’s ability to see themselves as

part of a collective, a significant question is which potential readers are included in or excluded from this audience through the novel's construction of that group identity (Krafft 12). If we begin with the novel's narrow geographical scope, this could both serve to make it more effective for readers with some familiarity with and attachment to New York City through the phenomenon of "cognitive mapping" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 51). However, for other readers, this intensely parochial focus may reduce their degree of identification with the text. This could potentially include very "local" readers like members of New York City's large African American and Hispanic communities, who barely appear in the text (Krafft 13), not to mention international readers, particularly from the global south, whose concerns are mentioned only in passing, and whose lives are not represented at all (Krafft 14).

As I argued earlier, inciting a worldwide economic revolution is unlikely to be the text's ultimate goal or "rule of action." Robinson's history of writing cli-fi novels that are resolutely America-centric, such as the *Science in the Capitol* trilogy, also suggests that connecting with a readership beyond the U.S. is not his primary concern. However, by including this revolutionary moment in the novel's pattern of redundancy in both "story" and "discourse," Robinson threatens the credibility of the novel's more immediate didactic aim, that of inciting engagement with mundane protest and politics. Given the risks, one might wonder why *New York 2140*'s climax stretches so far, instead of keeping its focus on the local, where it would seem to be more effective as an "ideological" text. Perhaps the issue is theoretical. Fredric Jameson observed that "[p]olitics only works when" the local and global levels "can be coordinated," otherwise the local struggles become an "interminable series of neighborhood issues" from which no systemic perspective can be achieved (*Postmodernism* 330). But this is an example of an idea that works in Marxist theory but is difficult to execute in aesthetic practice. What we see instead in Robinson's text is the problem of "closure," the creation of a "sense of an ending" that presents the resolution of the narrative as an endpoint in the historical process, where the "struggle between opposing paradigms disappears" and any objections the reader might have are simply swept away (Foley 312).

In these moments, "narrative closure substitutes for conceptual closure" (Foley 312), suggesting a revolutionary victory of "us" over "them" that is inevitable, total, and final. Jameson warns of the tendency toward closure in a postmodern context, noting that "[o]nly in the cheapest generic Science Fiction does the revolution triumph" (*Geopolitical* 32), while Goodbody and Johns-Putra observe that it poses particular challenges for cli-fi, given the unbounded nature of climate change itself (11). In "ideological" fiction, closure is particularly obvious in situations when micro-level events in the "story," such as the

successful culmination of a revolutionary character's romantic relationship or a strike leader's tragic death, perfectly mirror and reinforce the macro-level narrative (Foley 347-8, 364). In *New York 2140*, we can observe this pattern in Charlotte, who is successful not only in helping foment a global revolution, but also wins both a seat in Congress and the heart of Franklin. This kind of excessive redundancy can easily contribute to a sense that the novel is engaging in "wish fulfillment" rather than reality. Robinson once again tries to forestall this impression by having the citizen address it directly to the reader: "Don't be naïve! There are no happy endings! Because there are no endings!" The next cataclysmic event in the ongoing climate disaster could happen at any moment, and capitalism, while momentarily defeated, is always looking for the next weakness to exploit (604). But this "discourse"-level attempt at defusing the novel's triumphant moment of closure, much like the text's attempt to preempt accusations of universalism, comes across as a pro forma gesture, outweighed as it is by the redundancy of the "story." Reading Robinson's novel as an "ideological" text, we can thus both appreciate its didactic and hortatory potential and yet also wonder whether it could have been even more effective if he had closed the narrative with Amelia's call to action and the groundswell of the local masses starting to rise, and then left the rest to our imagination.

Nudging toward utopia

Read as an "ideological" anticapitalist cli-fi text, I find *New York 2140* to be a partial success. The text presents a vision of an eco-nomic class that connects environmentalist concern about climate change to populist anger about structural economic inequality that could resonate with readers in the leftist-environmentalist "choir." In doing so, it constructs a clearly defined "enemy" for this class to struggle against, and offers a rule of action for how this struggle can be effectively carried out, not just in the world of the text, but in the real world. It thus avoids a common risk of apocalyptic cli-fi narratives, that "they may reinforce patterns of denial and depoliticization" if they do not effectively "illuminate opportunities for collective action" that resonate with the reader (Cole 133). While some ecocritics may object to the didactic means and monological simplifications the novel deploys to carry out this ideological work, it is precisely from this kind of strategic simplification into Manichean terms that "ideological" fiction draws its power to educate and motivate. And if Chenoweth's 3.5% "rule" is right, then it only takes a surprisingly small number of people, each doing a little more than they might otherwise have done, to make a big difference.

There are, however, some areas of the text that are less successful, and which threaten to undermine its effectiveness as “ideological” fiction. In particular, the interplay between “story” and “discourse” becomes increasingly unbalanced as the novel’s revolutionary climax spreads outward from the narrow confines of southern Manhattan to encompass the entire world. In addition to causing some readers to find this resolution to be mere utopian wish fulfillment on a textual level, it also potentially obscures what I suggest is the text’s rule of action by drawing reader attention to fantasies of global revolution instead of keeping it focused on the practical and impactful work of local activism and political engagement. The text struggles to convincingly establish a collective protagonist and intertextual collective eco-political identity for the same reason, as what could be recognizable as a coherent eco-nomic class on the local level becomes impossibly diffuse when inflated to Earth scale.

Robinson, for his part, is aware of many of the challenges inherent in the kind of text he is trying to create. He has described the “utopian novel” as “a strange project, a bastard form,” because if it aspires to be “good” literature it must simultaneously adhere to the aesthetic conventions of the (bourgeois) novel, by showing the “world as it is,” while the “utopian imperative” requires it to depict the world as it “ought to be” (“Utopia” 6-7). However, echoing Sinclair, he points out that even “realist” novels are “utopian” to a degree, as all fictional representations of society are “a projection of the writer’s wishes and ideology” (“Utopia” 7). As such, the relative realism of a “utopian” novel is partially a matter of perception. This gets to the heart of the challenge of overcoming capitalist realism: getting enough people to recognize utopian alternatives as realistic. As Jameson notes, utopia is thus the site of a “crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change” from within the “dehistoricized and dehistoricizing” culture of postmodernism (*Postmodernism* xvi). But, as Robinson astutely observes, it is not imagining a better society that is the hard part (“Utopia” 7). The problem is rather to imagine the “future history” of “how we might get there,” from the “entrenched” structures that shape our current lives (“Utopia” 8).

New York 2140 is one attempt to tell this “future history.” Reading it now, in the post-pandemic moment, at the beginning of a new Trump administration that has already started to dismantle any environmental advances made in the U.S. in the last four years, there is a nagging sense that Milner and Burgmann have a point; that in the euphoric utopian rush to upend the capitalist financial system, all the “happiness” the novel offers “is far too easily bought, most especially so at the political level” (161). A key element missing from Robinson’s text is violence. This is both the reactionary violence deployed by state and corporate entities to defend their power, which Robinson has described as the “guns under the

table” blocking the bridge to utopia (“Utopia” 3-4), and the violence (against property, if not necessarily people) that has been an element of most, if not all, successful Western protest movements until the “demise of revolutionary politics” in the 1980s (Malm 61).

This question of violence, I believe, emerges as a key to helping us situate *New York 2140*’s ideological position(s), and understand it within its specific historical context. While the text’s economic ideas are clearly grounded in a Marxist-socialist perspective, and, as I have illustrated in this chapter, its aesthetic method is more aligned with the radical leftist literary tradition than its more mainstream cognitivist branch, its construction of activism as nonviolent resistance is solidly in agreement with the general progressive/liberal consensus that has reigned since the 1980s. This is, I think, the factor that led Robinson to channel the “revolutionary” fervor of the masses toward nonviolent protest in the spirit of “Chenoweth’s law” (*New York* 400-1) and ultimately to the ballot box (*New York*, 552-4). The alternative of constructing a “realistic” revolutionary movement like the bloody example from the French revolution that Milner and Burgmann cite (168), would place the novel outside the bounds of contemporary environmentalist discourse, and thus would make it more likely to alienate readers, including a large number of sympathetic ones.

Within the context of my analysis of *New York 2140* as an “ideological” novel, this means that the hortatory rule of action it presents to these readers is one that is more likely to align with their existing perceptions on legitimate and effective forms of agency, limitations that Robinson is very aware of (Robinson, “Socialism”), while the didactic elements work to expand the scope of potential areas (social, environmental, and above all economic) on which to act. *New York 2140* may not shatter the boundaries of capitalist realism or incite sweeping change overnight, but it can influence the larger climate imaginary and perhaps help shift the “Overton window” that defines the boundaries of what is politically conscionable in any given historical moment (Lowrey). Robinson is doing useful, pragmatic work here: expanding readers’ perceptions of what is possible—and desirable—within the bounds of postmodern capitalism, while illuminating the far horizon beyond, where utopia awaits. But perhaps, as Malm suggests and Robinson has since recognized (Robinson, “Socialism”), this work may not be enough unless it is accompanied by other, more radical efforts. This may thus call for more radical texts aimed at readers who already are (or are primed to become) radicalized. I will address this kind of text, and explore the ways in which their constructions of violence can affect the contours of the climate imaginary and the bounds of eco-political agency, in my next chapter.

2: *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*: Inspiring eco-sabotage as self-defense

In the climactic scene of the 2023 film *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, directed by Daniel Goldhaber, the ragtag team of eight protagonists does exactly what the title promises. An oil pipeline in the West Texas desert is blown to bits in a “perfect dramatization” of what Andreas Malm calls “intelligent sabotage,” in which no people are harmed and minimal additional environmental damage is caused (Haagensen, my translation). Most of the characters flee the scene and live to commit ecological sabotage (or “ecotage”) another day, while the two primary masterminds kneel down to peacefully await arrest, not so that they can “face the music,” but so that they can spread their message. From a safe location, one of the other conspirators holds up a mobile phone toward the camera, where a prerecorded video message from the ringleader, Xochitl, similar in style to the work of a social-media-savvy terrorist group, begins to play, describing the group’s violent act as a “last resort” (1:30:50). As her monologue continues, the film cuts back to the scene of the “crime,” and we get a lingering shot of the smouldering rubble while Xochitl’s voice transitions from diegetic (coming to us through the tinny sound of the cell phone speaker in the character’s hand) to extradiegetic voiceover, no longer the voice of an individual character, but the voice of truth:

If we want to survive, we must damage and dismantle CO₂-emitting devices.

Demolish them. Burn them. Blow them up. Let those who profit from mass death know their properties will be trashed. They will defame us and claim this was violence or vandalism, but this was justified. This was an act of self-defense.

(1:30:54-31:20)

The music swells. The scene cuts to black. The ecoterrorists get the last word, including a string of grammatically ambiguous parallel phrases (“Demolish them. Burn them. Blow them up.”) that could easily be taken as imperatives directed at the viewer. The radical eco-political ideas of Malm’s nonfiction book of the same name from 2021, subtitled *Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*, have been dramatically brought to life. And unlike Malm’s book, the film doesn’t stop at presenting an argument for why blowing up pipelines is justified; it actually shows you (mostly) how to do it yourself (Nguyen).

To put it bluntly, this is not how most ecocritics think an effective cli-fi text should work. In this one sequence alone, there are clear examples of several features that, according to Goodbody and Johns-Putra, negatively characterize “didactic” cli-fi texts, including

“preachiness,” “hectoring,” and “lecturing,” suggesting that the film’s writers have ignored their injunction that “the possibility of galvanizing readers into action must be balanced against the wish not to alienate them” (8-9). Empirical ecocritical research would appear to support this view. David Hanauer summarizes the findings in this field thus far, noting that “[r]esearch has shown that narratives are persuasive when the intent to persuade is hidden and fail to persuade when the reader has the sense that they are being directly manipulated” (334). This is especially true for “environmentally oriented texts that challenge dominant ideologies” (a category we can safely say encompasses Goldhaber’s film), which appear more likely to “fail to have an effect” on audiences that are skeptical toward the radical worldview presented by the text (Weik Von Mossner et al 199). Even Rob Nixon, one of the ecocritics who has written most compellingly about the “slow violence” that capitalism carries out against people through pollution and other forms of ecological devastation, would seem likely to object to how this film attempts to weaponize his ideas. Just in the film’s closing scene, we can find examples of what he has identified as “three threats to the dynamism of fictional eco-drama: predictability, sentimentality, and a political outrage or self-righteousness that supplants depth of character” (57). If we agree with these scholars, Goldhaber’s film would seem more likely to alienate viewers than activate them.

Moving from form to content, in addition to its potential aesthetic flaws, the film’s politics are also suspect from a mainstream ecocritical perspective. The general consensus (as in American environmentalist thought at large) privileges nonviolent resistance over violent direct action (Malm 22-3), as well as favoring nuanced representations of eco-political debates instead of the Manichean ones that narratives of confrontation (such as, I claim, Goldhaber’s film) are fundamentally based on (Suleiman 101). We can see one example of this in Adam Trexler’s commentary on *A Friend of the Earth*, where he critiques the “moral simplifications” of the radical environmentalist groups of the late 20th century such as the Earth Liberation Front, whose ecotage actions are dramatized in Boyle’s novel (“*Friend*” 102). In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh decries the “nihilistic forms of extremism that employ methods of spectacular violence” that have been inspired by the seeming “collapse of political alternatives” and feelings of “disempowerment” (132) as well as the “extreme political polarization” that has come to surround climate change, particularly in the English-speaking world (137). This suggests that he would also be opposed to both the film’s whole-hearted embrace of explosive direct action and its “good vs. evil” framing. Lawrence Buell, while sympathetic to the motivations of people who carry out acts of “eco-resistance,” finds it “hard to quarrel with the prudence” of mainstream environmentalist calls for them to

“tread more carefully and tone down their tactics, rhetorical and otherwise.” From a rhetorical perspective, this is because the use of “militant language” by eco-activists, particularly in the post-9/11 “age of terror,” makes it more likely for these groups’ ideas to convert, in the eyes of the public, from “harmlessly eccentric into grotesquely terrifying.” From a political perspective, meanwhile, he believes that “violence perpetrated against persons and even property on behalf of an unpopular cause” within a democratic society based on the rule of law “is extremely hard to defend on principle and almost always self-defeating” (“Ecoterrorism” 163-4).

This final assertion by Buell reflects the dominant environmentalist ideology that Malm reacts to in his “shocking” book, which has rekindled a debate within the movement: whether direct action, specifically including property destruction, is necessary as a complement to nonviolent protest tactics in order to achieve “real social change” (Glenn 19). By uncovering the crucial role of direct action and the threat of a violent “radical flank” in previous struggles against oppression, including the 20th-century fights for women’s suffrage and civil rights (Malm 31-49), Malm presents a compelling case for environmentalists to reevaluate the use of these tactics and recognize them as legitimate and potentially necessary elements within the climate struggle (50-70). Goldhaber’s film dramatizes this debate, and in doing so it also offers an opportunity for ecocritics to reinterrogate the widespread dismissal of violent “eco-resistance” tactics, and, by extension, of their positive representation in fiction. As such, it also invites us to renew the long-dormant critical debate on the effectiveness of radically didactic texts, and investigate their potential power to motivate action, direct or otherwise. In this chapter, I will analyze Goldhaber’s film as a work of radical “ideological” cli-fi, paying particular attention to how it “preaches” to two particular segments of the environmentalist “choir”: those who are skeptical or critical of direct action, and those who are already convinced that it is justified. Ultimately, I argue that texts of this kind have more potential for effecting real ecopolitical change than some ecocritics may believe, by working to nudge the already converted to act, and to be more likely to see their own actions and those of others—including direct actions that they might previously have been inclined to dismiss as counterproductive—as part of a coherent ecological movement that gives these actions meaning, and thus greater potential political power.

While this argument shares some common features with my reading of *New York 2140* in the previous chapter, my analysis of Goldhaber’s film will also highlight some key differentiating features. This includes particular features of film as a medium. Both Suleiman and Foley’s conceptual work on “ideological” fiction was developed in the context of novels.

Many features of their frameworks are applicable across other kinds of fictional narratives, particularly the concept of patterns of redundancy that is at the heart of Suleiman's theory of how these texts function to ensure that the "correct" messages and rules of action are received by the audience. I will supplement this with film-specific analysis, drawing in particular on Fredric Jameson's book of postmodern film criticism, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, and the work of Marshall Soules on persuasive effects in film and the multisensory cinematic techniques that support them. I will also address narrative features specific to a subgenre of environmental fiction to which the film *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* can be said to belong: the "ecological caper." I will begin this chapter by briefly reviewing this subgenre's origins in relation to Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, including its popular reception and influence on American environmentalist movements, and use this to contextualize the response to *Pipeline* thus far. Abbey's novel, which shares several formal and narrative similarities with Goldhaber's film, will serve as a point of reference throughout this chapter, and will provide useful context for exploring the special effects of this form, including its impact and ecopolitical consequences in the world beyond the text.

The ecological caper as "ecoterrorist" propaganda

By taking Malm's provocative title literally and leading the viewer step-by-step through the practical process of sabotage in the name of ecodefense, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* revives and renews a dormant strain of American radical environmental fiction for the era of climate change: the "ecological caper" (Gard 286). This "genre," if one can use that word for a set of texts that could probably be counted on two hands (at least as far as mainstream publishing is concerned), was epitomized in the first wave of 20th century American environmentalism by *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

Abbey's novel was immensely popular upon its release, becoming a bestseller (Schlosser xv). It was optioned for film by Hollywood celebrity (and friend of Abbey's) Robert Redford (Schlosser xv-vi), though no cinematic adaptation was ultimately produced, and it remains in print to this day. From a literary standpoint, *Monkey Wrench* "was generally treated by critics as an entertaining caper, if not great literature" (Gard 285). And while it did succeed in bringing Abbey's ecological concerns "to an enthusiastic generation of activists," some readers were concerned by the novel's "anarchist elements," particularly the inclusion of "potentially usable plans for eco-sabotage" (Gard 285-6). They had good reason to be concerned. *Monkey Wrench* was very influential in American environmentalist circles,

turning “monkeywrenching” into the generic term for ecological sabotage (Gard 285) and inspiring the formation of the radical groups Earth First! (EF!) and Earth Liberation Front (ELF) (Gard 286, Buell “Ecoterrorism” 154), the members of which carried out sabotage actions that followed the steps laid out in Abbey’s novel to the letter. Their efforts were no doubt aided by the subsequent publication of *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching* (1985), an actual how-to guide for ecoteurs that takes clear inspiration from Abbey’s novel, and to which Abbey himself contributed a “Forward!” (*Ecodefense* 18).

The initial critical response to Goldhaber’s film among popular media outlets has been strikingly similar. It has been described as a “must-see” film (Cardamenis 123), “propulsive” (Robey 11), and “an exciting thriller with a riveting drama at its core” (Fleet). As a rare fictional adaptation of a scholarly text, it has been praised for imbuing Malm’s ideas “with renewed vitality and a sense of burning urgency” through the power of storytelling (Glenn 19). However, some critics have taken issue with the film’s depiction of violent tactics. Commenting on a scene in which the protagonists discuss the likely public reception of their impending pipeline bombing, Tim Robey notes that “the mainstream view” that “most US media” will be “guaranteed” to propagate is that they are “dangerous cranks who need to be locked away” (11). Both the title of Robey’s review and the first line of a review in *Library Journal* preemptively reinforce this interpretation by labelling the protagonists as “eco-terrorists.” This aligns with the legacy of Abbey and *Monkey Wrench*: Abbey is now commonly portrayed by the American right wing as “the godfather of ecoterrorism” (Buell, “Ecoterrorism” 158), while his novel continues to enjoy a long “after-life as an iconic carrier of the ecoterrorism gene” (Buell, “Ecoterrorism” 162).

One potentially significant difference from Abbey’s novel is that *Pipeline* does not seem to have reached such a large general audience due to its release as an independent film, which implies more limited promotion and distribution channels. Reviewing the film for the Australian market in *The Guardian*, Adam Fleet notes its “almost nonexistent theatrical presence” and describes the film as “overlooked.” As of this writing, the film has been released in 8 countries and taken in a total worldwide box office of \$1,046,811 (“*Pipeline*,” Box Office Mojo), compared to more than 60 countries and \$552,639,571 for perhaps the most widely viewed cli-fi film, *The Day After Tomorrow* (“*Tomorrow*,” Box Office Mojo). That *Pipeline* was produced independently was perhaps unavoidable, particularly in light of the apparent impossibility of releasing an adaptation of *Monkey Wrench* as a commercial film, despite the money and star-power behind the idea, due to the text’s violation of the “most sacred American value: industrial private property” (Gary Snyder, quoted in Buell,

“Ecoterrorism” 160). Film production and distribution has changed dramatically since Abbey’s day, however, and despite its small theatrical release, *Pipeline* is widely available for streaming on the Internet, where interested audiences can seek it out. Goldhaber has stated that he and his co-writers deliberately selected Hollywood-style film as their medium and an “entertaining form” to reach a larger audience with their message (Nguyen). However, its subject matter and transparently environmentalist positioning, combined with its means of distribution, suggest that, like cli-fi in general, it is most likely to be viewed by a narrower audience that is already concerned about climate change and thus more inclined to be receptive to environmentalist views (Schneider-Mayerson, “Influence” 478). As such, Goldhaber’s aesthetic choices are significant not only for their implications on the film’s appeal to potential viewers scrolling through YouTube for something to watch, but also for the ways in which it works deliberately to convey its message, and to whom.

Daisy Gard’s commentary on *The Monkey Wrench Gang* that I have cited above is taken from the entry for Abbey’s novel in the compendium *The Literature of Propaganda* (2013), which gives an indication of how this text has been categorized by literary critics in retrospect: fiction that deliberately attempts to influence belief and agitate for action (Soules 6-7). For their part, the script writers for *Pipeline* have stated on the record that while the original motivation behind making the film was to make a work of “propaganda” or “direct advocacy” stemming from Goldhaber’s feelings of “anger and powerlessness,” they fought this instinct (Nguyen, Cardamenis 123). In an interview in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Goldhaber explained that this transformation came about during the script development process, particularly through the influence of co-writer Ariela Barer (who also plays Xochitl in the film), who encouraged her fellow script writers to “interrogate (the) feeling” behind Goldhaber’s desire to “make propaganda,” and introduce that feeling into the script on the character level, with the goal of encouraging the viewer to empathize with the anger of the characters “on their own terms” (Cardamenis 123). Doing so, they felt, reduced the need for the film itself to be “angry” or to have a clear “political alignment” (Cardamenis 123).

In the same interview, the film’s editor, Daniel Garber, neatly reaffirms the status quo conclusion of the “art vs. propaganda” debate, stating that in his opinion, the “best way” to get people to engage with the ideas from Malm’s text is not with “something that comes across as transparently propagandistic.” Rather:

You want people to engage with the idea, the need to affect change, and think about how we ought to go about that. The best way to get them to do that is to give them all the pieces of the puzzle for them to think through for themselves and come to their

own conclusion rather than trying to get everyone to think in exactly the same way.
(Cardamenis 123)

While Goldhaber's comments suggest that he himself may be slightly more open to more propagandistic art forms, it would appear that the production team's consensus was, to put it in Barbara Foley's terms, to side with the "cognitive" bourgeois aesthetic tradition rather than the "didactic" and "agitational" radical one.

Despite the statements of Goldhaber and his collaborators, some degree of underlying political alignment and persuasive intent is still clearly discernible in their film. Fleet calls it "a polemical movie" with a "forthright point of view," but notes that the writers succeed in keeping it entertaining nonetheless by focusing on the compelling plot rather than delivering a "diatribe." This suggests that for some viewers, the film's creators have succeeded in embedding their message within the movie's "story." However, this is a risk with embedding ideological messages too deeply, without support at the level of "discourse." Robey's comment that "[a]s a statement on the ethics of activism, (the film is) too threadbare to be profound" (11), implies that for other viewers, the film's reluctance to explicitly support its implicit message may result in that message being dismissed as insufficiently justified.

I believe that a key factor in the extent to which the film's intended message reaches the viewer depends on that viewer's preexisting ideological positioning. Namely, this is a question of whether the viewer is already part of the environmentalist "choir" or not. Viewers who are already concerned about climate change will be more likely to empathize with the plight of the protagonists, while those who are already aware of or engaged in contemporary environmental activism, particularly the ongoing debates about disruptive (and potentially destructive) protest tactics that have received increasing attention in recent years (Martin et al 259), will possess a discursive frame of reference in which the competing sides of these debates, which the film references only in passing, can be situated, allowing the film's contribution to these debates to be more clearly understood. For the viewer or reader whose worldview is already aligned with a radical text like Goldhaber's film, they are also more likely to perceive it as "a realistic, accurate depiction of the world" that can potentially "have an impact on their attitudes and behavior" (Weik Von Mossner et al 199).

This can help to explain why some presumably sympathetic viewers may also react negatively to what they perceive as the film's "superficial" treatment of the film's radical ideas and the characters' radicalization process. We can see one example of this in fiction writer Erlend Loe's critical review of the film in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*, which, I would argue, pans the film for deviating from realist norms in favor of a radical

“ideological” aesthetic (though without using those terms), due to his perception that the film’s construction of climate radicalization is too “dumb” and flat to be believable (Loe). Meanwhile, viewers approaching the film from an unsympathetic ideological background would be more likely to find the film’s politics anarchic instead of merely superficial and its means of delivering them not just unconvincing but potentially dangerous, which Buell’s research suggests has in fact been the general trend since even before 9/11 intensified the anxiety and critical rhetoric surrounding “ecoterrorism” in the United States (“Ecoterrorism” 158-9). In this context, Robey’s critique of the film’s delivery of its message and his use of “eco-terrorists” to describe its protagonists would appear to have a logical connection.

By analyzing the film adaptation of *Pipeline* as a radical “ideological” cli-fi text, I will argue that while the writers may have succeeded on the surface level in defusing the text’s most obviously propagandistic implications, a structuralist analysis reveals that it nonetheless delivers a consistent and coherent message in support of Malm’s thesis about the legitimacy and urgency of direct action in support of climate change. Of course, as with “ideological” fiction in general, this only holds true for an audience that is already inclined to agree with that message, but I hope to demonstrate that this is not a weakness of the film, but a strength. According to environmental communication scholar Helena Bilandzic, “audiences that are open to environmental issues but need a final push to action can tolerate (or may need) stronger stimuli, like radical or activist texts” (353). For broadly sympathetic but passive audiences who also have conflicted or negative feelings about the use of direct action to further progressive causes, which recent research (Feinberg et al) and public surveys (Knežević) indicate comprise a significant share of the population, the film supports Malm’s ideological project of reframing “violent” direct action as justifiable self-defense, which can help shift the majority opinion toward greater appreciation of (or at least less opprobrium for) the use of these tactics by more radical activists. For more committed and potentially active members of the environmentalist “choir,” the film can work more directly as an inspiration, firing them up and nudging them toward direct action, just as Abbey’s seminal work did for an earlier generation of environmental activists. If Malm is right, then even if the film’s didactic message only results in a small percentage of its viewers feeling compelled to do more in the fight against climate change than they otherwise would, this can nonetheless have a big impact in shifting the environmental movement from “protest” to “resistance” and ultimately helping make the status quo of the fossil economy untenable (Malm 69-70).

Given the importance of audience targeting to effective communication and the centrality of audience identification to the effects of “bourgeois” and “ideological”

character-driven fiction alike (Foley 269, Suleiman 73, Schneider-Mayerson et al, “Climate Fiction” 123), including in film (Soules 144-5), I will begin my reading of *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* by focusing on how it deploys specific characters to embody discrete ideological viewpoints within the larger environmentalist field and uses them to address the audiences those protagonists represent.

Exemplary protagonists: Bringing Malm’s message to life

As reflected in my summary in the preceding section, most popular critics who have written about Goldhaber’s film have analyzed it within the realist tradition, focusing their commentary on the motivations and emotions of its protagonists. One exception is Norwegian critic Olaf Haagensen, who identifies Goldhaber’s work as an explicitly “agitational” film. Writing in the Norwegian weekly magazine *Morgenbladet*, in response to a negative review written by a colleague who, like Loe, pointed out the weakness of the film’s characterizations (Erikson), Haagensen argues that the realist aesthetic is “an outdated idiom” for both thinking about the climate catastrophe and for motivating people to join the struggle against it. The strength of Goldhaber’s film, in his view, is how it “manages to make the climate struggle’s ‘impossible’ collective action its primary concern,” instead of diluting this focus by paying more attention to the concerns of bourgeois realism, such as psychology and interpersonal relationships (Haagensen, my translation).

I am generally inclined to agree with Haagensen’s view. However, as my analysis will show, Goldhaber et al appear to be more concerned with delving into the psychology of some individual characters than others, which I argue is related to the difference in the audience segments these characters represent and how likely (or unlikely) they are to respond positively to “agitational” aesthetic approaches. Since a fundamental part of my argument in this chapter is about how radical “ideological” cli-fi texts function for an already radicalized audience, I will begin my analysis by looking at the film’s most radical and most openly ideological protagonist, Xochitl.

Xochitl: Co-opting radical viewers

Pipeline opens with a long tracking shot of a person, seen from behind, walking down a sidewalk in a suburban American landscape. They are wearing a pink hoodie with the hood up under a faded pink jacket with a sparkly military-style insignia on one sleeve. As they approach a parked SUV, we hear the flick of a switchblade opening, and the camera tilts down to show a large knife in a small hand. We see the character’s face as she turns to look

over her shoulder before kneeling down by the rear tire. She grunts and we hear the sudden rush of air as, just below the frame, we imagine the knife puncturing the tire wall. She repeats the procedure on the front tire, then stands up, scans both directions as a police siren sounds somewhere in the distance, and places a yellow sheet of paper under the windshield wiper. As she walks away, the camera zooms in on the flyer's text. "WHY I SABOTAGED YOUR PROPERTY" the boldface headline reads, under a red-and-black logo of two matches crossed like an "X." We don't have time to read the rest of the text, except perhaps the only other boldfaced line: "If the law will not punish you, then we will" (Goldhaber 00:01:06-58). Before we know Xochitl's name, we already know she is radicalized.

This scene is a dramatization of a kind of ecotage (or "ecoterrorism") described in Malm's book that was originally proposed by British writer John Lanchester as a relatively easy kind of environmentalist direct action that urban activists could use to strike at SUVs as a source (and symbol) of pollution that was readily at hand, and which, if enough people joined in, could have a significant impact, making "ownership of these cars effectively impossible" (Malm 11). For viewers who have not read Malm's book, the implication of this opening scene may be uncertain—is it simply a random act of vandalism?—though the note on the windshield serves as an initial element of "discourse"-level redundancy to begin connecting it to an ideological context. On the other hand, for viewers who have already read Malm's book (and presumably felt positively enough about it to watch the film version), this allusion will be immediately recognizable from the moment Xochitl's knife comes out. With this shot, the film establishes itself as a narrative of "confrontation" between "two adversaries who are not on the same ethical or moral plane" (Suleiman 102), which "co-opts" already sympathetic viewers into siding with Xochitl (Suleiman 144-5) against the common enemy of runaway consumer capitalism. When these viewers see Xochitl's gaze trained on the SUV, they already know what is going to happen and are rooting for it. This "cold open" calls to mind the opening chapter of *Monkey Wrench*, where we see a successful sabotage action cause a newly inaugurated bridge, a symbol of capitalism's progress through the previously wild American West, to come crashing down, before we meet the gang responsible or are told what it is they stand for (Abbey, *Monkey Wrench* 1-7). As in Goldhaber's film, while casual readers may be left to wonder, those in the know are already getting fired up.

Pipeline's opening scene could have a particularly strong impact on viewers who remember the larger context of the SUV example in Malm's text. He uses it as an illustration of what he calls "Lanchester's paradox," which observes how "strange and striking" it is that such easy and effective actions "have not been taken" despite there being so many activists

who feel so strongly about the threat posed by climate change (Malm 13). This state of “inaction within the world of activism” (Malm 13) could perhaps be linked to the broader problem of capitalist realism, which would make any kind of individual action against the existing economic system seem futile. With this intertextual context in mind, when Xochitl kneels down at the SUV’s back tire, she is not just carrying out a simple ecotage action. With a single thrust of her blade, she cleaves Lanchester’s paradox like the Gordian Knot. From that moment, for those viewers, she becomes the film’s “pure” hero (Suleiman 106). For audience members who, like Malm, have wondered what is taking climate activists so long to “start physically attacking the things that consume our planet and destroy them with our own hands” (Malm 9), one can imagine them being filled with the sudden urge to stand up and cheer, as the seemingly impossible is revealed, single-handedly, to be very possible indeed.

Establishing Xochitl as a heroic character early on in the film is not only important for its hortatory effect on sympathetic viewers. It is also critical for the effectiveness of *Pipeline* as a radical didactic text. While “ideological” cli-fi novels like *New York 2140* can and do rely on “talkative” narrators or free indirect discourse as “discourse”-level effects to reinforce the “correct” interpretation of the message that may be embedded more subtly in their “story,” the genre of the contemporary Hollywood-style thriller that Goldhaber has selected does not offer a ready equivalent. The closest options, intertitles and voiceover, are used sparingly in contemporary mainstream cinema, perhaps at the beginning or ending of a film, not as running commentary throughout. There are other kinds of didactic “special effects” that are particular to cinema that I will explore later in this chapter, but in Goldhaber’s film, much of the didactic work is carried out at “story” level. Given the film’s multi-protagonist structure, and its dramatization of the many conflicting viewpoints around the use of sabotage within climate change activist circles (Goldhaber 0:16:44-18:30), it is essential that the viewer perceive one character as the “correct interpreter,” so that even though the arguments depicted in the “story” may appear to end inconclusively (Goldhaber 0:31:42-33:07), the viewer is nonetheless encouraged to draw the right conclusion.

This is necessary even for an audience that is already inclined to cheer Xochitl’s actions from the start, because the point is to move them beyond passive enjoyment of such scenes on screen to support for or participation in direct action in real life. For this transformation from “ought” to “is” to work, the viewer needs to be able to see these actions within a larger context, and to imagine themselves as a potential member of the larger collective identity or movement that imbues these actions with both ideological meaning and ecopolitical power. For this to happen, we need to go beyond Xochitl’s initial presentation as

a nameless ecoteur, and understand where she—and her comrades—are coming from, and the pathways that have brought them together and nudged them toward action. This is an essential element of facilitating audience identification, which is a “significant rhetorical strategy” in persuasive film (Soules 6).

The key to Xochitl’s transformation from passive to active resister of climate change is revealed through a flashback, which occurs around 15 minutes into the film. Before then, the film has introduced each of the other seven protagonists in short vignettes that show them leaving their normal lives behind to embark on their joint mission, in several cases responding to a literal “call to action” in the form of a text message from Xochitl (00:02:27, 00:03:21, 00:04:41). This is an early example of the film’s use of montage, a technique which “communicates emotion, because spectators are forced to fill ruptures and gaps with their own meaning,” and that has famously been used to “ideological” ends by directors such as Eisenstein and Riefenstahl (Soules 157-8). Here, it clearly conveys a sense of urgency and solidarity behind this group’s mission. The music swells and the title appears on screen in gigantic block letters, red on black (00:05:52), then the film transitions into the “assembly” sequence, where the gang gathers in ones and twos at an abandoned house in West Texas and begins putting together the precursor chemicals of what will become their improvised explosive devices (0:06:06-14:17). At this point, we have not yet learned all of the characters’ names, and while the viewer may assume that Xochitl plays some kind of coordinating role, whether or not there is any kind of hierarchy in the operation is not clear. Xochitl and three of the others decamp to scout out the targets, and as Xochitl takes a breather and watches Dwayne and Rowan finish digging up the dry earth to expose a length of pipeline, the film abruptly cuts to her dressed all in black, watching a coffin being lowered into a grave (0:15:02-16). Another sudden cut brings up a black screen with bold white text “XOCHITL & SHAWN” (0:15:23), though what we see immediately after is in fact Xochitl and Theo smoking in the front yard of a suburban bungalow, while immediately behind them, just beyond a razor-wire-topped chain link fence and white concrete barrier wall, the gigantic storage tanks and towering smokestacks of an oil refinery loom.

The ensuing scene shows us the spark that set Xochitl off. We learn from Theo’s dialogue that Xochitl’s mother has died of a “freak heat wave” due to “the fucking world we live in now” (0:16:03-10). The industrial setting, with streams of smoke rising up to the sky in the background, visually reinforces the line’s already fairly explicit implication of climate change, and serves to make visible the otherwise “invisible, mutagenic” violence that has been committed against Xochitl’s mother, transforming it from “slow” to “spectacular”

(Nixon 6). Here, we see an example of the use of cinematic techniques like visual juxtaposition and cutting through which “[i]dentification becomes ideological,” as the viewer is cued not only to sympathize with the protagonists, but also to link their cause to a larger worldview (Soules 144-7). In this scene, we learn that Xochitl was already working to “fix things” (Goldhaber 0:16:15), implying that she had already made a kind of environmentalist commitment before her mother’s death, and that now she “ha(s) to,” as her sudden transformation into an orphan is “like origin story shit” (Goldhaber 0:16:20-14). This last line, which the regular viewer of Hollywood films can be expected to recognize as a reference to a genre trope (as in *Batman*, *Spider-Man*, and many others), suddenly transforms Xochitl from victim into (super)hero, a shift that is reinforced by glum facial expression breaking into a smile despite herself, like hope rising from the ashes of despair.

This gives context to the narrative purpose of this flashback, the first in a series that occur at regular intervals throughout the film. Each one, which is titled with one or two of the protagonists’ names, cuts back from the pipeline-bombing action to a key moment in their respective radical awakenings. Once again, it is significant that Xochitl is first. The title card implies that this flashback is not just her “origin story,” but Shawn’s as well, and it quickly becomes clear that Xochitl is instrumental in his radicalization, positioning her not only as “hero” but “mentor,” another privileged position in “ideological” fiction which often functions to “elucidate arguments and ideas that cannot necessarily be inferred from ‘story’” (Foley 332). This is illustrated in the next sequence. Xochitl and Shawn are taking part in a planning meeting for an upcoming protest organized by their college’s divestment-focused climate change activist group, when Xochitl proclaims that she is “having trouble feeling like any of this matters” (0:17:52), a statement that could be read simply as a reflection of her grief, but the tone of her voice and look on her face as she delivers the line suggest it would be better understood as a Malmian expression of utter contempt for the “inaction” of climate activists (Malm 13). The lead organizer responds by insisting that while divestment will not “solve everything,” it is a “big step in the right direction” (0:17:56-18:01). In their ensuing exchange, Xochitl paraphrases the key argument from Malm’s book:

Xochitl: “Which would be great, if we still had time. But by the time any market solution does shit, billions of people will be dead from climate disaster.”

Organizer: “We all want faster change, but these are huge systems that change incrementally.”

Xochitl: “Right, so act outside of the system. We need to start attacking the things that are killing us. We can take more drastic action.”

Shawn: “Like what?”

Xochitl: “Like, actual sabotage. Property destruction.” (0:18:02-30)

While the faces of the lead protest organizer and his female counterpart express incredulity and alarm during Xochitl’s speech, Shawn begins subtly nodding his head along with her words, a gesture that reinforces the “correctness” of her speech. As she delivers her last lines, Xochitl is no longer looking at the protest organizer at all. Her gaze and message are directed at Shawn, and, as the camera frames her from over his shoulder, it is also directed toward the viewer. She is inviting him into a revolutionary consciousness at the same time as she is speaking to us. While there is a “general taboo in fiction against actors addressing the camera directly, thus preserving the illusion of the camera as unseen witness” (Soules 145), this is an example of a clever use of cinematography to “control the viewer’s gaze” (Soules 162) that allows the “ideological” effect of the scene to function more clearly.

Daniel Garber, one of the film’s writers, described this “library scene” as one of two sequences in *Pipeline* that “captured the entire perspective of the film,” the other being Xochitl’s post-bombing TikTok manifesto (Cardamenis 123). Much of what the writers had initially filmed for the library scene was cut during the editing process, which ultimately reduced the scene’s duration from six minutes to only two. Garber explains that this was due to their decision to make the film less overtly didactic by “reorienting scenes around emotional arcs for the characters” instead of feeling a “burden to be informative” and including more detailed recitations of the ideas from Malm’s book (Cardamenis 123). This editorial decision has certainly helped them avoid the extremes of “discourse”-level didacticism in Robinson’s novels. The end result, however, is “ideological” nonetheless. Audiences who are aware of the film’s intertextual context will connect Xochitl’s speech to Malm’s ideas, which serve as the “doctrine” that the film’s narrative supports (Suleiman 7). By virtue of her special role as a mentor character, Xochitl’s statements both “cue the reader to opinions that the authors wish to be heard” and “validate the political judgments that can be inferred from thematic patterns of comparison, contrast, and repetition among events and characters, furnishing an explicit analysis that reinforces implicit themes” (Foley 310). For an already radical audience, it is not necessary to spell out the doctrine in detail, or to omit any dissenting opinions. It is enough to reference it, reinforce it, and show the implications of living it out.

While several of the other characters have moments of hesitation throughout the film, Xochitl never wavers. She has no time “to indulge lip-biting doubt” (Bleasdale, *Sight* 76). She is committed to immediate and drastic action. By foregrounding Xochitl, the film is

similar to proletarian novels that feature already-radicalized protagonists in lieu of starting with a “naive hero”: rather than focusing on establishing sympathy with the cause, it asks, “what does it mean to have made a revolutionary commitment?” (Foley 327). This is a question that viewers who are already in the climate change activist “choir” are invited to contemplate in relation to their own lives. Suleiman notes this possibility in her study of “ideological” fiction: audiences who encounter a work like *Pipeline* in the moment of the social crisis it describes have the rare opportunity to transform from being the protagonist’s extradiegetic “pseudo-helper” to being a “genuine actor—a character in a ‘true story’ whose ending was not yet written” by “act(ing) out” the fantasies inspired by the text (144-5).

Alisha: Addressing the skeptical progressives

The biggest barriers to the acceptance of Malm’s arguments would presumably be the way that they fly in the face of the consensus on the unique effectiveness of nonviolent protest (and the corresponding ineffectiveness of violent protest) that has dominated progressive thought in the United States since the 1980s (Malm 61), and the ways in which they conjure the spectre of “ecoterrorism” that both the right wing and mainstream environmentalist organizations have used to stigmatize the actions of radical groups (Buell, “Ecoterrorism” 156, footnote to 155). Among the eight protagonists that make up Goldhaber’s team of ecoteurs, the closest we have to a stand in for mainstream American environmentalist opinions, and thus also for the likely majority of viewers of the film, is Alisha. While the film generally “gives voice to the relevant debates” around environmental protest (Bleasdale, *Sight* 76), how it represents Alisha’s worldview in dialogue with the more radical perspectives of the other protagonists is particularly critical for its ability to engage with, and potentially shift, the perspectives of members of the audience group she represents. Her transformation over the course of the film from outright dismissal of ecological sabotage as a tactic (Goldhaber 0:56:16) to willing collaboration in the pipeline bombing (Goldhaber 0:13:40) works didactically to present viewers in this category with a compelling argument for acceptance of, and potentially support for, violent direct action for environmentalist ends. As an example of what Soules calls an “ideological” use of identification in film, in which the viewer is encouraged to feel allegiance with a character, to take their side in a moral sense (Soules 145), Alisha could thus serve as a powerful persuasive tool to address this skeptical segment of the environmentalist “choir.”

Alisha shares a number of key characteristics with the other protagonists. Like all of them aside from Logan, she is working class. We first encounter her at work, cleaning a

well-off person's home (00:02:37-46). She is also a person of color, one of five protagonists who would likely identify with that category. Both of these are significant identity markers in the American context, and when they are combined with her womanhood and same-sex relationship with Theo (0:34:12) they suggest an intersectional social position that is characterized by a high degree of structural oppression. As such, her character's background also suggests a likely alignment with progressive social causes, which the film affirms by showing her serving food at a church-based soup kitchen (0:55:50-57), using some of her precious free time to serve people in even more precarious economic positions than her own.

In the context of a film targeted at leftist audiences, these character traits all serve as examples of "story"-level redundancy, reinforcing Alisha's position on the side of "good" (Suleiman 164). In fact, in some key scenes, the film seems to elevate her "goodness" above the others. The soup kitchen scene is one such example. It is clear that Alisha is a dedicated volunteer, while Theo just "want(s) to come by and help" (0:55:57), indicating a much more casual engagement that is driven primarily by her personal connection to Alisha. This is reinforced by the conversation between them that immediately ensues, as they walk down a stairwell with Theo lightly carrying a broom and Alisha lugging a hefty sack of trash. Alisha tells Theo that if she wants to "help people" then she should actually "*help people*" (with the kind of everyday assistance that Alisha provides at the soup kitchen, her delivery implies) instead of listening to the "crazy" ideas of Xochitl, who is "just another girl that went to college, read a book, and decided she knows how to save the world" (0:56:09-32). She repeats this point later on to Xochitl's face, telling her that "[p]eople are out there doing the work, and you just want to come in and say 'fuck you.' This flashy shit is pure ego" (1:28:00-07), and that their planned sabotage action is more likely to "fuck over poor people" than "scare some oil companies" (1:28:15-18).

In Alisha, the film thus presents the viewer with a credible challenge to Malm's argument from the left; one that is clearly and believably grounded in lived experience and progressive ideals. This is in contrast to some of the few other environmentalist voices of "reason" that we are presented with in the film. For example, the oil-divestment protest organizer who lectures Xochitl condescendingly on the need to work toward incremental change (0:18:10) is presented as a mildly ridiculous example of the college activist "type" that Alisha referred to. He sets the gathering time for the protest with military precision and delivers his instructions not to "escalate" in the event of campus police engagement in a tone of deadly seriousness, while his fellow organizer solemnly informs the group that they have "secured an on-site medic as well as legal support for anyone who might need it"

(0:17:13-22). The high seriousness of this delivery is both realistic and, given the extremely low stakes and low risk of the action they are planning, absurd. This use of “types” to reinforce ideological messages is a common trope in propagandistic cinema, stretching back to early films like Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) (Soules 158). Here, it serves to reinforce the film’s critique of the climate activist “status quo.”

Tellingly, that Xochitl has not carried out “faculty outreach” about the protest is treated by the organizers as a grave failure, while the “family emergency” that prevented her from doing it (the death of her mother) is brushed aside as trivial (0:17:37-48). This reflects both their blind commitment to nonviolent protest, as well as their blindness to the “slow violence” caused by the system they are protesting (Nixon 2). The implication of this last point is reinforced by the organizers’ character traits. They both appear to be middle-class, healthy white people, all of which can be read as slightly negatively-coded “story”-level redundancies within the value system of the film, as they suggest a lower degree of direct oppression by the capitalist system and thus imply that their ecopolitical commitments are more abstract than embodied. This makes their critiques of direct action much easier for Xochitl to dismiss, and her public challenge to them from a more positively-coded position (working class, ethnic minority, directly affected by “slow violence”) is enough to inspire her fellow student (and future collaborator) Shawn to begin to question the received wisdom about the sanctity of nonviolent protest they espouse (Goldhaber 0:18:19-56).

Alisha’s objections, on the other hand, are not so easily overcome. I argue that the film’s positioning of Alisha as particularly “good” serves a deliberate didactic function in this respect. By using “story”-level redundancy to privilege her perspective, the film demonstrates that it takes her ideological position seriously, which ultimately lends her radicalization arc more weight and credibility. Reading her transformation as a narrative of “apprenticeship” suggests that this can have a “powerful” effect on sympathetic viewers, as through their “virtual identification” with Alisha they are “incited to follow (her) in the right direction” (Suleiman 73), carrying the “implied lessons” from her “growth” toward a more radical environmentalist consciousness over “into their own lives” (Foley 327). Investigating what these “implied lessons” are in more detail will thus provide insight into the film’s “lesson” and “rule of action” for these viewers.

In my analysis, Alisha’s path to radicalization is ultimately grounded in empathy and care (particularly for the vulnerable), which frames her growing awareness of how climate injustice functions systematically. This is suggested early in her arc through the soup kitchen flashback. When her fellow volunteer announces that they are “low on supplies” and won’t

be serving food for the rest of the week, we cut to a close up of Alisha's face for a reaction shot: she looks down, furrows her brow, and purses her lips sourly (0:55:48-57), apparently deep in reflection on the bitter injustice of the world—a perfect example of the persuasive power of the cinematic cut, which “radically transforms visual experience” by allowing editors to choose camera angles that are most effective at conveying a specific emotion and edit them together for a cumulative impact, inviting the viewer's mind to make associations between shots through visual suggestion (Soules 147). It is also suggested in her argument with Theo, where Alisha insists, in a burst of righteous fury, that she also “get(s) it” (“it” being an embodied knowledge of the “slow violence” enacted on Theo, Xochitl, and others like them by the local manifestations of the global petro-capitalist system), because she is “literally in it with (Theo) every single day” (0:56:45-49). Here, she argues, her love and care for Theo make her equally implicated in the damage capitalism wreaks on their lives, even if she does not bear the physical stigmata of Theo's “chemical childhood” (0:31:16, 0:56:59).

This is particularly significant because, as I will explore in the next section, a key element of the film's didactic project is establishing a collective identity (potentially an “ecological class”) that is largely based on being “from here,” foregrounding the importance of physical space and membership in local communities of the oppressed and victimized (but which is fundamentally different from how place is used in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*). Alisha's presence also suggests that allies can be equal members in this class, provided they have achieved a level of consciousness that connects their sincere concern for the oppressed with a perspective that validates and supports the choice of the directly victimized to strike back against their oppressor if they believe this is the appropriate course of action. The film supports this kind of radical allyship by depicting Alisha's decision to commit to the bombing plot not because she is necessarily convinced of the philosophical or strategic arguments behind it, but because of her love for Theo and respect for her anger and agency. We can see this clearly in this film's final flashback, which stages the debate between Xochitl and Alisha on the ramifications of and justifications for their plot. Xochitl responds to Alisha's comment about how their actions will harm poor people by saying, “Pay more for gas now, or choke to death on hot air in five years!” (1:28:17). In this phrase, “hot air” both alludes to the looming reality of the accelerating greenhouse effect and echoes Malm's parody of the disingenuous “blah, blah, blah” of politicians paying lip service to climate action instead of doing anything (Malm 5-7). Alisha's riposte sets up her own moment of epiphany:

Alisha: “Who are you to decide? You're not God, Xochitl. You don't get to decide how people live and die.”

Xochitl: "Better me than the people that are currently doing that. And Alisha, you are the one trying to decide how Theo lives or dies. And I'm really sorry, I hate to say it, but we both know she's gonna die." (Goldhaber 1:28:21-35)

In the emotional catharsis of this moment, Alisha bonds with Xochitl over their shared subject position (connected to loved ones who have died or will die due to pollution), accepts Theo's "need to do this" (Goldhaber 1:29:10), and implicitly volunteers to join them in their plot. At no point during this dialogue, or anywhere else in the film, does it appear that Alisha has been intellectually convinced that Xochitl and Theo are right; rather, she has been convinced that supporting them is the right thing to do.

This flashback is the culmination of the film's repeated narrative pattern of shifts between present and past as well as action and introspection. Taken as a whole, this pattern works structurally as another form of "story"-level redundancy. Seeing the characters' moments of epiphany, one after another, has a cumulative effect, in which the repetition of "kernel" events and thematic patterns creates an "overwhelming" implication for both the protagonist(s) and audience, giving an "aura of inevitability" to their radicalization (Foley 294-5). In the film's case, this pattern of repetition involves personal revelations about "slow violence" and exposure to justifications of sabotage as self-defense. Alisha's flashback is given extra emphasis in this structure, as it is the final one in the sequence. It is also interesting as an exception to the general pattern: every other named flashback in the film is set off by something happening to that specific character in the film's narrative present. Alisha, however, is not on screen when her flashback begins. Instead, it is triggered just as Xochitl and Theo kneel down to await their arrest after they have successfully blown up the pipeline, and Xochitl types the code that will detonate the last bomb and destroy all the evidence linking Alisha and the others to the "crime" (1:26:42). This moment sets up the true test of their ideas: Now that they have succeeded in their explosive act of sabotage, how will the world actually respond? The flashback to Alisha's moment of radicalization here is thus perfectly placed to tip the mainstream environmentalist viewer, who has just experienced the emotional high of the gang's success against all odds, from skepticism to support.

In Alisha's character development, *Pipeline* most clearly appears to adhere to the dictates of "cognitivist" Marxist critic Joseph Freedman, that "[t]he best art deals with specific experience which arouses specific emotion in specific people at a specific moment in a specific locale, in such a way that other people who have had similar experiences in other places and times recognize it as their own" (quoted in Foley 139). I think that giving the protagonist who most clearly stands in for mainstream progressive viewpoints the most

traditionally realist narrative arc is no accident. But as I have argued above, the film ultimately works to speak to this audience not only through “transparent” identification, but also through patterns of redundancy that reinforce the text’s didactic effect. Through the “structure of apprenticeship,” audience members who are sympathetic to Alisha’s viewpoint are invited to identify with her and her development. “If the protagonist evolves toward a euphoric position,” these viewers are “incited” to follow her “in the right direction” (Suleiman 73). Showing that Alisha and Theo’s last moment together after the bombing is a positive one, when they share a kiss and exchange “I love you”s before Alisha gets in her car and starts to drive away, smiling at Theo despite the pain of badly fractured and hastily splinted leg (1:17:14-54) and the knowledge that she faces imminent arrest, is thus “both a proof and a guarantee of the values (she) affirms” (Suleiman 73), implicitly promising that fulfillment awaits the viewer who follows in her footsteps.

Collective identities and the role of place

Thus far, I have focused on two of *Pipeline*’s protagonists in order to isolate how its didactic effects work to address specific audiences. However, like *New York 2140*, I would argue that Goldhaber’s film can also be analyzed as a work with a collective protagonist, which—in the context of “ideological” fiction—implies a form of group agency that is larger than the sum of its parts (Foley 400). As I discussed in the previous chapter, the use of a collective protagonist can help “position the reader ‘outside’ the framework of bourgeois ideology” (Foley 364) and potentially aid in the construction of a new class identity that the reader can identify with, providing an alternative to the atomized individualism of “realistic” fiction and ultimately helping to overcome the ideological boundaries of capitalist realism.

In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Fredric Jameson observes that “traditional narratives have never been much good at conveying the collective,” with exceptions for “explosive punctual moments” such as “war or revolution” (9), while also noting that the “heist genre” is notable as an “inscription of collective non-alienated work” (14). *Pipeline* functions as an example of both. On the one hand, we have the “structure of confrontation,” in this case inherited (and dramatized) from Malm’s text, in which the protagonists are locked in a “struggle between heaven and hell” (Suleiman 101) against the relentless capitalist forces driving global climate change. On the other hand, we have a cinematic structure clearly inspired by contemporary heist movies (Goldhaber has described his film as an “*Ocean’s 11* but for eco-terrorism” (Bleasdale, *Financial*)), in which a “supergroup” of previously isolated

individuals is assembled to carry out a daring caper that none of the members could accomplish on their own. Examining the film's collective protagonist in relation to both of these generic structures can give us valuable insight into what the film presents as a potential grounds for forming an "ecological class."

If we begin with the heist movie trope, one thing that is immediately notable is how the film breaks with this genre's insistence on the importance of specialization. In *Ocean's 11*, to take Goldhaber's own example, we have a driver, a surveillance expert, a pickpocket, a con artist, an explosives expert, and so on (Soderbergh): each member of the gang contributes a particular skill that is essential to the team's success. In *Pipeline*, none of the characters have any previous experience with industrial sabotage, or any specialized knowledge that makes them uniquely suited to contributing to the plot. Indeed, the film goes out of its way to show the characters learning everything they need to know about bomb making from the Internet, and doing it themselves using ingredients that are readily available in hardware stores, farm supply shops, and junkyards (Goldhaber 0:08:59-11:09). It also deliberately undermines gendered stereotypes related to this work, such as by showing the female characters (who are slight of stature, and thus presumably weaker) taking on the tasks that demand the most physical strength, like rolling heavy barrels full of explosive powder back and forth across the ground (Goldhaber 0:13:40). One didactic lesson the film thus conveys, which is the exact opposite of the heist genre, is that when it comes to ecotage, anyone can do it. This democratization of direct action is very much in the spirit the *Ecodefense* manual that *Monkey Wrench* helped inspire, in which Abbey presents us with an image of his old Aunt Emma gleefully spiking trees as a kind of "pleasant exercise" during her walks in the woods (19). It also aligns with Malm's "big tent" vision of resistance movements based on his experience in the German climate change activist group Ende Gelände (131). By hijacking the heist movie structure, *Pipeline* potentially helps the viewer overcome Lanchester's paradox by revealing direct action to be achievable by everyone. It also works structurally to position the viewer on the side of the conspirators through genre conventions that may even function independently of environmentalist ideology—after all, Robey asks, reflecting on the film's similarities to *Ocean's 11*, "[i]f we can side with thieves against a casino, why not dissidents with no profit motive against an oil company?" (11).

The analysis does not, however, provide any useful clues as to what binds this "seemingly random collection of eight young people" (Von Mering 54) together. Without additional context, this apparent arbitrariness, combined with the gang's very "of the moment" ethnic, gender, sexuality, and class makeup (more than 50% minority background,

perfect 50-50 gender balance, a lesbian couple, several characters with “menial” jobs) can make the group’s composition seem “sometimes forced, almost to the point of being comical” (Eriksen, my translation). To understand the logic of how the protagonists come together and how the group functions as a more specific “class,” we need to identify shared features beyond the members’ willingness to engage in sabotage. The film’s repetition of flashback sequences is the key here. Through them, we see Xochitl’s response to her mother’s death from pollution-induced cancer from the oil refinery next door (0:15:44-16:44); Michael’s rage at the out-of-state oil workers drilling in his tribe’s land in North Dakota (0:24:02-25:14); Dwayne trying to stop an oil company from building a pipeline across his land to keep them from poisoning the water and air, ruining his crops, and killing his cattle (0:35:30-37:30); Theo’s diagnosis of a rare form of cancer that has become more prevalent in “clusters of people who grew up near chemical plants (or) oil refineries” (0:52:45-53:50); and Rowan and Logan getting arrested for sabotaging dam-building equipment near where they live in Portland, Oregon (1:07:53-1:08:20). This last scene is a clear allusion to *Monkey Wrench*, both in the anti-dam sentiment of the Oregonian ecoteurs and the tactics they are shown using, pouring sand or sugar into the engine of a heavy construction machine to render it unusable—a scene that occurs both in Abbey’s novel (*Monkey Wrench* 86) and is listed as a recommended tactic, accompanied by detailed instructions, in *Ecodefense* (146). What becomes clear through this comparison is the central role of place, both as motivation and justification for ecotage, and as a locus of collective identity formation. Specifically, in both texts, the opposition to the destructive forces of capitalism is reframed as a defense of one’s home, and thus (as in Malm’s formulation) ultimately as self-defense.

Abbey spells out this argument in his opening to *Ecodefense*, where he compares the ecological threat to the “American wilderness” (particularly the “Western states” where he lived) to a “stranger batter(ing) your door down with an axe, threaten(ing) your family and yourself with deadly weapons, and proceed(ing) to loot your home of whatever he wants.” In response to this threat, he claims, the “householder” has the “universally recognized” right to “defend himself, his family, and his property by whatever means are necessary” (*Ecodefense* 18). The “strangers” who are carrying out this “attack” are positioned as either being outsiders, such as MBAs from coastal and international universities, or “quisling politicians” who are betraying their own people for “short-term profits” (*Ecodefense* 18). We can see this same anger in Abbey’s novel, where Hayduke is spurred to action by returning from the Vietnam War to see the landscape he remembered changed (*Monkey Wrench* 16), converted from “sacred” wilderness to industrialized space, allowing the cities of the coast to “feed on

the defenseless interior” (26). The gang responds to this “home invasion” not just by sabotaging machines and destroying bridges, but also sending the message to the “far from home” corporate workers who are behind this destruction (230) to “go home” (106).

In Goldhaber’s film, several of the flashbacks capture a similar spirit of defiance against outside corporate interests that are wantonly destroying the protagonists’ “homes” in the quest for profit. When the oil worker tells Michael he is from South Carolina, Michael responds by spitting on his boots and telling him to “Go back to where you came from” (0:24:58). Dwayne sets down a strip of road spikes, another tactic straight from *Ecodefense* (128), and takes a stand beside his beat-up pickup truck with Texas plates, defending his property against the oil company’s corporate land survey team (the leader of which speaks to him in a decidedly non-Texan accent), and shouts “Go home!” as they beat a hasty retreat from his warning shotgun blast (0:35:36-36:14). *Pipeline*’s assertion of the right of the local population to self-defense also takes up a side of the issue that *Monkey Wrench* omits, namely that it is not just about who the aggressor is, but also who has the right to carry out the defensive act. The film’s characters view not only “foreign” corporate interests but also outside activists with suspicion. Dwayne’s wife, upon hearing the gang’s pipeline-bombing plans and their explanation of how they plan to minimize the environmental impact, replies: “Right. But Dwayne, we live here,” with an expression that clearly suggests that she thinks this is just another group of out-of-towners oblivious to the consequences of their actions on locals’ lives (0:41:10-50). Likewise, Theo’s comment to Alisha that “you’re not from here” (0:56:32) asserts a privileged status for the perspective and agency of the local.

The meaning of this distinction is tied to another key difference between the environmentalism of Abbey’s novel and the climate change resistance of Goldhaber’s film: the shift from the defense of nature for nature’s sake to the counterattack against ecological destruction for the sake of the people whose lives are being put at risk. In *Monkey Wrench*, Hayduke sums up his motivation clearly: “My job is to save the fucking wilderness. I don’t know anything else worth saving. That’s simple, right?” (229). The concerns he and the other characters voice about the incursion of capitalism into the west is about the damage it has wreaked to the “semi-virginal” wilderness (51), or in the case of Seldom Seen Smith, how it threatens to “put him out of business and obstruct the view” (35). In other words, capitalism here is primarily a quasi-spiritual, aesthetic, psychological, and (to a smaller extent) economic affront rather than a source of physical harm. The novel’s ideological message is thus squarely aligned with the American conservationist tradition. This may go some way toward explaining why its politics do not easily map onto the U.S. liberal-conservative axis,

but instead encompass “conservative,” macho, working-class “autochthonic patriot(s)” like Hayduke and Smith (Abbey, *Monkey Wrench* 20, 386), new-age/liberal college-educated idealists like Abzug (Abbey, *Monkey Wrench* 41-2), and wealthy, anti-government libertines like Dr. Sarvis (Abbey, *Monkey Wrench* 171-2). What links them is not a common class identity, but an angry populist/anti-authoritarian spirit and a desire to keep the land “like it was” (Abbey, *Monkey Wrench* 20), to escape the “madness” of the unchecked, cancerous growth of “planetary industrialism,” and return to an idyllic state before there were “too many people everywhere” (Abbey, *Monkey Wrench* 63-4). This worldview aligns Abbey’s text with the ideas of Deep Ecology, which, while they remain popular in certain environmentalist circles (including the radical Anti-Civ movement, which also draws inspiration from the “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski (Richardson)), have come under criticism, particularly from ecological justice scholars and activists from marginalized communities, for privileging the idea of the empty and pure wilderness over human life (Malm 152-5).

In Goldhaber’s film, on the other hand, the idea of the “semi-virginal” wilderness is resolutely absent, both from the screen and from the characters’ dialogue. The protagonists inhabit a landscape that is already inescapably industrialized, from the smokestacks abutting Xochitl’s family home to the high-tension power lines criss-crossing the West Texas sky. What links the characters in this film is not an attachment to and defense of nature *qua* nature, or of place *per se*, but a shared, place-specific experience of victimization (Von Mering 54) that inspires the characters to join together to defend their home turf specifically for the sake of saving their own and their loved ones’ lives. This experience is class-based. Without the financial liquidity to simply pick up and move or the social capital to block these toxic developments from their backyards through lobbying channels, these protagonists have effectively been rendered invisible, transformed from inhabitants to mere collateral damage or externalities in corporate accounting books (Nixon 34, 153). *Pipeline* thus effectively dramatizes not only Malm’s text, but also Nixon’s work on “slow violence.” In doing so, it “gives voice to the most vulnerable populations that have contributed the least and face the biggest threats from climate disaster” (Von Mering 54), and posits the shared experience of victimization between members of these populations as grounds for a collective ecopolitical identity. As with some of the more effective proletarian novels that featured multiple protagonists, it does this not by presenting all of these characters as identical or equally radicalized, but by using them to represent various levels of radical/class consciousness, while “pointing to a larger political scheme” that gives coherence to “the characters’ efforts at

rebellion” (Foley 206-7). Victimhood is thus transformed from individual oppression to a source of the group’s collective superpower.

Analyzed in this way, the aspects of the film’s “ecoterrorist supergroup” that may otherwise read as “comical” or “unrealistic” diversity are instead revealed as serving its didactic ends, as a “crystallization of a central point in Malm’s book, namely that the climate struggle is class struggle” (Haagensen, my translation), thanks to “patterns of repetition and contrast that provide implicit commentary upon relations both within and among classes” (Foley 403). By embedding this ideological message at the level of “story,” conveyed by repetition of personal experiences of victimization, *Pipeline* makes it more likely that the viewer will respond sympathetically to the protagonists’ motivations and understand their actions as inevitable (Fleet, Von Mering 55). It also makes it clear that the film “is not sitting on the fence” (Fleet); through this structure of didactic redundancy, the film further announces its “ideological” intent. Viewers of such a film, as with readers of proletarian novels that dramatized class-based confrontation, “are moved toward revolutionary sympathies not so much from being educated along with the protagonist as from identifying with characters who have already chosen sides” (Foley 362).

There is one character in *Pipeline*’s gang who appears to be an exception to this pattern I have just described. While Alisha, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, can be categorized as a victim due to her personal relationship with Theo, Shawn’s personal stake is never specified. At no point do we learn where he is from, or see any suggestion that he or someone he cares deeply about has directly suffered due to pollution or climate change. Instead, I would place him in a different category. He is a protagonist who does not appear to be primarily radicalized by personal exposure to “slow violence,” but through exposure to information and ideas. As such, he can be seen as a stand-in for viewers who may not immediately connect to the lived experiences conveyed through the film’s “story,” but may nonetheless be receptive to the message conveyed on the level of “discourse” and other more explicit means of incorporating ideological content into the text.

Special didactic effects: “Discourse,” documentarism & DIY ecotage

As Barbara Foley explains, “discourse”-level redundancy is an important “means by which the ‘way’ of a narrative can underline its ‘what’” (270). While “ideological” novels frequently rely on either “talkative” narrators or free indirect discourse as means to clarify and reinforce the didactic message of a text and position the reader as an “accomplice” (Foley

268-70), as I mentioned earlier, these techniques do not map easily onto the conventions of contemporary mainstream film. It should also be noted that, as a multi-protagonist text, there is less need for *Pipeline* to be explicitly didactic in this way. As Foley observed in her commentary on proletarian social novels, when the characters in the text are already “talk(ing) about about rebellion and revolution,” it is no longer “incumbent on the narrator—or a stand-in for the narrator—to raise left-wing ideas; the oppressed are already discussing them” (376). There are, of course, examples of “discourse”-level redundancy that are more subtle, as “discourse” in the narratological sense refers to the manner in which the “story” is told, which encompasses a number of structural effects and “textual maneuvers,” including “spatial and temporal dimensions” and perspective (Foley 270-1). I would posit that the film’s repeated emphasis on Xochitl’s viewpoint, which I have described above, is one example of this, and that it works to shape the viewer’s experience of the film through alignment with her perspective and interests (Foley 268). There are also a small number of examples where Goldhaber directly inserts radical doctrine into his film, which I argue is a key element that cements its status as an “ideological” text.

The Monkey Wrench Gang uses “discourse”-level effects to set the stage for its argument from the very beginning. The facing page to the table of contents proclaims the novel to be “IN MEMORIAM: Ned Ludd,” the anti-industrialization rebel from who the Luddites got their name, which is accompanied by praise for “King Ludd” from Lord Byron (xxii). The pages following the contents include injunctions from Walt Whitman to “Resist much. Obey little,” and from Thoreau to act “Now. Or never” (xxv), and a definition of “sabotage” (xxvi). I have already given three examples of how *Pipeline* deploys similarly explicit kinds of “discourse”- or “story/discourse”-level effects: Xochitl’s closing monologue, in which she momentarily achieves the status of “narrator;” her placement of a printed flier paraphrasing Malm’s call to arms on the SUV’s windshield after slashing its tires, which functions both as a “story”-level event and “discourse”-level device for connecting her action to ideas “from outside” (Foley 305); and her argument with the mainstream environmentalist activists in which she propounds Malm’s theories without citing him by name.

There are a scattering of other instances like this throughout the film, several of which are structurally similar to the library scene. For example, Xochitl and Shawn’s brief dorm-room discussion on the most appropriate targets for sabotage (0:19:13-20:05) and the gang’s debate on the evening before the bombing about whether the action they are about to take is “terrorism” (0:31:42-33:07). In these scenes, radical ideas are raised by characters through dialogue and thus appear organically as part of those characters’ perspectives within

the “story.” However, if we parse these utterances individually it is easy to miss their didactic intent, and instead read them as neutral dramatizations of a dialectic process that the film invites the viewer to go through on their own, essentially abandoning them to cognition, without a hortatory or didactic nudge toward one side or the other. This can lead to anodyne readings of the film as simply presenting a “conflicted dilemma” that offers “food for thought” (*Library Journal*). Seeing these scenes holistically in the context of “ideological” fiction, however, it becomes more obvious that Goldhaber has his finger on the scales. What is significant is the repetition of opinions that specifically align with Malm’s theories, which are proclaimed by the particular characters the viewer is encouraged to recognize as the film’s “correct interpreters,” viewed across these different scenes, helping ensure that the intended meaning of the text is clear (Suleiman 161-2). This “correct interpretation” is cemented in the film’s coda, when the Malm-doctrine “Why I sabotaged your property” flyer recurs in slightly modified form, as an entirely separate band of ecoteurs plants a bomb on a luxury yacht docked at a harbor in Florida (1:32:38-1:33:11), a scene that reprises the film’s opening both to reinforce the didactic message and to expand the collective protagonist beyond the narrow boundaries of the original pipeline gang, hinting at the establishment of a larger movement.

There are also several examples throughout the film of what Foley calls “documentarism,” techniques that “assert direct documentary links with the world of the reader” (402) and in doing so “problematiz(e) the ontological relation between text and actuality” (441). For example, when we first see Theo at work, we hear what she is listening to through her headphones as she cleans, which is a snippet of a news report about how “Pakistan is still recovering from catastrophic flooding that left tens of thousands dead” (0:02:37-46), a reference to a recent real-world event, albeit with the death toll inflated for dramatic effect (“2022 Pakistan Floods”). Appearing very early in the film, this helps establish the threat of climate change to human life as the primary context of the film. Another such scene is when a smash cut takes up abruptly from Xochitl’s showdown with the other activists at the library to Shawn sitting in his dorm room staring at his computer screen. We see him reading a post on a Twitter-like website, in which someone with the user name “Cornelia Iancu PHD” has shared a link to a news article titled “BREAKING: New Climate Model Data Predicts Devastating Consequences,” accompanied by a photo of a raging forest fire, on which she commented: “It’s too late for prevention. Climate genocide is here” (0:18:31-56), an interpretation that the viewer is invited to perceive as “correct” due to her scientific credentials. Shawn scrolls down, past a series of responses that convey despair, defeatism, escapism, irony, and calls to action (vote!), to the final comment in the thread,

where someone has posted “WeRE all gonna die lol” over a map titled “Temperature change in the last 50 years.” The camera lingers on the map, in which almost the entire globe is streaked with bands of yellow, orange, red, like an illustration of the world “on fire” (0:18:34-57), which viewers may associate with Malm’s book’s titular turn of phrase. In addition to making the stakes clearer to Shawn, this scene connects the action of the film to actual climate science in the world beyond the film, thus reinforcing the narrative’s “reality.”

A final “documentary” moment of this kind is the scene where Logan and Shawn first meet. Logan is in a small bookstore in Portland talking to the person working there, who observes that it is “pretty messed up this year.” Logan replies, wryly: “The world is ending,” to which the bookstore employee responds, “Yeah, yeah. That’s kinda how it feels,” and then chides someone for leaving the door open while the AC is running (1:11:08-15). By this point in the film, the viewer immediately recognizes that they are talking about unusual weather patterns driven by climate change. Logan drifts over to the next aisle where Shawn is reading a slim book with a bright red cover, which astute viewers may recognize as Malm’s. “That’s got some good shit,” Logan remarks, drawing a curious glance from Shawn. “Doesn’t teach you how to do it though” (1:11:35-39). This last metatextual comment calls attention to another kind of documentarism that is very relevant for *Pipeline* and the *Monkey Wrench*-inspired tradition that it revives: the “ecological caper” as “how to” manual for ecotage. Unlike Malm’s book, Daniel Goldhaber’s film, in his own words, does in fact show viewers “in broad strokes” how to blow up a pipeline (Nguyen). Perhaps even more significantly, from the perspective of didactic fiction, it does so using documentary effects that encourage the viewer to perceive the steps being shown on screen as “real.”

Similar to Shawn’s radicalization scene, the film’s depiction of the Internet plays a key role here. While *Monkey Wrench* goes through various sabotage actions in a fair degree of detail, providing detailed lists of the supplies required to outfit a sabotage gang (Abbey 71) and step-by-step instructions for disabling a bulldozer (Abbey 86), what we see in *Pipeline* is essentially a bomb-making montage. We are shown some individual moments, like Theo pouring fertilizer into a blender, Alisha hammering some metal bits flat on the ground, and Shawn prying an airbag out of a wrecked car (0:09:23-52), but these simply appear one after the other, without specific instructions or dialogue that explains what the steps and ingredients are, or how they fit into the larger process. What we do see that adds more context are Michael’s handwritten notes, which show the name of one of the key ingredients (0:10:12-20, 12:44, 13:54), and Shawn reading a printout of an instructional video from a YouTube-like website (0:10:39). This allusion to the information that is available online,

which is reinforced by the way in which Xochitl finds and recruits Michael through the DIY bomb-making tutorials he posts (0:27:36-28:40), absolves the film from having to actually show every step on screen, because it has shown interested viewers where to find the rest.

The scene where the gang discusses their target is also worth mentioning in this context, as it also contributes to making this action seem “real,” and thus possible in reality. The cinematography of this scene features a rare break in the film’s otherwise visually consistent perspective. Xochitl, Shawn and Dwayne are in the kitchen of Dwayne’s trailer. The camera is positioned at an unusual angle: we see them from below, looking down at a point out of frame below the camera lens. Dwayne’s arm makes a pointing gesture, and the camera shifts to a close-up of reconnaissance photos that he (presumably) has taken of parts of the pipeline infrastructure in the surrounding desert. The point of his pencil taps one of the photos, and suddenly the film cuts to that image displayed full screen, documentary-style (in the Ken Burns sense), and then rapidly cycles through a sequence of other photographs as his voice narrates the plan of attack, including concrete actions to take, such as to “turn this wheel” as a photo of an industrial handwheel is shown (Goldhaber 0:39:55-40:01). An almost identical sequence occurs just seconds later to illustrate the first bombing target, a stretch of underground pipe (0:40:10-12). These rapid-fire montages of still photographs are visually unlike any other part of the film. I take them to be both an assertion of the “reality” of the sites they plan to sabotage, and a set of instructions for the viewer to what kinds of facilities to look out for, since this kind of information on promising bombing targets may be slightly harder to find through a casual Google search.

True to the spirit of “ideological” fiction and the tradition of persuasive film, these references to reality are not value-neutral. The physical sites of petro-capitalism, the chemical plants and pipeline controls, are not simply technical installations supporting an advanced and globally dispersed energy sector; they are the localized nodes through which “slow violence” is carried out against the victimized population. This association is reinforced by the protagonists’ physical reactions to their first encounters with these sites. When Xochitl and the gang arrive at the pipeline, someone exclaims, “That smell!”, to which Theo replies, “Just like home” (0:50:08-30), a callback to the toxic landscape of her “chemical childhood” (0:31:16). Immediately after, Rowan and Logan arrive at the pipeline control station, and are filled with awful dread, like they are faced with hell itself: “Oh fuck. There it is. Holy shit,” Logan says, followed by a long, awestruck pause. “Look at that fucking ugly thing,” he continues, and adds, as they get closer, “It smells like shit” (0:51:30-40). Occurring within little over a minute of each other, these scenes drive home the association of fossil fuels with

death. This will likely resonate with environmentalist viewers. As Adam Fleet notes, it is hard “to muster any sympathy whatsoever for the fossil fuel industry, which at this very moment is acting like a celluloid villain in real life.” The film helps render this villainy tangible, successfully mediating the “hyperobject” of global petro-capitalism (to use Timothy Morton’s term) to transform an otherwise impossibly large and dispersed system into something concrete (Haagensen) and thus a physical enemy that is susceptible to attack.

Acts and sites of environmentalist resistance, on the other hand, are positively coded. The protagonists’ interactions with each other are natural, even lighthearted. Shawn gets picked up by Xochitl in her unmarked gray van, lightly tossing his bags on top of a pile of ammonium nitrate sacks in the rear compartment, then climbs into the front seat and casually offers her “snacks” (0:03:44-8), as though they are a couple of college buddies heading out on a road trip, not conspirators with a cargo-load of Timothy McVeigh-style DIY bomb-making supplies. When Rowan and Logan get the summons from Xochitl, they share a passionate kiss in the front seat of their car, shriek in excitement, and pound the inside car ceiling before tearing off into the night to rendezvous with the gang (0:05:05-10). The whole bomb-making montage is characterized by lighthearted jokes and moments of intense focus blended together in equal measure (0:08:59-14:25, 0:20:06-20) making it an example of exactly the kind of “non-alienated work” that Jameson was talking about, and a textbook case of using montage “to construct an argument” (Soules 158). Even when the gang is arguing about whether or not to consider themselves terrorists, the vibe is more drunken late-night dorm room hangout than high conspiracy (0:31:42-33:07). The only one who does not immediately appear to share in this (relatively) positive mood is Michael (0:21:07-15), but even he eventually cracks a smile before the film is done, once their mission is complete.

This is a deliberate choice and, I argue, a didactic one. Barer explained that they wanted to “make this fun fantasy heist movie where we (leftists) pull it off in the end,” avoiding the “in-fighting” that frequently undermines leftist movements in films (Cardamenis 123). While the *Pipeline* gang’s targets and motivations are different, this sense of camaraderie—and even joy—in the environmental struggle is very much in keeping with the spirit of Abbey, who is quoted in the section of *Ecodefense* titled, “Monkeywrenching is fun,” as offering would-be ecoteurs a kind of gleeful benediction: “Enjoy, shipmates, enjoy” (Foreman 24). This is also embedded repeatedly as part of the didactic message of *Monkey Wrench*, such as when it dawns on Abbzug, as she reads reports of her and Dr. Sarvis’s sabotage exploits in papers, that she feels “delight” for the first time in years (45). The point of depicting this “gleeful destruction of private property” (Schlosser xvi) is to go beyond

making it seem simply achievable to making it seem fun. We can also see something like this radically joyful spirit in Robinson's work, in the underground dance party that closes *New York 2140* (610-12), which in turn calls to mind the quote commonly attributed to anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman: "A revolution without dancing is not a revolution worth having." These texts thus live up to Mike Gold's call for radical fiction that does not just convey an ideological message, but is full of "revolutionary élan" (Foley 95).

It is important to note that Abbey's emphasis on joy does not mean that he and the authors of *Ecodefense* were sure of victory. If anything, they were quite prepared for defeat. They write: "In these desperate times, it is difficult to be both close to Earth and optimistic about her future. The hope that remains is found in the minds of those who care, and the hearts of those few who dare to act" (31). Sabine Von Mering finds a similar spirit at work in *Pipeline*, as the film suggests that climate activists "are not primarily concerned with efficacy, because that would lead to constant frustration in light of the overwhelming threat of climate change." Instead, Goldhaber's film, "and the activists portrayed, model how we can support each other and accept to be 'in it for the long run,' no matter the outcome," fighting not for some abstract victory, but for each other (56). This is the spirit of non-alienated teamwork that animates Goldhaber's film, and is its most inviting and radical call to action against the atomization and alienation of postmodern capitalism and the ecological destruction it has wrought. The text invites us to abandon the quest for doctrinal perfection that so often leads to leftist inaction and fragmentation, to take collective action based on shared values and hope, and find joy in struggle together. Or, as Hayduke memorably put it, before the titular monkey wrench gang set out to commit their climactic sabotage action: "Are we through with this fucking philosophizing? ... Okay. Now let's get to work" (Abbey, *Monkey Wrench* 313).

Fictional capers, real-world radicals

In *Slow Violence*, Rob Nixon notes that one serious barrier to convincing politicians to take ecological action is the disjuncture between the slowness of climate change and the speed of the political cycle, which makes it politically expedient to acknowledge climate change as "critical, but not urgent," and defer environmental action in favor of short-term issues that will net them more support in the next election (8-9). In the face of this dilemma, he proposes that leaders can "be goaded to avert catastrophe" through the work of "environmental activists and storytellers" who "intervene representationally" by devising "iconic symbols" that embody the otherwise "formless" and "dispersed" threats posed by climate change and

other forms of environmental damage, “as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency” (9-10). Malm takes this logic one step further by proposing that it is not enough to use narrative to create a sense of urgency, that it has become increasingly clear that “the ruling classes really will not be talked into action,” but that “change will have to be forced upon them,” and that the climate change movement “must learn to *disrupt* business-as-usual” (20, original emphasis) through direct action. Goldhaber’s film enacts both Nixon and Malm’s ideas: it creates a compelling narrative around the “slow violence” of climate change and works “ideologically” to impel audiences to fight back.

Viewed at a high level, much of the “ideological” work of Goldhaber’s film is similar to Robinson’s in *New York 2140*. There are, however, several significant differences. One is the relation between the local and the global, and the correlated model of revolution each text posits. In Robinson’s novel, the group in New York essentially functions as a vanguard party, establishing the specific (non-violent) terms of the revolution and calling on others to join their movement, which ultimately channels protest pressure into mainstream political channels. *Pipeline*, in contrast, presents us with a radical movement that forms organically, inspired by broadly shared ideas, ideals, and tactics, but without a precisely defined political program or established leadership structure. This construction of a grassroots and decentralized radical movement that is heterogeneous, and that exists in a conflicted relation to the mainstream climate change movement within which it can be seen to represent a “radical flank,” better represents the “complex reality” of collective protest movements, in which violent and non-violent actions exist within a “continuum of dissent” (Martin et al 273-4), and in which leaders of mainstream groups cannot necessarily instruct the radical flank how to act, but must instead acknowledge its actions as expressions of the logical extremes of the movement in order to use them to its advantage.

Another difference is Goldhaber’s avoidance of closure. Instead of seeing a successful worldwide revolution, as in Robinson, all we are shown is one additional sabotage action, carried out by different people in a different state on the other side of the country, just before the screen cuts to black and the credits roll (Goldhaber 1:32:38-33:17). From this, the audience can infer that a collective force is rising to engage petro-capitalism in battle, as isolated cells coalesce into a mass movement, but it is clear that the war is yet to be won. The ultimate victory remains in our imagination. And given the film’s contemporary setting, in contrast to Robinson’s near-future one, the film implies that this victory remains in the viewer’s hands. They are encouraged to “act out” in the extension of the battle constructed in the film that they can directly map onto the real world (Suleiman 146). *Pipeline* thus

functions as the kind of “future history” that Robsinon describes, but a much more immediate one. In this, it again follows the example of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, in which the author’s note on the title page suggests this was exactly how Abbey wanted his novel to be read: “*This book, though fictional in form, is based strictly on historical fact. Everything in it is real or actually happened. And it all began just one year from today*” (original emphasis).

One final difference from *New York 2140*, which may be the most significant in regards to the potential of Goldhaber’s film to have a demonstrable impact in the real world, is the simplicity and immediacy of the real-world resistance actions that *Pipeline* dramatizes. Like Abbey’s novel before it, these actions are concrete, local, and direct. As such, in addition to the more general motivational effects these “ecological capers” may have on the environmental activist “choir” at large, or their influence on shifting environmental/climate imaginaries in the aggregate, they offer unique opportunities to isolate and examine at least one element of their didactic and hortatory effectiveness in a very literal way: If you write a compelling novel that tells the reader how to disable a bulldozer, or make a film that shows the viewer how to blow up a pipeline, will they actually go out and do it?

Looking at how *Monkey Wrench* helped inspire tens of thousands of ecotage actions (Malm 154-5), this seems like a very realistic outcome indeed. And while there have been no environmentally motivated attacks on pipelines following the release of Malm’s book or Goldhaber’s film (Winter), these texts do appear to have inspired some less spectacular copycat actions. In 2021, just months after the publication of Malm’s book, a channel was created on Telegram, an encrypted messaging service, with the name “The Tyre Extinguishers” and a logo that shows an SUV in a red circle and slash. The first post in the channel, from 8 March 2022, announced: “TYRES DEFLATED ON HUNDREDS OF SUVs OVERNIGHT IN 13+ UK LOCATIONS AS DEMANDS FOR CLIMATE ACTION GROW” (*Tyre Extinguishers*, Telegram). The post links to the group’s website, which, while it does not mention him by name, deploys Malm’s ideas almost word for word, calling SUVs “unnecessary ‘luxury emissions’” and restating his fundamental argument: “Politely asking for climate action, clean air and safer streets has failed. It’s time for action” (*Tyre Extinguishers*, “Press Release”). Two of the last posts in the “News” section of the website, from early 2024, include an announcement that Goldhaber’s film is available on Netflix, and a note that the movement has spread to 20 countries. Meanwhile, on Telegram, the channel’s creators marked the group’s three-year anniversary on 14 March 2025 with a post announcing their intent to publish “*The Tyre Extinguishers Handbook*” to “show others how to set up

similar direct action movements” (*Tyre Extinguishers*, Telegram). Just like with *Monkey Wrench* and *Ecodefense* decades earlier, text has become reality.

This chain of events raises some pressing political and aesthetic questions. First, what makes ecotage actions politically effective? Malm and others have argued that in order for isolated acts of ecotage to register as coherent forms of resistance instead of “meaningless” anarchy, they need to be perceived as a “radical flank” of a larger activist movement. In Malm’s view, this was not the case for the ecotage campaigns of EF! and ELF, which were carried out “largely in a void” (155) instead of being articulated within “a wider anti-capitalist groundswell” (157). However, the *Tyre Extinguishers* example points to what may be a critical blind spot in Malm’s work, which is the distinction between the specific kinds of violent direct action that are more likely to be perceived as contributing to a movement like this, and those that are more likely to hinder it. Notably, both political science scholars and ecocritics like Buell have been skeptical of the particular kind of destruction of personal property (disabling SUVs) depicted in Malm’s book and Goldhaber’s film (Martin et al 260, Armstrong 353) which seems likely to generate an “incredibly hostile” response (Martin et al 265) that can pose a significant risk to the mainstream perception of environmental movements in the U.S. context (Buell, “Ecoterrorism” 160).

With this political issue in mind, we can move to the aesthetic question: Does the hortatory and didactic function of an “ecological caper” operate broadly on a radical audience, encouraging them to take in the general message of the work and map it onto politically relevant actions in their own context, or does it tend to operate more narrowly based on the text’s specific content? Recent research on television from the field of environmental communication suggests that cli-fi texts can directly influence audience behavior, but that this impact is more literal than cognitivist theories of literature suggest. In their article “Climate Fiction, Real Impact,” Anirudh Tiwathia et al found evidence of persistent increased support among the test audience for certain kinds of environmental action. However, this support was specifically for the kind of action that had been portrayed on screen, and did not necessarily correlate to significant changes in support for other climate action measures (12-13). More research is required to test this claim in regards to radical texts and audiences, but the anecdotal evidence I have presented earlier in this section about the real-world “monkeywrenching” that followed in the wake of Abbey’s novel and the sudden wave of tire deflations that has sprung up after the release of Malm’s book and Goldhaber’s film suggest that a similar literalness of audience response is at work here.

Tiwathia et al conclude their paper by observing that their results “show the *general* capability of narrative climate fiction to shift climate beliefs and attitudes, while also showcasing how a given piece is unlikely to shift *all* key climate beliefs and attitudes, pointing to the need to precisely tailor content to the target states and audiences” (16, original emphasis). For authors of “ecological capers” and other forms of “ideological” cli-fi, as well as the ecocritics who analyze them from an “instrumentalist” perspective, this point is worth taking seriously. The Tyre Extinguishers Telegram channel now contains a running list of hundreds and hundreds of actions. It does not appear to contain examples of concrete political results. The implicit evidence it does present, however, is of the impact of radical texts to help incite real-world climate action, of the truth of Chenoweth and Stephan’s observation that “[c]ourage breeds courage,” leading people to be more likely to carry out resistance actions when there are examples by others like them to follow (36).

In his interview with *The Brooklyn Rail*, Goldhaber stated that *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* poses the question of “what tactics are necessary and defensible to prevent the end of life on earth as we know it?” rather than provide an answer (Cardamenis 123). My analysis suggests, however, that his film does present an implicit argument that violent actions are required, and that environmentalist movements should use them as leverage, instead of dismissing them as “ecoterrorism” and ostracizing those responsible (Støyva). While it is not clear what kinds of ecological sabotage could be effective, if any (Martin et al 270), it is reasonable to expect that as climate change becomes more urgent, support for violent resistance will increase (Arridge 2, Von Mering 53, Malm 118). As I have attempted to show, cli-fi texts have potential to contribute to both shaping the discourse that could contribute to a reassessment among mainstream environmentalists of the value of these actions, and to constructing a menu of tactics that radicals may embrace, which could ultimately help to bring about the kind of effective “radical flank” that Malm calls for. In the United States, works of fiction are uniquely suited to play this role, not only for their efficacy, but for their legal defensibility: The First Amendment protects even the most inflammatory literature as free expression, as long as the work has a “lawful purpose” like “informing or entertaining the public” (Nguyen). It is worth noting that even *Ecodefense*, the infamous instruction manual for ecotage, was officially presented by its publisher as “meant only to entertain” (16). The “ecological capers” of Abbey and Goldhaber thus help us see a potentially significant opportunity in the climate change struggle: the blind spot of bourgeois realism, as effectively codified in American jurisprudence—that art is not instrumentalist, but simply the free play of imagination—could actually be capitalist realism’s Achilles heel.

Conclusion: “Ideological” cli-fi for a world on fire

In 2022, following the publication of his cli-fi novel *The Ministry for the Future*, Kim Stanley Robinson was interviewed in the American leftist magazine *Jacobin* to talk about his work and ideas on climate change, capitalism, and how to get to a better world. After discussing Robinson’s mixed opinions on Malm’s insistence on violent direct action and the need for a radical flank in the ecological struggle, and Robinson’s conviction about the necessity to reform or (ideally) replace the “massive failure” of neoliberal capitalism in order to achieve a more just and sustainable world, the interviewer, Philippe Vion-Dury, asks him a leading question. While the kind of utopian fiction that Robinson has championed, in which there are “stories with more carrier bags and less spears” (referencing a famous text by Ursula K. LeGuin that opposes traditionally “heroic” narratives of confrontation) may be one way to overcome the sense that “there is no alternative” to capitalism, given the challenges we face, “don’t we also,” he wonders, “above all, need ‘combat literature’?”

With this term, Vion-Dury refers to Frantz Fanon’s classic anti-colonial work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), in which Fanon describes a “fighting phase” in resistance movements when the oppressed writer begins to produce “revolutionary literature” that attempts to awaken the people to fight against the forces of oppression (179), which for Fanon necessarily involves the use of violence (30). Robinson begins his answer by reflecting on his new novel, which covers a period of near-future history referred to as “The War for the Earth,” and includes “a lot of fighting,” and which “does suggest combat literature” to him (Robinson, “Socialism”). Going on, he looks at the bigger picture:

The coming decades are going to include a lot of violence, both slow violence (a good term from Rob Nixon) and fast violence... Now the fight is on... to create justice among humans at last, to save the biosphere from a mass extinction event. It’s going to be chaotic and confusing, and it’s going to last for as long as anyone alive is still alive. We have to get used to it, and fight effectively. Combat literature might help give us ideas or warn us of ramifications, but it’s the actions in the world that will matter—laws, norms, behaviors. (Robinson, “Socialism”)

In Robinson’s turn from the essentially nonviolent utopian revolution against capitalism in *New York 2140* to the inescapably violent battle to save the Earth in *The Ministry for the Future*, we can see a return to the key insight on revolution from his earlier works: The powers that be have “guns under the table” (Robinson, “Utopia” 3-4), and the rentier class that benefits most from the capitalist system (Huber 25) will not go down without a fight. The

prominence of militant action in his recent climate fiction reflects this conviction that it will also play a role in the real-world climate change battles yet to come.

In this, Robinson appears to be part of a growing trend. In addition to his work, several other cli-fi novels published in the past five years have included environmentalist, anticapitalist violence as a narrative element and, I argue, as a central aspect of their ideological message. Novels like Stephen Markley's *The Deluge* and Nick Fuller Googins's *The Great Transition* both construct near-future scenarios in which radical environmentalist groups in the United States (and beyond) that deploy violent tactics play a key role in the movement toward climate utopias. Meanwhile, in addition to the film adaptation of *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, there may be signs of a revival of the "ecological caper" for the age of climate change, with Malte Tellerup's 2023 novella, *Spræng fabrikken (Blow Up the Factory)* also offering the signature combination of agitprop narrative and sabotage "how to" manual for aspiring ecoteurs that characterizes this radical genre.

Having observed that "ideological" novels appear with greater or lesser frequency in different places and periods, Susan Suleiman hypothesized that "the *roman à thèse* flourishes in national contexts, and at historical moments, that produce sharp social and ideological conflicts—in other words, in a climate of crisis" (16). Given the widespread impression in the western world that "business as usual" activism and science have failed to stop climate change (Klein 124, 152; Malm 5-8), and the increasingly strong feelings of outrage and the embrace of extremist viewpoints that characterize our hyperpolitical media environment, especially in the United States (Jäger 13, Klein 321), I believe that today, in the United States and elsewhere, we are witness to just such a moment. So, to rephrase Vion-Dury's question in Suleiman's terms: does our current moment call for radical "ideological" climate fiction? Based on the increasing output of novels, films, and other fictional texts like the ones I've discussed in this thesis, I think the answer is already clear. Just like in earlier moments of intense social and political division, writers have once again answered the call to engage in the ideological struggle over our shared future using the "weapons" they have at their disposal. In aiming to create *littérature engagée*, some of them have produced works that can be read as "ideological" fictions, a phenomenon that occurs "naturally in all radical movements" (Wald 148).

Neither the climate crisis nor the era of hyperpolitics show any sign of abating. If Suleiman is correct, we can expect to see even more of these "didactic" and "propagandistic" cli-fi texts in the years to come. My central argument for ecocritics, at least for those who embrace the "instrumentalist" approach and activist nature often ascribed to the discipline, is

that we should study these works deliberately, using an approach that takes their intentionally instrumentalist writing style seriously; in essence, taking these texts and their authors “at their word” (Foley 319). Doing so will help us connect their structural and narrative elements to ideological commitments and engagement in a war of ideas, and allow us to more effectively analyze their potential not just to inform, and not necessarily to persuade, but to inspire and mobilize, particularly for the people most likely to act on the lessons and rules of action these texts offer: the environmentalist “choir.” This is not meant to suggest that this kind of explicitly instrumentalist fiction should replace more traditional modes, but rather that it can be a valuable—perhaps essential—complement. With my analysis of *New York 2140* and *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, I have explored the potential benefits these novels offer, and proposed an approach to reading texts of this kind that can both lead to further insights and offer inspiration to radical writers on how to create stories that prepare their readers to fight.

As the genre of “ideological” fiction is new territory for ecocriticism, there are numerous potential areas for further research. Close readings that compare texts that are more or less “à thèse” could provide useful insights into their respective abilities to compellingly represent climate change and/or construct certain forms of agency, including texts that focus less explicitly on capitalist structures than the two I have selected here, or that construct the specific kind of organized-labor-based climate change resistance movement that Matthew Huber calls for. This work could help refine Suleiman’s model specifically for a cli-fi context, as could additional studies that apply it to other popular narrative media such as graphic novels, television, and video games. While this thesis has focused on leftist/environmentalist cli-fi, it would also be useful to apply the “ideological” fiction framework to texts that propound a right-wing, pro-capitalist, or anti-environmentalist worldview, with Michael Crichton’s novel *State of Fear* (2004) being an obvious place to start, as this has already been referenced in various ecocritical studies as an example of conservative cli-fi (Trexler, *Anthropocene* 132, Buell, “Ecoterrorism” 153).

Empirical ecocriticism, with its emphasis on reader response, would also seem like a natural fit for a genre like “ideological” fiction that is defined in part by the presumed relationship it establishes with its audience. Researchers working in this field have already noted that narratology may be useful in providing testable claims about the effects that specific modes of narration have on readers (Schneider-Mayerson et al 16), and while some limited analysis has been carried out on the effects of “radical” texts on mainstream audiences (Weik Von Mossner et al 199) the question of their effect on radical audiences is still open (Bilandzic 353). Research in these areas could be carried out with more rigor and

precision by building on the theoretical frameworks of Suleiman and Foley. Among other things, such a study could test, and potentially challenge, the assertion made by some empirical ecocritics that narratives are more “persuasive” when they disguise their persuasive intent (Hanauer 334), particularly given the distinction in the meaning of “persuade” invited by the “ideological” form: inspiring to act on existing convictions vs. changing minds. Finally, with the aid of modern computational methods, empirical ecocritical approaches could help to achieve a vision originally proposed by Suleiman, to assign “weights” to different types of redundancy with a text (178) and to gain a more precise notion of the “degree of redundancy” between different texts (172), which could allow for the creation of quantitative scales through which texts could be ranked according to their comparative didacticism. In addition to serving as a tool for future research, this could also aid the operationalization of activist approaches that leverage this kind of data, such as targeted social media marketing campaigns based on reading history of highly “ideological” works.

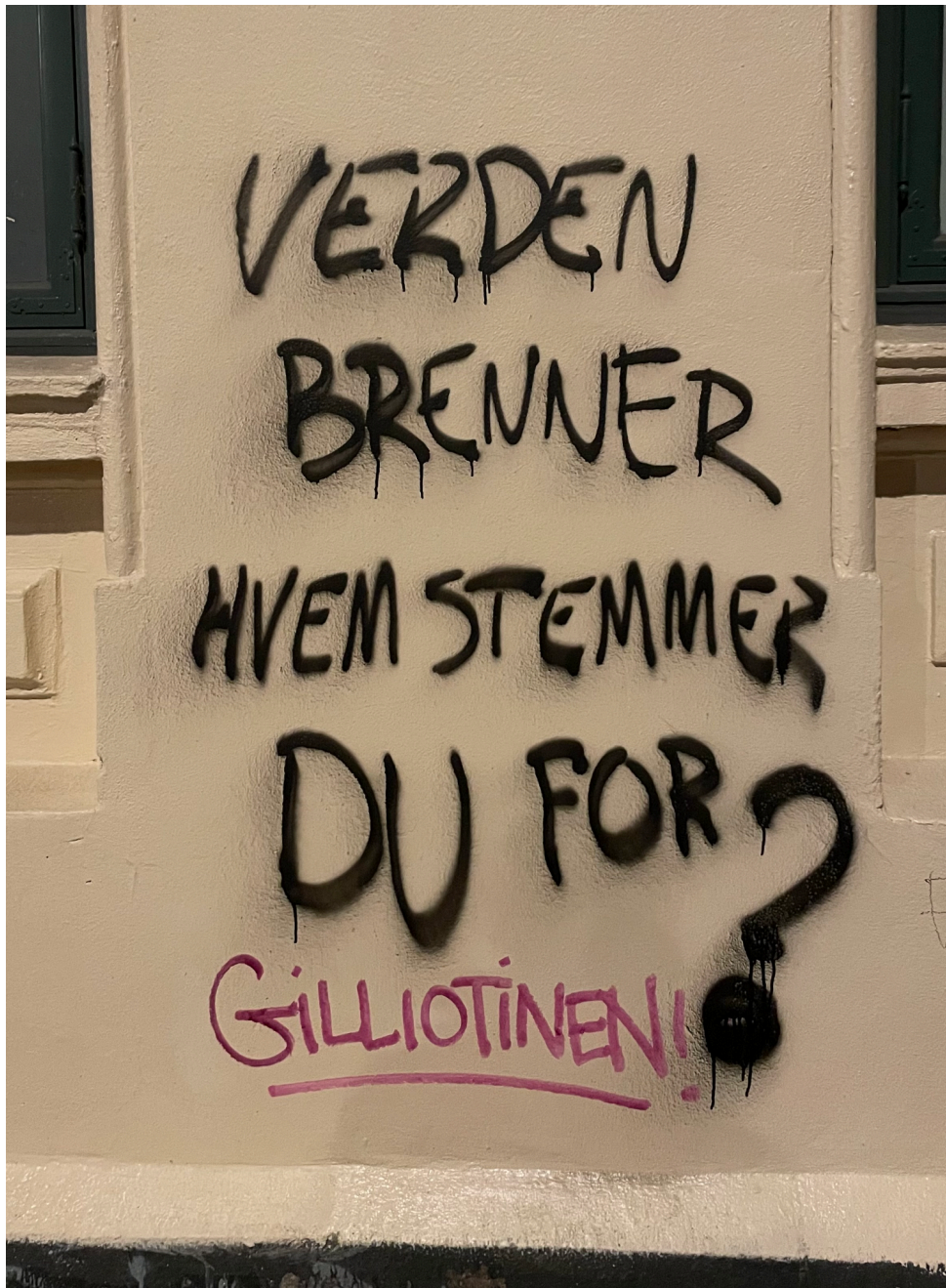
Greater research into, and respect for, “ideological” cli-fi could also have a positive effect on the production of these texts, increasing not only their visibility, but potentially their effectiveness. Given the extremely negative reputation of the genre within ecocriticism and mainstream literary criticism at large, it is unlikely that either Robinson or Goldhaber deliberately set out to create “ideological” fiction per se. As Suleiman observed, “no self-respecting writer” would ever call their own work a *roman à thèse* (3). My intent in this thesis is not to malign their texts by insisting that they “belong” to this genre, but rather to use it in its “interpretive and evaluative” sense (Suleiman 4), as an analytical lens to help explain how these texts can function for specific audiences. However, in reopening the long-dormant debate between “cognitive” and “agitational” aesthetic modes, and showing the potential of the latter to contribute to the fight against climate change and other leftist struggles, I hope that this thesis can contribute to a long-overdue reevaluation of the “teaching” function of literature that Jameson and other theorists have called for; a “didactic” tendency that is part of the origin of the form of the realist novel, but that “theorists and practitioners of the modern ‘text’ have sought to suppress” (Suleiman 19). There have been radical authors in the past who have embraced this openly didactic and hortatory form, such as the Marxist writers of proletarian fiction who intended their work to be a “weapon” against capitalism (Foley 159), or socialist authors like Sinclair who embraced the description of their own art as deliberate “propaganda.” It is my hope that by connecting cli-fi to this radical novel tradition, and by convincing ecocritics to embrace texts of this kind rather than continuing to perpetuate the “bourgeois realist” status quo, we can offer inspiration to cli-fi

authors of today to wear the label of “ideological” fiction not as a mark of shame, but as a badge of courage.

Particularly now, this could be critically important. While hyperpolitics has affected both sides of the political spectrum in the United States, the right has been much more effective at transforming populist anger into political results (Jäger, *Hyperpolitik* 108-12). In addition to the concrete differences between left- and right-wing constituencies and mobilization strategies that Jäger describes, I would suggest that this is also thanks to conservatives’ willingness to embrace (and exploit) monological narratives and Manichean confrontations, while the left appears to still be heavily influenced by postmodernist thinking, in which collective identities, alternatives to capitalism, and even the idea of ideology itself have tended to be met with skepticism (Fisher 2, Jameson, *Postmodernism* 397-8). At the same time that ecocritics have been dismissing “didactic” cli-fi, the U.S. military has been deliberately experimenting with the use of fiction to convey ideas and influence decision makers (McCann). This suggests an asymmetrical embrace of the didactic and hortatory power of narrative across the political spectrum. If, as Jäger, Klein, and many others have claimed, our historical moment is indeed characterized by increasing polarization, this offers an opportunity for environmentalists (and others on the left) to embrace the logic of conflict, establish a new collective “us,” create a clear narrative about the future we are fighting for, and “prepare them to fight” (Schultz, “Grønne partier”, my translation). As I have shown in this thesis, “ideological” fiction is perfectly suited to help with this task.

On the other hand, a progressive refusal to provide monological narratives of its own is not a form of de-escalation, but of abdication. It allows the spontaneous sparks of environmental and economic protest to continue flaring up and fizzling out without building into any larger narrative or achieving lasting political consequences, and leaves a vacuum for more radical ideologies to arise and fill the void. The resulting outcomes can be much more destructive than the revolutionary actions proposed by either *New York 2140* or *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*—and there are signs that this is already happening. In fiction, we are starting to see novels like *The Deluge* in which one of the environmentalist characters proposes assassination as the only tactic that “demonstrates what’s actually at stake,” that “[t]his is life and death for all of us, and it’s time to choose sides” (Markley 315). In real life, one need look no further than the wave of populist glee that spread across the Internet in the wake of the assassination of United Healthcare CEO in December 2024 to see how the persistent sense of victimization and lack of political recourse can play out. The frustration that Malm and others feel about climate inaction will not go away if their current tactics prove

ineffective because the political channels they attempt to influence prove stubbornly aligned with the status quo. This frustration could, however, find more violent outlets. Indeed, the writing may already be on the wall. A patch of graffiti spotted in downtown Oslo in March 2025 captures the spirit of the times. “The world is burning. Who are you voting for?” one tagger has asked, to which another has replied: “The guillotine!”



“The world is burning. Who are you voting for? The guillotine!”

Grünerløkka, Oslo, Norway. 21 March 2025. Photo and translation by the author.

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