“Learning to Fight in a World on Fire”: Imagining Political Violence in the Anthropocene

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Abstract This article takes Andreas Malm’s 2020 manifesto *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* as a starting point to examine the representation of strategically used political violence in recent fiction and film. Political violence – as Malm envisions it for the future climate movement – has been a part of the radical environmental movement (in the U.S.) at least since the 1970s, very often, however, accompanied by accusations of terrorism from political interest groups and government agencies. In the immediate post-9/11 context, government rhetoric about “eco-terrorism” and new laws targeting different forms of expressing dissent as domestic terrorism were also accompanied by fictional representations portraying activists as dangerous terrorists (e.g. Michael Crichton’s *State of Fear*). Briefly tracing the so-called Green Scare in fiction and film from the post-9/11 era, I argue that a new awareness of the climate emergency has also led to a (literary) re-evaluation of strategically employed violence in protest movements. Analyzing Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Ministry for the Future* (2020), David Klass’ thriller *Out of Time* (2020), and the eponymous film to Malm’s manifesto, this article aims to show that recent novels envision political violence as an adequate means to inspire societal and political change in the face of the climate crisis.

Keywords Climate Activism; Political Violence; Radicalization; Fiction; Cultural Imaginary.

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Introduction

With the intensification of the climate crisis, climate justice movements and protests in reaction to slow political processes of change are growing around the globe. States find themselves increasingly confronted with public protests by citizens demanding swifter climate action and the implementation of measures to mitigate climate change. In addition to public demonstrations of moderate activist groups, protestors increasingly commit acts of civil disobedience (the most prominent tactic being the blocking of car traffic) to raise awareness within the broader public or to hold governments accountable to their own laws and promises to ameliorate the effects of anthropogenic climate change. While these acts of civil disobedience, popularized again by Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, or Letzte Generation[1], already mark a change in the tactical repertoire of climate activists, the Swedish human ecologist Andreas Malm argues for a further radicalization of the climate justice movement – and the use of strategically employed violence. Such violence, in the form of property damage and sabotage, has been part of the tactical repertoire of environmental activists before – most prominently in the US, by Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front. However, specifically in the post-9/11 US, the rhetorical association of radical environmental activism with terrorism ('eco-terrorism') was increasingly supported by legal changes and a reinforced security apparatus. While this so-called Green Scare of the early 2000s – an analogy to the Red Scare – was underpinned by fictional narratives that cast eco-activists as misguided criminals threatening national security, recent examples from fiction and film imagine an increasingly different scenario and represent a shift in the cultural imaginary of radical environmentalism. With the climate crisis looming large and a growing awareness of what scholars have termed the Anthropocene, the perpetrators of political violence represented in these works (the 'radical flanks' of climate activism) are often depicted as rational actors, who are given no other avenue of effecting necessary change. After a brief discussion of Andreas Malm's manifesto *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (2020) and Herbert Haines' theory of radical flank effects, short close readings of David Klass' *Out of Time*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, and the eponymous film based on Malm's book will examine the representation of political violence as well as the negotiation of its role in the mitigation of climate change.

The Climate Justice Movement and "Radical Flank Effects"

In his 2020 monograph *Wie man eine Pipeline in die Luft jagt* (published in English in 2021 as *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*), Malm wonders about the fact that so far climate activists have meticulously avoided violence – despite a series of unsuccessful non-violent protest cycles (in the US, for instance, the protests against the Keystone XL pipeline project) and the imminence of the climate emergency.[2]

> To say that the signs have fallen on the deaf ears of the ruling classes of this world would be an understatement. If these classes ever had any senses, they have lost them all. They are not perturbed by the smell from the blazing trees. They do not worry at the sight of islands sinking; they do not run from the roar of the approaching hurricanes; their fingers never need to touch the stalks from withered harvests; their mouths do not become sticky and dry after a day with nothing to drink. To appeal to their reason and common sense would evidently be futile. […] And so we are still here. We erect our camps of sustainable solutions. We cook our vegan food and hold our assemblies. We march, we block, we stage theatres, we hand over lists of demands to ministers, we chain ourselves, we march the next day too. We are still perfectly, immaculately peaceful. There are more of us now, by orders of magnitude. There is another pitch of desperation in our voices; we talk of extinction and no future. And still business continues very much as usual. At what point do we escalate? When do we conclude that the time has come to also try something different? When do we start physically attacking the things that consume our planet and destroy them with our own hands? Is there a good reason we have waited this long? (Malm, *Pipeline* 8-9)

Implicating himself in the activist efforts of the climate movement, Malm recounts a history of the movement that – despite its large numbers of adherents – has achieved little success with regard to climate change mitigation, compared to the immense consequences of a climate-changed world. He locates the obstacle to political and ecological change in the deep entrenchment of business-as-usual and the fossil fuel industry, or what he calls "fossil capital" in his 2016 monograph of the same title (*Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*). The passage above also shows that Malm, among others, does not view climate change as an equalizer of human experience, as the concept of the Anthropocene, implicating humanity as a whole, may suggest. Rather, he describes the fight for climate justice in terms of class differences and power asymmetries, as a fight of the relatively powerless against powerful representatives of the oppressive systems of fossil capital – who will not be affected in the same way. In a similar vein, he writes in an essay with Alf Hornborg: "For the foreseeable future – indeed, as long as there are human societies on Earth – there will be lifeboats for the rich and privileged" (Malm and Hornborg 66).

Having framed the climate crisis as a struggle of the powerless against the "ruling classes," he also asks why, thus far, the movement has remained so staunchly peaceful. The reluctance to even imagine a social movement that does not eschew the use of (strategic) violence, is, according to Malm, a consequence

of the deep entrenchment of (fossil) capital and a result of on-going delegitimizations of movements that have made use of political violence. He writes:

> The insistence on sweeping militancy under the rug of civility – now dominant not only in the climate movement, but in most Anglo-American thinking and theorising about social movements – is itself a symptom of one of the deepest gaps between the present and all that happened from the Haitian Revolution to the poll tax riots: the demise of revolutionary politics. […] [S]ince the 1980s it has been defamed, antiquated, unlearned and turned unreal. With the consequent deskilling of movements comes the reluctance to recognise revolutionary violence as an integral component. This is the impasse in which the climate movement finds itself: the historical victory of capital and the ruination of the planet are one and the same thing. (61-62)

Again, the framing of climate justice activism as a fight against an unjust, oppressive system also allows Malm to view this movement as part of a longer history of resistance movements. The Civil Rights Movement, the abolitionist movement, the Suffragettes, or the fight against Apartheid in South Africa, he further argues, are remembered in a fragmentary way that obscures the role of violence in the processes of change these movements inspired (38-50).[3] The (false) memorialization of non-violent protest as the only successful path to change – what Malm calls "selective memory" (51) – is thus structuring what is deemed acceptable protest today and, as a consequence, also limits the climate movements' imagination of what is possible and how change can be achieved.

The argument that less moderate forms of activism have been swept "under the rug of civility" and that other approaches have been "defamed" since the end of the twentieth century can also be connected to a recent, ecologically-oriented movement: the radical environmental movement in the US. From the 1980s onward, radical environmentalism has been met with a backlash from corporations and the political right that has resulted in a firmly established discourse about 'ecoterrorism' (Sorenson; Pellow; Grubbs; Arnold).

Examining what came to be known as the Green Scare (Potter), anthropologist Jennifer Grubbs points to a constructed dichotomy between "the good protestor" and "the bad protestor," which helps to not only establish a wedge between moderates and radicals but also criminalize those deemed "bad protestors." The good protestor, according to Grubbs' analysis, believes in democratic participation as a way of expressing dissent, as well as in the idea of consumer choice-activism and green capitalism (49). The bad protestor, on the other hand, engages in direct action environmentalism and property destruction (Grubbs 49). Colin Salter moreover argues that corporations and governments challenged by protesters often aim to demarcate dissent they deem un-threatening from more radical, disruptive

expressions of dissent, creating what he calls "a false dualism" between so-called moderates and radicals that are part of one and the same movement (214). With regard to the climate movement this dynamic is especially evident in the fact that groups and even political parties that are considered moderate are expected to distance themselves from the more radical factions of the green movement – even if radicalism, at this point, means merely incorporating civil disobedience into the tactical repertoire of climate protest.

This complicated relationship between moderate and radical parts of a social movement has been theorized by sociologist Herbert Haines in his study on the influence of so-called radicals on the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. He argues that the relationship between moderates and radicals is ever-shifting, not least because the perceptions of what is moderate or radical are constantly subject to re-negotiation and change:

> Moderation and radicalism are troublesome, relative terms; they mean different things to different people. […] In other words, the positions of a particular spokesperson or movement organization may *seem* to be truly radical until a more radical spokesperson or organization appears. At that point, an intersubjective shift may occur on the part of audiences, and those activists previously thought to be extreme or outlandish become redefined as relatively reasonable and tame. (Haines 7; italics in original)

However, he also critically discusses that the success of so-called moderates, who are usually more widely accepted by society and the political establishment, is shaped and influenced by factions of the same movement that purport ideas which are considered more radical. He refers to the ways in which radicals influence the path of moderates as "radical flank effects" (Haines 2). These effects can be either positive or negative: "radical flank effects are patterns of gains or losses, successes or failures experienced by moderate organizations which can be directly attributed to the activities of more radical organizations or groups" (10). In other words, radical factions of a movement can critically influence whether moderates are successful in achieving their goals or not.

Malm's criticism of the climate movement thus runs counter to a well-known argument, which seems to be prevalent not only in activist circles:

> It has been suggested by activists and scholars alike that the emergence of radical activists and organizations in a social movement can undermine the position of moderates (and sometimes that of the movement as a whole) by discrediting movement activities and goals, by threatening the ability of moderates to take advantage of resources supplied by supportive parties. (Haines 3)

A radical flank of the climate movement, so the argument goes, would result in negative radical flank effects – alienating the public and losing the support of politicians in favor of the movement's ideas. Malm writes, "the commitment to absolute non-violence appears to have stiffened over the cycles, the internalisation of its ethos universal, the discipline remarkable" (*Pipeline* 22) and poses the question if "absolute non-violence" will "be the only way, forever the sole admissible tactic in the struggle to abolish fossil fuels?" (24).[4]

Citing author John Lanchester, who has asked a similar question in a 2007 essay titled "Warmer, Warmer," Malm refers to the reluctance of climate activists to strategically employ violence as "'Lanchester's paradox'" (Malm, *Pipeline* 13). "It is strange and striking," Lanchester wrote in said essay,

> that climate change activists have not committed any acts of terrorism. After all, terrorism is for the individual by far the modern world's most effective form of political action, and climate change is an issue about which people feel just as strongly as about, say, animal rights. This is especially noticeable when you bear in mind the ease of things like blowing up petrol stations, or vandalising SUVs.

Lanchester's question may be powerful, his assessment, however, is problematic in two ways: On the one hand, and similar to Malm, he partly omits the US American history of radical environmentalism that precedes the climate justice movement, during which SUVs were vandalized and pipelines sabotaged – albeit maybe not embedded in a climate justice framework.[5] [6] On the other hand, he seems to subscribe to a definition of terrorism that includes property damage and has been criticized for its possible impediment to the expression of civil liberties – even if it may be in line with the FBI's definition of domestic terrorism.

Terrorism is of course a notoriously contested term with a complicated history. Even when understood within a critical terrorism studies framework, there is considerable debate about the term's normativity and the power asymmetry inherent in labelling something or someone as 'terrorist.' While some scholars in critical terrorism studies have argued for a completely constructivist approach to terrorism (see Stump and Dixit, "Toward a Completely Constructivist Critical Terrorism Studies"), others have pointed to the importance of differentiating between acts of "'true' terrorism" (White 318) and those mislabeled as such (for example property damage). More specifically, the equation of the loss of human life with property damage has been viewed as problematic and offensive (White; Miller et al.).[7] In the wake of the Green Scare criminalization of radical environmentalism as terrorism a number of studies have tried to recuperate the acts of, for example, the Earth Liberation Front by relying on the argument that so far the group had not harmed human beings (Loadenthal "Eco-Terrorism?"; Sumner and

Weidman; Miller et al.) and thus, their deeds should be differentiated from acts of terrorism, often using 9/11 as a point of reference.

While such an approach runs the risk of "ontological gerrymandering" (Stump and Dixit, "Toward a Completely Constructivist Critical Terrorism Studies" 205), which relies on a definition of "terrorism" based on varying characteristics, in anticipation of a radicalization of the climate movement, it seems, states are radicalizing their responses to the now popular means of protest, mainly the blocking of traffic through sit-ins.

In the UK, the Public Order Act was adapted in 2023 to outlaw the blocking of traffic and the act of gluing oneself to objects – tactics that are first and foremost part of the repertoire attributed to climate activists. In Germany, a state government has been wiretapping phone lines of the group Letzte Generation and activists' homes have been searched in an attempt to establish the group as part of organized crime, which would give law enforcement and the state greater power in the prosecution of climate activists. Accompanying these forms of state repression, specifically in Germany, is a public discourse about "Klimaterroristen" (climate terrorists) inspired by politicians and popularized and further disseminated via social media and other internet platforms. Branding parts of the climate justice movement as terrorist cells and delegitimizing civil disobedience via terrorism – discursively creating "bad protesters" – serves the purpose of discrediting the actual cause of the movement and by extension works to stabilize a status quo based on the extraction and burning of fossil fuels and other natural resources.

The Green Scare and the Cultural Imaginary of Radical Environmentalism

In the United States, a similar phenomenon can already be observed towards the end of the twentieth century. Starting in the early 1980s, when Ron Arnold, then-vice president of the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise allegedly coined the term 'ecoterrorism,' radical environmentalism was accompanied by a discursive criminalization of activism.[8] In the post-9/11 US, then, activists were facing the Green Scare – an interconnected mesh of discourses about (eco)terrorism, movement-infiltration, new laws to target radical environmentalism, and a wave of incarcerations in the early 2000s (cf. Pellow 167; Loadenthal "Deconstructing Eco-Terrorism" 93; Potter).

Several arrested adherents to the Earth Liberation Front and others were sentenced with terrorism enhancements, resulting in prison sentences of up to 22 years (see en5) for arson or vandalism. Said terrorism enhancements were created in response to the Oklahoma City Bombing and the first attack on the World Trade Center and repurposed in the post-9/11 moment in several trials against environmental activists (Bruggeman; Johl 478). As previously mentioned, 9/11 featured prominently in texts about radical environmentalism at the turn of the century – both scholarly and fictional[9] – as a point of comparison, to make the case

for a careful differentiation between terrorist violence and property damage, or sabotage.[10] The attacks of September 2001 and the ensuing War on Terrorism, however, also shaped narratives about radical activists, which portrayed them as dangerous, irrational terrorists – a label that the attacks of 9/11 had re-defined in the cultural imaginary and the public arena. "Describing someone as a 'terrorist'," wrote Steve Vanderheiden in a 2005 essay on 'ecoterrorism,'

> serves an explicitly rhetorical purpose in contemporary discourse, though the very language and imagery the term conjures obscure its rational analysis: it implies a moral claim for their aggressive pursuit and prosecution unconstrained by the conventional limits set upon military or law enforcement action. A 'terrorist' refuses to observe any moral or legal limits against harming others, and thus a 'war on terror' ought likewise to be freed from any such limits (or so the argument goes). (425-426)

Apart from news and other media reports that quickly adopted the label of 'ecoterrorism' for property damage and sabotage (see Wagner; Joosse; Sumner and Weidman), fictional works also participated in the Green Scare criminalization of radical environmentalism. In Michael Crichton's 2004 novel *State of Fear*, for instance, a dangerous group of eco-radicals named Environmental Liberation Front – which shortens to ELF just like Earth Liberation Front – sparks lethal "natural" disasters in order to raise awareness of climate change. Climate change, or global warming, as the novel refers to it, is however debunked as a hoax, as a global conspiracy of environmentalists that seek to keep the population in a "state of fear." In line with a post-9/11 cultural (re-)turn to hardboiled masculinity (see Faludi), the novel's protagonist is not part of ELF – the perpetrators are given no narrative space – but rather a counter-terrorist agent of a secret government agency, who enacts a frontier-like form of justice.[11] Less blatantly anti-environmentalist, but portraying the radicalism of their characters as dangerous (and lethal), are two movies from 2013: Kelly Reichardt's *Night Moves* and Zal Batmanglij's *The East*. *Night Moves* portrays a scenario well-known from Edward Abbey's classic 1975 novel on radical environmentalism, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, but transported to a contemporary setting: Three young activists blow up a hydroelectric dam, an act that results in the accidental death of a camper and the murder of the only female activist at the hands of her co-conspirator. *The East*, on the other hand, has a protagonist who works as a counter-terrorist agent and who infiltrates an "ecoterrorist" cell for a private intelligence firm. The eponymous group The East is mostly engaging in revenge-plots against corporations they have a personal connection to, and while their actions do not result in the death of their victims (but in physical injury), one of their own, again a young woman, dies a violent death. The deaths of Deena (in *Night Moves*), and Izzy, in

The East, can be read as a metaphor for the detrimental, or negative, effects of (environmental) radicalism the films try to convey. Potential martyrdom is thus precluded in both cases – the deaths within activist circles can rather be read as punishment for their turn to radicalism – and the message is in line with the notion of radical activism as "unpatriotic" and "un-American" domestic terrorism (Rana 241) prevalent in the immediate post-9/11 years.

The majority of fictional texts about environmentalists published in this time period can be said to speculatively spin further the development of radical environmentalist groups in the United States, without reverting to historical precedent. ELF and other groups had never killed or severely injured a human being (Loadenthal "Eco-Terrorism?") – which, for many observers, was also an argument against the terrorism-label. Texts such as Crichton's novel or Reichardt's film, however, portrayed environmentalists as perpetrators of lethal violence, contributing to a criminalization of eco-activism in the cultural imaginary. A form of (fictional) speculation that is in line with Michael C. Frank's assessment that the post-9/11 security apparatus "also depended on ingenuity in the imagination of possible present and future events" and had to "work speculatively through possibilities, to think in the subjunctive" (488).

Negotiating Political Violence in Anthropocene Fiction

Since the 2010s, the US has seen some of the worst and most costly natural disasters in its history: out-of-control wildfires, intensifying droughts, and severe storms and flooding, all of them arguably exacerbated by climate change (Smith). With a growing awareness of climate change and its effects that can be felt in people's own backyards, it seems that there has also been a re-evaluation of environmental activism in the cultural imaginary.[12] Recent fictional accounts of (climate) activism even explore the possibility of further radicalization of tactics and imagine radical flanks to moderate organizations that attack fossil fuel infrastructure (*How to Blow Up a Pipeline*; *Out of Time*) or corporate representatives and politicians responsible for detrimental political decisions (*The Ministry for the Future*; Stephen Markley's novel *The Deluge*).

These narratives of Anthropocene fiction, defined by Adam Trexler as based on the premise that "climate change is upon us" (Trexler 5), represent a shift in the cultural negotiation of radical eco-activism compared to the immediate post-9/11 years, and can be said to represent a broader trend. I use this periodization both to express the aforementioned shift in a US context, and because it adds the element of human responsibility (see Trexler 4-5), as opposed to 'cli-fi' or climate fiction. In the following, I will briefly discuss David Klass' novel *Out of Time*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, and the 2023 feature film based on Malm's manifesto, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, and show how their

representation of political violence in the struggle for climate justice departs from previous portrayals.

Out of Time (2020)

David Klass' 2020 novel is a crime thriller – supposedly set during the Trump presidency – with an unusual negotiation of the genre's formulaic standard elements (cf. Cawelti). Protagonist Tom Smith is a data analyst working for the FBI who becomes part of a task force that seeks to catch the United States' most dangerous domestic terrorist, a perpetrator the public has quickly dubbed "Green Man," due to the choice of his targets: luxurious yachts, gas facilities, and oil fields, and thus symbols of 'business-as-usual' in the face of the climate emergency. The title, *Out of Time*, stands for both a temporal element often found in crime fiction – the perpetrator has to be caught before a spectacular, often final, deed – and the novel's "doomsday clock," an initiative by a Swedish activist collective that shows that time for successful climate action is running out, and according to which Green Man times his attacks. Among the targets for his bombings are hydroelectric dams, wealthy politicians' yachts, and waste-water tanks of oil and gas companies engaging in fracking. The attacks on these targets are carefully planned to not harm the atmosphere even further (i.e., release more carbon dioxide), expressing Green Man's deep concern over climate change. Breaking with the conventions of formulaic crime plots, the perpetrator is not only a family man, who plans his actions according to reason rather than madness, and has numerous fans among the public, but his own adversary – FBI agent Tom Smith – is also not quite sure if he wants to stop the "terrorist" at all. *Out of Time* thus also represents a shift with regard to the narration of terrorist violence and reasoning. Rather than presenting "a clear pathologization of terrorist psychology" (Ziser 212) – as well-known from post-9/11 texts – Green Man's motivation is not only given narrative space, but is also validated through the perspectives of other characters, among them his persecutor.

The novel opens with Green Man's attack on a dam in Idaho, which points to the issue of species extinction but also alludes to Edward Abbey's fictional *Monkey Wrench Gang* and the playful and performative enactment of this novel's central conspiracy to blow up Glen Canyon Dam by the early Earth First![13] It also immediately places Green Man's violent attacks in a genealogy of terrorism: the FBI's "Green Man Task Force," readers learn, "now numbered more than three hundred dedicated federal agents, twice the number who had pursued the Unabomber" (Klass 2). Moreover, Green Man's bombing of the dam takes technical inspiration from 9/11: "The attacks on the World Trade Center had demonstrated with terrifying clarity that it was not necessary for a blast to instantly demolish its target – it need only do sufficient structural damage for weight, pressure, and gravity to finish the destruction" (Klass 5). While these references to the Unabomber and 9/11 may be unsurprising in a novel about 'eco-terrorism,' in the same passages Green

Man is also portrayed as a reluctant terrorist, who feels deeply for his victims ("he was not a sociopath; he was in fact highly empathic, and killing brought him no joy," 3; "he took no pleasure in destruction and death," 5) and is haunted by the collateral damage resulting from his deeds, but is given no other choice.

Over the course of the novel, it is revealed that Green Man relies on friends from his past, for example Ellen, the director of an NGO called "The Green Center," with whom he unknowingly has a daughter. Ellen and Green Man, then called Paul Sayers, were part of several radical environmentalist organizations together – among them Earth First! and Earth Liberation Front – before Paul allegedly died in an attack on a "gas facility" (Klass 286). Paul's personal history can also be read as a representation of the development of radical environmentalism in the US, from Earth First!'s civil disobedience and tree spiking, to ELF's property damage, to Green Man's political violence in the present.

While there are debates about activist strategy and tactical repertoire – through Ellen's perspective on her work at the Green Center – it seems that radical environmentalism is resuscitated or revived with Green Man, or Paul Sayers, who previously died a metaphorical death alongside green radicalism. Ellen is secretly disseminating Green Man's writings to the press, but at the same time, she also strongly advocates for non-violence in her NGO (at first):

> we are in a desperate war to save our planet. We've lost some major battles, but we have science on our side. We have the youth on our side. But most importantly, we own the moral high ground. And that's why we'll win, just the way Gandhi won and Martin Luther King won. But we can't give up the high ground. Violence is always wrong. Bombs and bullets are not the way to effect change. Killing innocent people is murder, and it's absolutely unjustifiable. […] And it's immoral for us, as an organization, to profit from them [Green Man] by tacitly approving and remaining silent […] We're going to be one of the first environmental organizations to responsibly speak out against Green Man. (Klass 43)

While her stance changes towards the end of the novel, her insistence on non-violence in the passage above is a reflection of the strategic pacifism Malm views as an obstacle to successful climate action. In order to keep "the high ground," Ellen decides to distance her organization from radicalism, thereby reinforcing the good protester/bad protestor dichotomy – even though Green Man is said to have support among the general public.

Among the people who do not want law enforcement to catch Green Man, and thus condone his use of violence, are Ellen's daughter Julie as well as Tom's sister Tracy ("But don't you dare catch that man […] he's really the only hope we have and deep down you know that as much as I do," Tracy tells her brother; Klass

78). Tom himself became an FBI agent to make his distant father proud, arguing that he had turned down a well-paid Silicon Valley tech job because "catching bad guys" was "the family business" (Klass 220). Tom's father Warren, however, is not a larger-than-life paternal hero figure but an unhappy, emotionally distant former Marine and FBI agent, who has an alcohol problem, uses the term "liberal media" derogatorily, considers his son "a tree hugger" (Klass 11), and complains about his son's longer hair. In contrast to his father, Tom "admires [Green Man's] goals" (Klass 11) and finds "his loyalties divided in an almost painful way" (185). After having read Green Man's "manifesto," in which the perpetrator explains his strategic use of violence, he even wonders about his other colleagues, who "were committed law enforcement agents but not dumb people. How could they not be affected by this powerfully argued warning that all the rules had to be broken?" (Klass 185-86). Breaking with readers' expectations and formulaic conventions of the crime novel, Tom refuses to follow in his father's footsteps – despite a brief period of seeming assimilation to his father's ideals, during which he also gets a buzz cut.

His relationship with his father can be said to represent a conflict between generations as well as questions of intergenerational justice that inspire not only Green Man's actions, but also Ellen's and Julie's activism as well as Tom's reluctance. Tom does find out who Green Man is, figures out his plan for a final attack on a fracking facility, and confronts the "terrorist" in the end – he does, however, not "catch the bad guy." In the final stand-off in the midst of a burning oil field, Paul Sayers, lethally wounded by a gunshot, could shoot Tom but tells him to escape: "'One of us has a chance to get out. And it can't be me' […] 'What's the point? It's doomsday. In Sweden and here and everywhere.' Green Man replied haltingly, in tremendous pain. 'I would like to think that the people in Sweden… and God himself…built in just a little extra time, if we use it wisely'" (Klass 362-63). Tom gives in to his divided loyalties, films Green Man's final moments amidst the burning fossil fuel infrastructure, and disseminates a final pre-recorded message the "terrorist" recorded for his followers. Instead of eliminating the threat, Tom contributes to a form of martyrdom that represents a sharp digression from post-9/11 terrorism discourse. Thus, while Green Man may die, *Out of Time* does not suggest an end to radicalism, but rather a beginning. In the final pages of the novel, Ellen sketches a new path for her employees at the Green Center:

> 'Don't you understand? […] Green Man's death and the publicity it's generated is a game changer. Our struggle has now entered a critical phase. We're in a pitched battle to save the planet, and it's not a distance race anymore – it's a sprint. Sprinters can't worry about strategy – they just have to run as fast as they fucking can for ten seconds. […] We have to throw out the rulebook and not be bound by what we've said or done before.' (370)

In *Out of Time*, thus, moderate activists exemplified by Ellen's NGO decide to follow in the footsteps of radical activist Paul Sayers, which, with regard to Haines' study, represents not so much a positive radical flank effect but rather a growth of the radical flank alongside a re-definition of what is considered moderate: "Radicals may thus provide a militant foil against which moderate strategies and demands can be redefined and normalized, i.e., responded to as 'reasonable'" (Haines 3-4).

The Ministry for the Future (2020)

Kim Stanley Robinson's novels are most often referred to as science fiction, a label that has also been attached to his latest work, *The Ministry for the Future*, and that also shines through in the cover art of the first edition published by Orbit. The fact that climate change fiction has often been relegated to the sci-fi category has been criticized most prominently by Indian author Amitav Ghosh, as part of a failure of the imagination ("It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel," 7). With Robinson's latest novel, a formally innovative narrative about international efforts of climate mitigation, there seems to be a scholarly trend to consider *Ministry* as a work of realism, rather than sci-fi. Pierre-Louis Patoine, for example, refers to Robinson as a "'realist of a larger reality'" (143), alluding to a speech by Ursula K. LeGuin, and Jerome F.A. Bump decries that *Ministry* "has not received the attention it deserves" as Robinson "has been typecast as a socialist science fiction writer," and declares the novel "a simulation of the future" (140). *Ministry* represents collective and successful climate action as a trial-and-error process of different initiatives and efforts, prominently among them science (and geo-engineering), global and local politics, and finance, but also radical activism and political violence.

Contrary to other climate fictions that have focused on relating and exploring the effects of climate change through one main protagonist or a limited set of focalizers (for example Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*, Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, or even Robinson's own *Forty Signs of Rain*), *Ministry* uses "planetary polyphony [...] to achieve a portrait [...] of the struggle against climate change in the central decades of the twenty-first century" (Patoine 146). A narrative strategy apt at depicting the complexity of climate change and action, this polyphonic narrative includes human and more-than-human narrators, personal narration, we-narration, and "third-person objective narration" (Patoine 146), with many narrators only present for one or two chapters. As Patoine shows in a graph on the book's chapter distribution, "the novel is [...] largely dominated by collective and/or anonymous voices [...] leaving comparatively little room for the everyday life or heroic actions of individuals [...] that have occupied a large part of the modern novel" (147). While there are two prominent recurring characters – the

head of the newly founded ministry for the future, set to represent the interests of future generations and non-human nature, Mary Murphy, and aid worker-turned climate radical Frank May – the formal innovation stems from the collage of perspectives presented over the course of the novel's almost six hundred pages.

Mary and Frank are "conceived in [...] dialectical opposition to each other – the optimist and the pessimist, the meliorist and the radical, the idealist and the pragmatist" (Christman 87). As the head of the international ministry for the future Mary seeks change within official diplomatic channels through "lawsuits, and sanctions, and publicity campaigns" (Robinson 99). Frank, on the other hand, has experienced a lethal heat wave in India firsthand – the novel opens with this horrendous event – and was one of few survivors of this mass death event. As an aid worker from the Global North and a survivor of the deadly heat wave, Frank symbolizes the uneven distribution of risk and responsibility in a climate changed world. Suffering from PTSD and survivor's guilt, Frank holds Mary at gunpoint in her own home upon his return from India, demanding to know what she and her organization are doing to avoid other heat waves to come. Upset with her statement that "[w]e're doing all we can with what we've got" (Robinson 97), Frank implies that stopping short of violence was a mistake, alluding to the Children of Kali – an Indian group that has formed after the heat wave.

> "[...] Children of Kali, you've heard of them?" "Yes. But they're a terrorist group." He shook his head, staring at her all the while. "No. You have to stop thinking with your old burgeois values. That time has passed. The stakes are too high for you to hide behind them anymore. They're killing the world. People, animals, everything. We're in a mass extinction event, and there are people trying to do something about it. You call them terrorists, but it's the people you work for who are the terrorists. How can you not see that?" (Robinson 97)

In this passage, Frank attempts to turn the terrorist label against those perpetuating a system – based on fossil capital – that bears responsibility for anthropogenic climate change and its consequences. Not only does this reference previous attempts by activists to label those in power as terrorists, but it also highlights the power asymmetry inherent in labelling someone or something "terrorist."

Whereas Mary is skeptical in the beginning, seeking to "sweep militancy under the rug of civility" (Malm, *Pipeline* 61), over the course of the novel she changes her mind, installing a radical "black wing" – while keeping the public-facing part of her ministry moderate. When Mary suggests the establishment of a non-violent black wing to her employee Badim, who similarly to Frank tells her "[w]hat we're doing with this ministry. I'm telling you, it isn't enough" (Robinson 33), she finds out that he had already started a secret section of the ministry "scar[ing people] away from burning carbon" (113). Admitting to Badim the effect that Frank

has had on her, Mary finally also agrees to the use of violence: "But…Well, we have to do something. Something more than we've been doing" (Robinson 115).

What results from, among other phenomena, "the struggle between the two" (Christman 87) – Mary and Frank –, is related to readers via chapters of "speculative world history" that provide "a retrospective look at a planetary history that appears as already constituted" (Patoine 149). Through this perspective, questions about the efficiency of radicalism and political violence in the face of climate change are foreclosed, as these chapters present a state of affairs after the fact. Reflecting on the 2030s, one such chapter, related in "third-person objective narration" (Patoine 146), describes how the opening event of the novel – the heat wave Frank survived in India and that "was now said to have killed 20 million" (Robinson 227) – has set in motion as series of violent events.

> Everyone alive knew that not enough was being done, and everyone kept doing too little. […] So it was not really a surprise when a day came that sixty passenger jets crashed in a matter of hours. […] One message was fairly obvious: stop flying. And indeed many people stopped. […] The War for the Earth is often said to have begun on Crash Day. (Robinson 227-29)

This retrospective on the events of the 2030s and later decades ("indeed in the forties and ever after, less beef got eaten," 229), halfway through the novel, suggests not only that the efforts at climate mitigation were successful – emission free air travel, overseas transport abstaining from the burning of fossil fuels, and a declining meat industry seem to have been achieved – but also that they were in part brought about by political violence helped along by Badim's black wing of the Ministry for the Future ("The War for the Earth had lasted years, his hands were bloody to the elbows," 391).

Alongside many other avenues of climate mitigation, *Ministry* thus gives a prominent role to politically motivated violence and critically interrogates previous decades' discourse on terrorism:

> to Frank it seemed different than it had when he was a child, when terrorists were universally abhorred. Now it felt different. Many attacks now were on carbon burners, especially those rich enough to burn it conspicuously. Car races and private jets. Yachts and container ships. So now the terrorists involved were perhaps saboteurs, or even resistance warriors, fighting for the Earth itself. Gaia's Shock Troops, Children of Kali, Defenders of Mother Earth, Earth First, and so on. (368)

Moreover, Frank and Mary's developing friendship suggests a reconciliation of moderate and radical positions, a friendly co-existence of the two. The specu-

lative historical account of "The War for the Earth" but also Badim's promotion to director of the Ministry for the Future as Mary's successor, suggest a positive radical flank effect impossible without a radicalization of the moderate middle. In *Ministry*'s polyphonic narrative, thus, change is a polymorphic phenomenon, which also includes disruptive forms of activism and politically motivated violence.

How to Blow Up a Pipeline (2023)

Daniel Goldhaber's 2023 movie is a fictional adaptation of Malm's manifesto that depicts what taking the central critique in *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* to heart would mean for the climate movement. A diverse group of eight young activists sets out to "to make oil unviable in the marketplace" and bombs a pipeline in western Texas. More than twenty years after 9/11, the film presents an activist group well aware of the semantic weight of terrorism, but deviates significantly from previous cultural negotiations of political violence: "If the American Empire calls us terrorists, then we're doing something right," says Michael, Native American resident of a Dakota reservation and the group's bomb builder. Goldhaber's film thus takes an openly radical stance that not only carries through the film itself but also through the promotional material. On the official website one can not only get Malm's book as a free ebook but also consult a map of the pipeline infrastructure spanning the US with additional information on oil and gas industry-related spills as well as injuries and fatalities resulting from them. Above the map one reads: "Act outside of the system. The pathway to a livable future on this planet is rapidly narrowing. The US is the world's top producer of oil and gas, and home to the largest network of pipelines on Earth" ("Take Action"). The data on fossil fuel infrastructure displayed through an interactive map serves to rationalize the call to action "outside of the system" and calls into question understandings of violence that exclude injuries and death resulting from the extraction and burning of fossil fuels.

Similarly, the film itself rationalizes the group's bombing of a Texas pipeline – rather than "pathologizing" their actions – and humanizes the perpetrators through the interspersed backstories of its protagonists: Xochitl has lost her mother to a heat wave exacerbated by climate change, and has subsequently, and without success, tried other avenues of activism (for example in a moderate, public-facing group called "Divest"); her childhood friend Theo, who also resides in Long Beach, California, a city that struggles with pollution from oil extraction and is known for its bad air quality, is diagnosed with terminal cancer, probably a consequence of life-long exposure to air and water pollution; Dwayne, a native Texan, lost his home due to the government invoking eminent domain in order to build a new section of pipeline; Shawn, a former member of Divest and an aspiring documentary filmmaker, is shown struggling with focusing on his studies due to climate emergency "doom scrolling" and appears fed up with the insig-

nificant impact relating environmental sob stories via documentary film has on audiences; Michael, a young Native American, who lives on a Dakota reservation riddled with oil pumps and "mancamps," and who seeks to resist the oil industries exploitation and destruction of Indigenous land and culture; Rowan, who got arrested on domestic terrorism charges for a protest in Portland, Oregon, became an FBI informant set to infiltrate the group, but decides to trick the state; Theo's girlfriend Alisha, who does volunteer work for a local church group, at first firmly advocates for non-violence, but has to come to terms with Theo's terminal illness and the fact that climate change will impact different social classes to varying degrees. The flashbacks informing the audience about the protagonists' motivation shows the "gap" between audience and activists "to not be so wide at all, as underneath each we see a clearly humanist desire that we can easily empathise with" (Ellis). Through these individuals' encounters with fossil capital, *Pipeline* also places their political violence firmly in an anti-capitalist, decolonial, climate justice framework that casts the fight against climate change – similar to Malm's manifesto – as a fight against oppression and inequality.

While Malm's book is an academic treatise, Goldhaber's movie is a thriller that runs on "planting questions and making us itch for answers" (Baker). "What makes [it] so interesting," Peter C. Baker writes in a review for the *New York Times*, "is the way it intertwines plot questions (will the explosives work?) with the uncertainty inherent in judging your actions by the standards of the future." References to previous "terrorists" or violent organizations are often featured in fictionalizations of radical environmentalism (see *Out of Time or The Overstory*, for example; en13) and can serve as a reminder for the fluidity of the concept. In *Pipeline*, picking up on Malm's argument, the protagonists debate the Civil Rights Movement in the context of terrorism but also name the Boston Tea Party ("they were terrorists of their day") to seemingly convince themselves – and the audience – of the righteousness of their plan on the eve of their attack. At the same time, the scene serves to contextualize the memorialization and judgment of political violence from a historical perspective, suggesting that future generations may exonerate them from accusations of "terrorism."

Contrary to previous texts about radical environmentalism, *Pipeline* is not set in beautiful green landscapes populated by sympathetic poster-animals. Rather, the film is set in seemingly barren, rocky desert landscapes, dotted with pumpjacks and transected by pipelines. Next to the backstories, thus, the visuals also center (human) survival rather than a nostalgic display of natural beauty and the wish to preserve 'nature' for nature's sake. Moreover, although sabotage and property destruction in environmental contexts are usually thought of as taking place in secrecy – Earth First!'s Judi Bari once referred to sabotage as "night work" (8) – the attack on the pipeline is carried out in the glaring Texas sunlight with some of the characters even wondering why access to the vulnerable infra-

structure of the fossil fuel industry is so easy. In contrast, the moment when law enforcement finally catches up to the group is set in a gloomy darkness, with Theo and Xochitl standing in front of the burning shack the group had built the bombs in.

As a collective, the eight activists decided to have the two young women, who grew up in the shadow of an oil refinery, claim responsibility for their communal action. Reminiscent of Jessica Reznicek and Ruby Montoya (see en4), Xochitl and Theo – one orphaned by climate change, the other terminally ill due to pollution – are set to serve as figures of identification for a broader movement. Through Rowan, the group sends out a video in which Xochitl explains their actions as self-defense:

> My name is Xochitl Fuentes. If you're seeing this, then I've just blown up a section of JDIA oil pipeline. Destroying this property was a last resort. 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.

In his manifesto, Malm claimed that "Greta Thunberg might well be the climate equivalent of Rosa Parks [...]. But she is not (yet) an Angela Davis or a Stokely Carmichael" (*Pipeline* 51). The fictional version of *Pipeline*, however, envisions the iconization of radical figures rather than moderates – and a form of martyrdom for its "terrorists" previously thought impossible.

Conclusion

Contrary to fictional accounts of radical environmental activism from the post-9/11 decade, the three works analyzed in the previous pages offer a more nuanced examination of political violence. Texts shaped by the so-called Green Scare tended to represent the use of strategic violence by non-state actors as threatening not only to themselves, and the environmental movement, but by extension also to the nation (for instance, Crichton's *State of Fear*), outlawing certain viewpoints and concerns. As a consequence, in-depth examinations of the portrayed activists' motivations and reasons for radicalization remained largely absent from these narratives that were shaped by the politico-historical climate of the War on Terrorism.

The works of Anthropocene fiction analyzed in this article, on the other hand, represent a shift in the cultural imaginary with regard to the representation of radical activism. Published under the impression of an intensifying climate crisis and the implications of the Anthropocene, they portray "terrorism" or political violence as "an expression of democratic politics" (Schwarzmantel 89) that arises

when "working through the established institutions of democratic politics, ha[s] failed to address specific issues" (Schwarzmantel 88). While earlier texts, such as *Night Moves*, *The East*, or *State of Fear*, have portrayed radicalism as a phenomenon that needs to be fought both by the state and the environmental movement itself, *Out of Time*, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, and *The Ministry for the Future*, seem to have heeded Malm's call to imagine a radicalization of the climate movement.

With an interest in the interplay between moderate and radical factions of activists, the three texts represent activism within the official democratic channels of participation as partly failed: campaigns for the divestment from fossil fuels (Goldhaber's *Pipeline*), the efforts of Ellen's Green Center in *Out of Time*, and Mary's institutional lobbying on behalf of future generations in *Ministry*. Fossil capital's grip on political power, it is suggested, is too strong and well-established for a swift institutional response to a worsening climate crisis. Thus, it is not the moderate factions, but the radical factions of climate activism that inspire political and ecological change. Especially in Klass' *Out of Time*, the complicated relationship between moderate and radical is examined, with a 'positive radical flank effect' for climate activism: from moderates having to distance themselves from radicals, to a re-definition of formerly radical positions "as relatively reasonable" (Haines 7).

Echoing Malm's view on climate activism as a struggle of the comparably powerless against an oppressive system seeking to safeguard the status quo (*Pipeline* 8-9), the three texts also legitimize the use of violence they represent through the experiences of their radical protagonists. To varying degrees, all three examine how the climate crisis shapes or will shape the lives of the 'powerless' – through Frank's experience of a mass death event in India that represents differing vulnerabilities in the face of climate change (*Ministry*), Green Man's concern for the future of his children in a climate changed world (*Out of Time*), and the ways in which the fossil fuel industry influences and endangers the lives of *Pipeline*'s protagonists. With the portrayal of moderate activism as partly failed, the texts seem to pose strategically employed violence as part of the puzzle to achieve the "global and structural" "changes that are needed" (Lanchester) to fight climate change – at least in the cultural imaginary.

Notes

[1] There are several chapters of this group in different countries that can have translated versions of this name.

[2] As a US example, Malm mentions the protests against the Keystone XL pipeline project, which was ultimately cancelled by President Joe Biden in 2021. At the time

Notes

of Malm's writing, however, the pipeline project, which had been cancelled by President Obama after a series of protests from 2011 to 2015, had gained momentum again with the election of Donald Trump. It is probably due to these political fluctuations and the consequences for environmental regulation that Malm describes the pipeline protests as unsuccessful.

[3] Regarding the fragmentary remembrance of the Civil Rights Movement, see Gilmore, "The Good Protest." Moreover, Herbert Haines has similarly argued that the success of the CRM was in part also due to positive radical flank effects: "Even now the most common interpretation of that decade of black protest maintains that black militants impeded progress by spawning backlash. It is undeniable that many whites turned against the cause of civil rights in the midst of the struggle. That a decrease in white sympathy for civil rights was at least partially a response to racial violence and 'black power' is also beyond debate. This book, however, presents evidence that such an understanding of the years of black protest is one-sided and inadequate: the turmoil which the militants created was indispensable to black progress, and indeed, black radicalization had the net effect of enhancing the bargaining position of mainstream civil rights groups and hastening the attainment of their goals." (2)

[4] While strategically employed violence is not a widespread tactic of the climate movement, there are examples of activists who have made use of this tactic and sabotaged pipelines. During the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016, climate activist and member of the Catholic Workers' Movement Jessica Reznicek and her fellow protestor Ruby Montoya committed several arson attacks on construction equipment as well as sections of the pipeline. In 2021, Reznicek was sentenced to "eight years in federal prison" due to terrorism enhancements that were applied ("Sentencing guidelines recommended up to 20 years in prison due to Reznicek's criminal history, which included convictions for things like trespassing during her activism," Joens). Ruby Montoya was sentenced to six years in prison in 2022, also with terrorism enhancements (Bruggeman).

[5] Activist Jeffrey "Free" Luers, for example, was sentenced to more than 22 years in prison for an arson attack on a car dealership in Eugene, Oregon (he served about half of his sentence in the end). Luers' severe punishment for property damage is an often-cited case in studies that critically debate the criminalization of radical environmentalism during the so-called Green Scare of the early 2000s (Taylor 4; Pellow 187).

[6] Malm argues that the underlying ideology of groups such as Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and Animal Liberation Front (ALF), "deep ecology and animal liberation" have "lost their street cred since then" (153) and claims that the climate movement has drawn larger numbers because of a disconnect to these earlier activist organizations.

[7] For White, there is a difference between what he refers to as "true terrorism" and other forms of violence labelled as terrorism: "The need to urgently revisit dominant narratives of terrorism is also a moral imperative in a society that is being traumatised by deliberate human on human acts of violence, in other words 'true' terrorism. Any definition, or application, of terrorism that equates 'people and property' needs to be called out for the sham it is." (318)

[8] Arnold defined "ecoterrorism" as any crime committed "to save nature" (103). In his book *Ecoterror*, he provides a list of acts he considers ecoterrorism in a chap-

Notes

ter titled "Terrorists"; said list is a mixed bag ranging from the publication of Edward Abbey's comical novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, acts of civil disobedience committed by Earth First! activists, and the bomb attacks of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber.

[9] The lethal attacks of September 11, 2001, were also used in political rhetoric, serving to delegitimize and criminalize ELF's acts of property destruction and arson. One prominent example is a speech by Republican Representative Greg Walden of Oregon (see Potter 58).

[10] Cultural productions that pick up 9/11 as a reference point are, for example, Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory*, or Marshall Curry's documentary film *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* from 2011.

[11] Michael Ziser has identified a shift in narrative point-of-view from the pre- to the post-9/11 era. After the attacks of September 2001, he writes, narrating the point of view of the terrorist "is rarely attempted in the current terror-novel tradition without a clear pathologization of terrorist psychology" (212).

[12] Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory*, for example, is re-negotiating the history of radical environmentalism in the US in the context of the climate crisis. The paths of his activist protagonists Olivia, Adam, Doug, Mimi, and Nick represent the radicalization of the movement from Earth First! to Earth Liberation Front, from tree-sitting and civil disobedience to arson and sabotage. Rather than contributing to the criminalization of radicalism, the novel is also critically interrogating the labelling of the group's deeds as terrorism, and asks, through the ruminations of protagonist Adam, who ends up a convicted terrorist, if history will one day justify the means (see Marak 2021).

[13] In 1981 the newly established group Earth First! acted out what Abbey had envisioned in the pages of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* – in non-violent, symbolic fashion. As Daniel J. Philippon recalls "four men and one woman [...] unfurled a three-hundred-foot wedge of black plastic sheeting over the edge of the dam to simulate a long, narrow 'crack' in the dam's face" (162). Long a thorn in the flesh of environmentalists in the US West, Glen Canyon Dam was both a logical and visually spectacular target for this 'attack' that not only put Earth First! on the map, but also highlighted the entanglement of (literary) fiction with radical US environmentalism.

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Biography

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