



## Encountering Bakhtin's Dialogism and Polyphony in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

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### Abstract

This article examines Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* through the framework of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, emphasizing the novel's polyphonic narrative and its significance in contemporary discourse on climate change. By investigating the multiplicity of voices and perspectives within the text, this article demonstrates how Robinson utilizes heteroglossia to construct a complex dialogue that mirrors the intricacies of global environmental challenges. A close textual analysis of its 106 chapters reveals how characters represent divergent ideologies and experiences, facilitating dialogic interactions that encourage readers to confront dynamic approaches to climate issues. Additionally, this research situates Robinson's narrative strategies within broader interdisciplinary contexts, including eco-criticism and political theory, thereby enhancing the understanding of climate fiction as a vehicle for social critique. This examination illustrates how *The Ministry for the Future* functions not only as a cautionary narrative but also as an urgent appeal for collective action, highlighting the essential role of diverse voices in imagining sustainable futures.



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### 1. Introduction

Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, published in 2020, is contextualized in the immediate future of 2025, exploring sprawling issues that humankind could realistically encounter if conscious mitigation efforts are not effectively advanced by stakeholders concerning the environmental crisis. Jeremy Williams (2022), in his *Earthbound Report* review of *The Ministry for the Future*, states that Robinson's creation seems to be a fitting reply to Amitav Ghosh's comments in his 2016 book *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh shared his concern regarding the lukewarm representation of the actual climate crisis in contemporary literary settings. The major issue that Ghosh identified in climate fiction works across the globe is their unconvincing portrayal of a monotonous individual heroic struggle to battle climate challenges. As Ghosh (2016) argues:

*At exactly the time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics and literature alike.*

(p. 80)

Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* stands as a befitting reply to Ghosh's remarks on literary contributions to the climate crisis, as his work represents real challenges relatable to the current scenario. The novel champions a

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collective effort from political, social, and personal spheres to validate the construction of a sustainable environment. Notably, the narrative style, mirroring the content with its multiple voices, appropriately and credibly underscores the importance of diversity in the novel's plot construction.

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian linguist and literary critic, first proposed the idea of polyphony. Polyphony literally translates to “many voices,” referring to a literary work’s narrative framework that features a variety of concurrent viewpoints and voices. Bakhtin’s primary example of this concept is found in the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 1984), whose novels feature independent and unmerged voices that contribute to a complex dialogue, allowing each character to express their own consciousness and perspective. This multi-voiced reality, as Bakhtin articulated, reflects a genuine polyphony of valid voices, emphasizing the importance of dialogism in literature. In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), Bakhtin expanded on this notion of polyphony, or “dialogics,” proposing the exploration of language and literature as inherently dialogic, emphasizing the coexistence of multiple voices and perspectives within a text. Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* stands as a substantial text to analyze the polyphony illustrated by Bakhtin, as it effectively utilizes a multiple narrative style to emphasize the collective endeavor to fight climate change caused by anthropogenic activities within the plot.

## 2. An Overview of the Ministry for the Future

In Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future*, the narrative begins with a catastrophic heat wave in a small Indian town in 2025, resulting in the deaths of nearly all its inhabitants within a week due to extreme “wet-bulb” temperatures. In response, the Indian government deploys planes to release sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere, replicating the cooling effects of volcanic eruptions—a move that sparks mixed reactions globally. The story introduces an international organization, referred to as “The Ministry for the Future,” tasked with advocating for future generations and all living beings unable to voice their concerns. Led by Mary Murphy, a former Irish foreign minister, this body navigates complex challenges, including confrontations with a radical eco-terrorist group known as the “Children of Kali,” which employs violent tactics against ongoing carbon emissions. As Mary reflects:

*Obviously we have to do better,” she said. “The Paris Agreement was created to avoid tragedies like this one. We are all in a single global village now. We share the same air and water, and so this disaster has happened to all of us. Since we can’t undo it, we have to turn it to the good somehow, or two things will happen; the crimes in it will go unatoned, and more such disasters will happen. So we have to act. At long last, we have to take the climate situation seriously, as the reality that overrides everything else. We have to act on what we know.*

(Robinson, 2020, p. 24)

Simultaneously, scientists are engaged in efforts at the polar ice caps to prevent catastrophic sea-level rise. Robinson incorporates extensive scientific research and speculative military strategies into the narrative, illustrating how interconnected modern civilization is in addressing climate change. The novel balances serious themes with a sense of optimism through its latter chapters, suggesting that despite dire circumstances, collaborative efforts and innovative solutions can pave the way for a sustainable future (Poole, 2020). As Robinson (2020) succinctly puts it:

*To be clear, concluding in brief: there is enough for all. So there should be no more people living in poverty. And there should be no more billionaires. Enough should be a human right, a floor below which no one can fall; also a ceiling above which no one can rise. Enough is as good as a feast—or better.*

(p. 297)

It is significant to note that the novel pervasively condemns capitalism for exploiting the environment and creating a polarity that is difficult to break, advocating instead for the equal distribution of resources. It largely promotes self-reliance and a minimalist approach to living. This suggestive awareness, coupled with plausible scientific research propositions to mend what has been lost in the name of civilization, ensures a sustainable future in the novel. Robinson’s work emphasizes that literature can effectively engage with climate issues by presenting conceivable scenarios grounded in scientific reality, ultimately inspiring readers to consider proactive measures against impending environmental crises. The diverse voices within the narration play a crucial role in shaping the novel, as they capture the emotions of individuals from various social strata and illustrate the dynamic impacts of climate change on their lives. This approach offers a detailed understanding of the characters’ emotional

experiences, enabling readers to cultivate both sympathy and empathy, which in turn allows for a more effective analysis of potential consequences and the exploration of possible mitigation avenues.

### 3. Significance of Polyphony and Dialogic Interactions

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) asserts that traditional stylistics, by confining stylistic phenomena to a "monologic context," limits their potential for meaningful interaction:

*Stylistics locks every stylistic phenomenon into the monologic context of a given self-sufficient and hermetic utterance, imprisoning it, as it were, in the dangers of a single context, it is not able to exchange messages with other utterances, it is not able to realize its own stylistic implications in a relationship with them. It is obliged to exhaust itself in its own single hermetic context.* (p. 224)

In this excerpt from "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin criticizes traditional stylistics for limiting the possibility of meaningful interaction between utterances by enclosing stylistic phenomena within a monologic framework. According to him, stylistics views every utterance as an independent, self-contained entity that is incapable of interacting with or relating to other voices. This confinement essentially imprisons the statement within its own unique environment, leading to an inability to perceive the broader social and contextual consequences of language. Bakhtin, on the other hand, promotes an interpretation of language and literature that recognizes the diversity of voices and viewpoints, enabling a more sophisticated investigation of meaning that captures the intricacies of social life and cultural debate. As Bakhtin (1981) further states, "The Dialogic Orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of any discourse. It is the natural orientation of any living discourse" (p. 279).

In *The Ministry for the Future*, Robinson employs multiple narrators, each offering unique viewpoints and experiences. This approach creates a tapestry of perspectives that allows readers to engage with the dynamic nature of climate crises. The novel shifts narrators almost through every chapter, some repetitively, which can be disorienting but ultimately serves to present a broader understanding of global challenges (Honeywell, 2021). The use of various voices underscores the idea that climate change affects individuals differently based on their backgrounds and circumstances. Robinson often develops characters that embody diverse ideologies and approaches to solving environmental issues. This character-driven narrative style allows for an exploration of contrasting viewpoints on capitalism, scientific responsibility, and ethical considerations. Indeed, as Robinson himself states, he prefers narrators that differ from his own voice, thereby allowing for a richer storytelling experience that captures diverse human experiences (Paulson, 2019). The polyphonic nature of Robinson's narratives also reflects the interplay between personal stories and larger political frameworks. By weaving individual experiences into broader socio-political contexts, Robinson highlights how personal agency interacts with systemic forces. This duality encourages readers to consider how individual actions contribute to collective outcomes in addressing climate change (Plotz, 2021).

Robinson's use of polyphony aligns with the concept of cognitive estrangement, where readers are presented with scenarios that initially seem foreign but ultimately resonate with their realities. This technique prompts readers to reflect on their own lives and societal structures while engaging with speculative futures (Plotz, 2021). The varied voices in his works serve as lenses through which readers can examine their own beliefs and assumptions about environmental issues. The multitude of voices in Robinson's narratives emphasizes the necessity for collaboration across disciplines and communities in addressing climate change. By showcasing diverse perspectives, he advocates for a collective approach to problem-solving that incorporates scientific, economic, and social dimensions (Harpignies, 2023).

The concept of polyphony in modern novels, particularly as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin in his work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), is sensed through the multiple narrators employed in Robinson's novels. It posits that the modern novel is fundamentally an assemblage of diverse voices and perspectives, which can be harmonious or contradictory. These voices are interwoven into a textual matrix that reflects linguistic and social dynamics, as well as ecological considerations, since the existence of the novel itself relies on natural resources. As Bakhtin (1981) further explains:

*Language—like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary. It is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is a characteristic of all living language. Actual social life and historical becoming*

*create within an abstractly unitary national language, a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems, within these various systems (identical in the abstract) are elements of language filled with various semantic and axiological content and each with its own different sound.* (p. 288)

Bakhtin articulates a fundamental aspect of his linguistic theory, emphasizing that language, much like the dynamic environment in which it exists, is inherently non-unitary. He asserts that while language can be viewed as a cohesive grammatical system comprised of normative forms, this perspective fails to account for the continuous historical evolution that characterizes all living languages. He argues that actual social life and the process of historical development generate a rich diversity within what may appear to be a singular national language. This results in the emergence of multiple concrete worlds, each representing distinct verbal-ideological and social belief systems. Although these systems may share an abstract identity as part of the same language, they are imbued with varying semantic and axiological content, each possessing its own unique phonetic qualities. This notion highlights the complexity of language as a social phenomenon. Rather than being a static entity, language is shaped by the interactions and experiences of its speakers, leading to a multiplicity of voices and meanings that reflect the diverse realities of human existence.

#### 4. Heteroglossia in Robinson's *the Ministry for the Future*

Pierre-Louis Patoine's (2022) research, titled "The Realism of Speculative Fiction: Planetary Polyphony and Scale in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*," provides a comprehensive analysis of the diverse voices present in the novel. Patoine (2022) observes that "*The Ministry for the Future* is thus presented as a patchwork of voices and points of view, weaving together political and techno-scientific actors, identified protagonists and anonymous characters, individual and collective voices, human, animal and geophysical actants." This meticulous categorization by Patoine, based on chapter distribution, identifies three primary narrative groups within the novel's 106 chapters: Omniscient Narrator Chapters, Chapters Featuring Anonymous Voices, and Chapters Featuring Non-Human/Abstract Voices. The Omniscient Narrator Chapters primarily follow central characters, such as Frank, a humanitarian doctor profoundly traumatized by a catastrophic heat wave in India at the novel's onset (Chapter 1), and Mary, the director of the Ministry for the Future. These chapters, constituting nearly one-third of the book, maintain a recognizable linear progression, reflecting Robinson's deliberate effort to articulate the plotline with appropriate coherence without creating narrative cacophony. Conversely, Chapters Featuring Anonymous Voices present the perspectives of various anonymous individuals emblematic of specific groups. This includes, for instance, scientists in Antarctica (Chapter 44), refugees in Switzerland (Chapter 48), or communities speaking collectively, such as eco-terrorists (Chapter 35) or citizens affected by climate disasters (Chapter 41). Lastly, Chapters Featuring Non-Human/Abstract Voices give narrative voice to non-human entities like CO2 (Chapter 66) or geophysical forces (Chapter 53). These sections also explore theories from humanities and social sciences pertinent to climate issues. This narrative structure allows Robinson to effectively convey a complex story that reflects the nature of contemporary ecological challenges (Patoine, 2022). Beyond these three primary divisions, several chapters function as scientific reports, providing factual and theoretical context. These include an elaboration on Article 14 of the Paris Agreement (Chapter 3), a report on the effects of human carbon emissions (Chapter 8), a report on extinction particularly highlighting the ocean acidification-deoxygenation phenomenon (Chapter 12), an economic report focusing on the Gini coefficient (Chapter 20), a report on Arctic ice melt (Chapter 36), and a report on bird plight and extinction rates (Chapter 97). Additionally, "Notes for Badim" (Chapters 15, 34, 71), scribbled by an unnamed assistant, hold considerable significance within the novel. These minutes detail discussions and decisions regarding various measures aimed at combating climate change, such as carbon currency, quantitative easing, and a new user-owned social network. The inclusion of these chapters in the narrative allocates significant space to showcase the plot's progression. Given this detailed framework of narrative divisions, a further exploration into the specific nature of each chapter type is essential to fully illustrate the characteristics of heteroglossia as highlighted by Bakhtin.

##### 4.1. Omniscient Narrator Chapters

Approximately Robinson's strategic deployment of a third-person omniscient narrator across approximately 48 chapters fundamentally underpins *The Ministry for the Future*'s elaborate narrative architecture. This substantial portion of the novel is not merely descriptive; rather, it actively drives the overarching plot, demonstrating Robinson's meticulous commitment to maintaining narrative linearity. This deliberate choice avoids the potential

cacophony often associated with polyphonic structures, ensuring the reader can consistently trace the progression of events and thematic arguments. Consequently, these chapters serve as foundational elements, explicitly illustrating the pervasive omniscience crucial to the narrative's comprehensive scope.

For instance, the omniscient perspective immediately immerses the reader in the dire consequences of climate change, as Chapter 1 vividly depicts a catastrophic "wet-bulb" heat wave in India in 2025, resulting in millions of fatalities. This immediate and visceral portrayal establishes the novel's central crisis. The narrative then broadens its scope, with Chapter 4 introducing the international bodies in Geneva deliberating climate change mitigation and highlighting India's proactive determination to secure a sustainable future. This global perspective is further expanded in Chapter 6, which illustrates India's remarkable transformation into a self-reliant and supremely sustainable nation through profound amendments in resource management. The imperative for accountability is underscored in Chapter 9, which discusses the critical need for "The Rule of Law" to address resource exploitation and carbon emissions. Environmentally, Chapter 22 details the perilous state of the Antarctic region and the ongoing scientific endeavours to decelerate its melting process, while Chapter 23 explores the psychological toll of climate change, revealing Frank's struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and his vengeful pursuit of those exacerbating the crisis.

Subsequently, numerous chapters within this omniscient framework meticulously track the intertwined efforts of Mary and Frank to mitigate climate change. These sections introduce pivotal concepts and developments: carbon coins (Chapter 42) emerge as a novel currency rewarding carbon-mindful individuals, while the increasing reliance on AI's intervention in climate action is explored (Chapter 54). The narrative does not shy away from depicting the human impact of global climate catastrophe, detailing occasional disasters, ongoing wars, and the pervasive emotional responses such as grief, sorrow, anger, panic, shame, guilt, dissociation, and depression (Chapters 60 & 61). Furthermore, the omniscient perspective facilitates the exploration of complex socio-economic themes, including discussions of taxes (Chapter 67), resource limitations in the Middle East (Chapter 69), critical COP meetings (Chapter 70), and various economic strategies like Modern Monetary Theory and Federal Banks. The stark plight of animals and birds on the brink of climate-induced havoc (Chapter 87) is also prominently featured, grounding the abstract threat in tangible biological loss. Beyond plot progression, these omniscient chapters skilfully integrate abstract ideas such as ideology (Chapter 11) and perspectives (Chapter 24), thereby enriching the narrative's broader philosophical and conceptual outlook on the climate crisis.

#### 4.2. Chapters Featuring Identifiable Voices

Beyond the omniscient perspective, Chapters Featuring Identifiable Voices are crucial for grounding *The Ministry for the Future's* expansive narrative in tangible human experience. These segments present the perspectives of specific characters who, while not always individually prominent throughout the entire novel, collectively enrich the narrative through their distinct actions and emotional responses to pivotal events. This deliberate choice by Robinson ensures that the reader develops a detailed understanding of the personal stakes within the global climate crisis.

For example, Frank May, an American aid worker, becomes central to the reflections on the traumatic heat-wave scene in India, as vividly captured in Chapter 5. His harrowing experience is conveyed through his own words and recollections, illustrating the profound physical and psychological toll on survivors: "He looked like he had been burned, or boiled, I don't know—he looked dead but he was moving. His eyes were almost swollen shut, but I could see he was looking at me. Once we started helping him he never said a thing, never made another sound. His lips were cracked bloody" (Robinson, 2020, p. 22). This direct testimony immerses the reader in the immediate, devastating impact of climate events. An additional identifiable voice is Frank's friend, who appears in Chapter 7 and offers an external perspective on Frank's trauma, observing how the incident has deeply unsettled him: "He was having panic attacks whenever he got hot, and then the panic attacks made him hotter still. Feedback loop for sure. When he was stabilized enough to move him, we flew him to Glasgow" (p. 27). This external view highlights the lasting psychological repercussions.

Furthermore, Sibilla Schmidt, an officer in the Swiss federal secret service responsible for protecting Mary Murphy, the head of the Ministry, features prominently in Chapter 62. Her narrative provides crucial insight into the security measures and ongoing threats faced by key figures striving for climate action, as she recounts: "We moved M in one of our vans, bullet-proofed, road bomb resistant, darkened windows, secure comms. Priska and Thomas made perfunctory compliments on how light M travelled" (p. 299). These firsthand accounts from Frank, his friend, and Sibilla Schmidt collectively embody the novel's commitment to portraying the emotional and situational realities of its protagonists. By doing so, Robinson effectively ensures that the story remains deeply



rooted in the lived experiences of its characters, even as it engages with broader social and environmental themes on a global scale.

### 4.3. Chapters Featuring Anonymous Voices

‘Chapters Featuring Anonymous Voices’ present the perspectives of various anonymous individuals emblematic of specific groups. The polyphonic structure of *The Ministry for the Future* is further amplified through chapters that foreground anonymous voices, enabling the novel to represent collective experiences and social realities beyond individual protagonists. Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* distinguishes itself through a polyphonic narrative strategy that amplifies a multiplicity of anonymous voices, each representing diverse socio-political perspectives and lived experiences. Among these, Indian representatives appear in Chapters 10 and 52, reflecting post-disaster national resilience and moral defiance following the catastrophic heat wave in Chapter 1. One such voice asserts, “I tell them. It wasn’t your people, so you don’t care. But we know and we care. And there hasn’t been a heat wave like that since. One may come again, no doubt of that, but we did what we could. We did the right thing. I must admit, I sometimes shout at people if they deny that. I damn them to hell. Which is a place we in India have already seen” (Robinson, 2020, p. 39) exemplifying a collective ethos of accountability and survival. Refugees’ perspectives are explored in Chapters 14, 37, 48, and 55, capturing the harrowing impact of displacement. As one voice laments, “We had to leave. It was too dangerous to stay” (p. 51), while another evokes the scorching reality of displacement: “Babies crying at Dawn. Already hot. People hungry. Sun over the hills like a bomb. Hot on the skin. Don’t look that way or you’ll be seeing white all morning. Shadows running off the west edge of the world” (p. 205). These chapters embody climate migration as a key global consequence of environmental breakdown.

Equally pivotal are the testimonies of the Children of Kali, introduced in Chapters 16, 33, 35, and 51, who enact eco-terrorism as radical justice for climate atrocities. One chilling voice recounts, “They killed us so we killed them. Everyone in our cell had helped to clean up after the heat wave. You don’t forget a thing like that. I myself didn’t speak for three years. When I did I could only say a few things. It was like I was two years old. I was killed that week, and had to start over again.” (p. 135), narrating trauma as both personal and political rupture. In contrast, Chapters 19, 44, 57, and 93 provide data-driven reflections from researchers and scientists in Antarctica. These rational voices present geo-engineering propositions, such as the warning that,

*All the ice melting around the world was now raising sea level at a rate of some 5 millimetres a year, which did not sound too bad until one remembered that it had been 3 millimetres a year just twenty years before, and this rapid rate of increase was also itself speeding up. If the current rate doubled every year, then very quickly the sea would be rising so quickly that the coastlines of the world would be inundated, and that catastrophe would greatly complicate an already tricky ecological situation.*

(p. 180)

Chapter 21 offers a stark juxtaposition through the voice of a wealthy youth, apathetic to ecological collapse moments before their world is intruded upon by eco-activists.

*We are on the lakefront in Brissago, on the swiss side of Lake Maggiore, partying on the lawn of Cinzia’s place, just above the narrow park between her property and the lake. She had a celebrity chef there who cooked with a welder’s torch he used to fire at the bottom of big fry pans he held in the air, and a band with a brass section, and a light show and all that.*

(p. 77)

Chapters 17, 38, 90, 99, and 101 collectively feature a commentator’s analytic tone, questioning cultural and technological determinism. “Today we’re here to discuss the question of whether technology drives history. No. I’m sorry, are you saying that technology doesn’t drive history, or that you don’t want to discuss it. Both.” (Robinson, 2020, p. 457), while Chapter 39 presents a climate sceptic’s satire-laced resistance to ideological confrontation:

*They did their best to defend themselves from all this, saying it had been an unprecedented new form of hostage taking, which could not be defended against in advance of knowing it could exist. A new thing! And none of us had died, nor even been hurt much, except in our*

*feelings. So much criticism of our lifeway! But we all had a lot of practice ignoring that kind of yelling, the dogs bark the caravan moves on, and indeed we all caravanned away as fast as we could.* (p. 164)

A climate victim in Chapter 41 starkly depicts state failure in response to both drought and flood: “That was clear to everyone. You could fight your way to the front of the line, but to what effect? There was nothing there to grab; whatever water there was in the city was guarded by the military. The army and police were out in force.” (Robinson, 2020, p. 168). Chapter 58 contributes a Spanish representative’s promotion of Mondragon’s cooperative model:

*“Open admission, democratic organization, the sovereignty of labour, the instrumental and subordinate nature of capital, participatory management, payment solidarity, inter-cooperation, social transformation, universality and education ( ). Likewise, a coastal resident in Chapter 59 recognizes the necessity of systemic overhaul: “The entire city of Los Angeles is going to have to be replaced. Which was great. Maybe we could do it right this time. And I myself am going to find a different job.”* (p. 279).

Chapter 65 introduces a mine worker in Africa who reclaims economic agency: “Some of us left as soon as the buses showed. Most of us stayed. We figured we could leave later if we wanted. But being an owner of the mine sounded interesting. We wanted to know what that meant. Like sweat equity, some said. Sweat Equity! Hell, we had blood equity in that mine.” (p. 325), while Chapter 76 critiques militarized spending from a U.S. Navy officer’s perspective: “Then later I looked up and learned that admirals’ salaries top out at \$200,000 a year. No one in the Navy gets paid more than that per year. So they call this the pay differential, it’s sometimes expressed as a ratio from lowest pay to highest.” (p. 383). In Chapter 78, an anonymous man, crushed by moral burden, attempts to dissuade further violence: “He said, I am Kali. Suddenly he felt the enormous weight of that, the truth of it. They stared at him and saw it crushing him. The War of the Earth had lasted years; his hands were bloody to the elbows. For a moment he couldn’t speak; and there was nothing more to say.” (p. 391). In Chapter 80, peasants receiving carbon coins from the government are portrayed as ecological stewards: “Twenty-three carbon coins... about seventy thousand, six hundred and eighty” (p. 401). Chapter 88 shifts to the collective voice of animals pleading for coexistence: “We are caribou, we are reindeer, we are antelope, we are elephants, and we are all the great herd animals of Earth, among whom you should count yourselves. Therefore let us pass.” (p. 443). These anonymous perspectives converge to construct a comprehensive mosaic of global ecological consciousness, grounding the novel’s speculative architecture in the lived and imagined realities of both human and non-human actors.

#### 4.4. Chapters Featuring Post-human/Abstract Voices

These Non-Narrative chapters provide narrations of entities like a photon, a carbon molecule, and the market itself, adding a post-human perspective.

Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* transcends anthropocentric boundaries by incorporating a range of non-narrative chapters in which abstract or non-human entities—such as natural forces, particles, systems, and ideas—are granted narrative voice. These experimental monologues disrupt conventional storytelling and embody Bakhtin’s heteroglossia in an expanded, post-human register. Chapter 2 opens with the voice of the Sun, a cosmic narrator that establishes the primordial relationship between life and stellar power: “I am a god and I am not a god. Either way, you are my creatures. I keep you alive. Someday I will eat you. For now, I feed you. Beware my regard. Never look at me” (Robinson, 2020, p. 13). This declaration fuses mythic and scientific registers, foregrounding the vast ecological temporality that overshadows human lifespans.

In Chapter 43, Code, the metaphorical embodiment of digital cryptography and block chain, introduces itself as both a paradox and a tool for justice: “I am a secret so everyone can know me. You don’t know me, you don’t understand me and yet still, if you want justice, I will help you to find it. I am block chain. I am encryption. I am code. Now put me to use” (p. 177). Here, Robinson animates technological infrastructure as a sentient moral actor, aligning with the broader narrative’s interest in decentralized systems of accountability. The Market, personified in Chapter 46, offers a more menacing perspective, identifying itself as an all-consuming force: “My body worked so well that eventually all things everywhere was swallowed and digested by me. I grew so large that I ate the world, and all the blood in the world is mine, What am I? You know, even though you are like

everything else, and see me from the inside. I am the market” (p. 192). This satirical tone critiques global capitalism's omnipresence and insatiability, reinforcing the novel's call for economic reform.

Chapter 53 features a dazzling soliloquy from a Photon, tracing its journey from the Sun to Earth: “I zing and I ping and I bring and I bling... I define the speed of light by my dance” (p. 235). This playful and poetic rendering brings quantum mechanics into narrative art, celebrating the invisible forces that sustain life. Similarly, in Chapter 66, Carbon narrates its cosmic origin through stellar cataclysm: “You think your birth was hard—my mom exploded!... I was, as elegant as anything in the universe: Carbon, the king of the elements” (p. 327). The dramatized account of carbon's formation in a supernova evokes both scientific wonder and ecological irony, as the same element becomes emblematic of human-caused climate disruption.

The voice of History, in Chapter 77, speaks in riddles and warnings: “Everyone knows me but no one can tell me. No one knows me even though everyone has heard my name. I am blood in the streets, the catastrophe you can never forget. I am the tide running under the world that no one sees or feels. You know what I am. I am History. Now make me good” (p. 386). As an allegorical force, History is portrayed as elusive yet omnipresent, urging humanity to actively shape its trajectory. Chapter 95 then gives the stage to Space, an entity that straddles existence and nonexistence: “I am a thing. I am alive and I am dead. I am conscious and unconscious... I keep you alive. I will kill you someday, or I won't and something else will, and then, either way, I will take you in. Someday soon. You know what I am. Now find me out.” (p. 492). This final non-human voice reflects the cosmic ambivalence within which human life unfolds, emphasizing the transient and precarious nature of civilization.

Together, these non-narrative chapters exemplify Robinson's commitment to narrative experimentation and ecological totality. By attributing speech and agency to elemental forces, systems, and particles, Robinson not only extends the polyphonic structure of the novel but also challenges the human-centric frameworks through which climate crises are typically understood. These post-human voices cultivate a deeper, systems-level awareness in the reader, echoing Bakhtin's assertion that language and by extension narrative is “never unitary,” but always a site of social and ideological tension. In this way, the non-narrative chapters amplify the novel's commitment to dialogism by literally giving voice to the foundational agents of planetary life.

### 5. Bakhtin and *The Ministry for the Future*

The exploration of climate change through literature, particularly in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, presents a dynamic narrative that embodies Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia.

*When heteroglossia enters the novel it becomes subject to an artistic reworking. The social and historical voices populating language, all its words and its forms, which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualizations, are organized in the novel into a structural stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author and the heteroglossia of this epoch.*  
(Bakhtin, 1981, p. 300)

This novel serves as a vital commentary on the climate crisis, utilizing a diverse array of voices, officials, activists, survivors, and even non-human entities to create a rich tapestry of perspectives. Such an amalgamation not only enriches the narrative but also cultivates an empathetic understanding among readers regarding the gravity of climate change.

Robinson's work exemplifies polyphony, where multiple competing voices coexist without allowing any single perspective to dominate. This approach mirrors the complexity of real-world climate discussions, where capitalist reformers, radical activists, and pragmatic policymakers engage in a continuous dialogue. The dialogism present in the text further emphasizes how meaning is constructed through these interactions, reflecting the chaotic nature of climate action. Dialogue acts as a catalyst, bringing together fragmented elements like the pieces of a puzzle to ultimately form a unified whole, thereby marking the gradual process of transformation. In this way, it fosters a sense of collective reasoning by encouraging separate individuals or perspectives to unite and integrate, shaping a cohesive and shared understanding. (Malczynski, 1984). As different ideologies clash and converge, readers are invited to engage with the text on a deeper level emphasizing a sense of urgency and awareness about the climate crisis.

The stratification of language within the novel highlights the disparity between technical jargon and emotional narratives. For instance, economic terms like “carbon coin” stand in stark contrast to the visceral accounts from survivors of climate disasters. This juxtaposition not only illustrates the gap between policy-making and lived experiences but also underscores the need for a more inclusive discourse that encompasses diverse voices. Moreover, Robinson incorporates carnivalesque elements that challenge societal norms surrounding



climate action. The portrayal of eco-terrorists and their radical approaches to confronting environmental degradation reflects a growing irreverence towards established financial and governmental systems. This subversion invites readers to reconsider traditional power structures and envision alternative pathways toward a more sustainable future.

*The Ministry for the Future* stands as a significant contribution to climate fiction, effectively utilizing Bakhtin's theories to present a holistic view of the climate crisis. By weaving together multiple voices and perspectives, Robinson not only enhances the narrative's depth but also bridges a profound understanding of the complexities surrounding climate change. This literary approach stimulates readers' intellect and emotions, encouraging them to consider their personal involvement in this urgent global challenge. As we journey through an increasingly unpredictable future, these narratives play a vital role in nurturing our shared awareness and motivating us to take meaningful action for positive change.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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