

Thomas Svolos : Psychoanalysis, Science Fiction, and Climate Change (LRO 336) : 13th April 2022

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Psychoanalysis, Science Fiction, and Climate Change

In November 2021, psychoanalyst Gustavo Dessal challenged psychoanalysts to take account of climate change, which he referred to as a “blind spot” in the discourse of Lacanian psychoanalysis.^[1] When it comes to the issue of climate change and the future of our planet, what might a psychoanalyst have to say about this from the perspective of psychoanalysis? What does psychoanalysis have to say about this whole set of issues that cover climate, geology, science, policy, media, international affairs, ecology and all the other discourses that address the topic?

A starting point might be the recognition that, for a psychoanalyst, our focus is not so much on the scientific or political issues as such, but rather on how they are spoken of, to us, as psychoanalysts in our consulting rooms, or, perhaps more broadly, how they are presented in public discourse.

Certainly, some patients talk about climate change and global warming, and my first observation about it is that they are most often spoken of in the register of anxiety. Some analysands of mine speak of anxiety—and, at times, panic and anguish—when they address the issue of climate change. That, too, is what others who work in psychology and mental health are hearing as well. A recent headline from the front page of the *New York Times* highlighted this: “Anxiety Over Climate Change Lands on the Therapist’s Couch.”^[2]

For the Lacanian psychoanalyst, this anxiety or anguish signals that we have entered the realm of the real. While this is being described, obviously, with words—the affect of anxiety and anguish is a signal of the real, which Lacan described as the only affect that is not deceptive.^[3] We are dealing with something

here that is exceeding the ability of language and the symbolic order to capture, at least for some subjects.

And we see an interesting resonance of this with at least one of the recent philosophical approaches to the phenomenon of climate change, as articulated by Timothy Morton in his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*.^[4] Morton's hypothesis is that phenomena such as climate change are hyperobjects, in that they transcend our frameworks for understanding what constitutes an object in the world—they are, to use Freud's term, *uncanny* and do not behave like other objects. Or we might say that they defy the frameworks we use for the depiction of everyday objects, such as our usual sense of space and time.

It is interesting to note that one of the production companies for the 2021 movie satire *Don't Look Up*, that was, in part, scripted as an allegorical commentary on the global response to climate change, is named Hyperobject Industries.^[5]

So—my first conclusion is that in the consulting room and also in philosophical and even popular movie discourses, we are dealing with something of the real, something difficult to get a handle on, something that isn't working, something outside of our usual laws or frameworks for objects, something that is impossible to represent—all attributes of the Lacanian real.

So how do we “catch hold” or “get a handle on” this real, to use Lacan's terms on how the psychoanalyst might approach the real?^[6]

We have many ways we conceptualize the approach to the real from the clinical perspective of psychoanalysis, a discourse on the subject that may well work for us psychoanalysts steeped in our discourse, in our “parlance,” as Jacques-Alain Miller puts it,^[7] but a discourse that is, however, hard to describe for those without the experience of psychoanalysis and long study of its works.

Putting aside psychoanalysis, for a minute, I argue that we also have a literary form that does this exceedingly well, namely—science fiction. Take, for example, the work of Kim Stanley Robinson generally, and, on the subject of climate change, his most recent book, *The Ministry of the Future*, particularly.^[8]

Ministry for the Future is a “near-future” novel, set a few decades in the future. In the story, the earth has warmed up further, and the novel is the story of the consequences of this warming (mass death, extinction of some forms of life, and so forth) and the responses across the globe to the change, including efforts to confront it and turn the direction of warming around. I want to highlight several features of the work.

First, it presents something (global warming) that can be described, can be put into words, can be placed in a spatial and temporal frame. Climate change is no longer uncanny, but very much documented. While there is enormous suffering in the story from climate change, I assert that, discursively, we are no longer as much in the realm of the real. Robinson's words make climate change an ordinary object. As a psychoanalyst, I would say that Robinson found a way to “catch hold” of this real through the very act of putting it into words, of symbolizing it, in this story.

His approach, however, is not a fairy tale—there is no idealistic “solution” to the problem. Indeed, just to step back a bit from this novel, let me remark that science fiction in general is, in some ways, a challenging literary form for the psychoanalyst. Fredric Jameson has rightly highlighted that one of the key dimensions of science fiction is that so many works in the genre work in the tradition of utopian literature.^[9] On first glance, one certainly could construct a psychoanalytic approach to utopian literature or science fiction that would be very skeptical. After all, when it comes to utopian politics,

there is a strong anti-idealism in psychoanalysis: according to Miller, psychoanalysis is inherently skeptical of idealisms, and utopian thought certainly can be figured as a form of idealism.^[10] That said, I think that there is another way to approach this issue. In a recent profile of Robinson in *The New Yorker*, Robinson describes his work as “anti-anti-utopian.”^[11] For me, this description by Robinson opens up a very different perspective on this literature. For starters, so much “anti-utopian” discourse itself is a form of conservative idealism (including especially notions of human nature). I believe that Robinson’s novel is skeptical perhaps of both any idealistic solution to climate change and also the idealistic denial of climate change—to take my initial comment above, the novel works in the register of the symbolic (in the Lacanian discourse), or one might say “materialistic” (in the Marxist discourse), rather than in the register of the imaginary or the realm of the idealistic.

We might approach this from another angle as well: the “real” of climate change is, for some, an old-style real, the real of nature, the real written in the stars. Nature is immutable. It is a catastrophe that is inevitable. It lives, in Aristotelian modal logic, in the zone of Necessity. It will happen, and there is nothing that we can do about this. This is a discursive frame of the situation that is very familiar in the realm of psychoanalysis—people often believe in the inevitability of their suffering, their situations, and so forth.

Part of the effect of Robinson’s work, however, is to move this from the realm of Necessity to the realm of Possibility—the necessity of a catastrophic future (as, for example, in *Don’t Look Up*) is transformed into a difficult future, one with conflict and loss, but one that is not catastrophic. This discursive effect of his work grants agency to humans, opens a place for subjectivity, which is, linked to the symbolic.

Some humans might choose to act. And, interestingly, this is indeed one of the ways we might figure psychoanalysis itself—the necessity of a certain imperative, master signifiers, a fundamental fantasy, or possibly even a certain mode of jouissance gets transformed into a possibility of something different, in the opening of a subjective space for desire.

[1] Gustavo Dessal, “Our Blind Spot,” *Lacanian Review Online*, #320, November 26, 2001.

[2] Ellen Barry, “Anxiety Over Climate Change Lands on the Therapist’s Couch,” *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 2022, p. A1.

[3] See Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, Malden, MA, Polity Press, 2014.

[4] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

[5] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t_Look_Up. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyperobject_Industries. Both sites accessed on February 13, 2022.

[6] “catch hold”: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XXIV: L’insu que sait de l’une bévue, s’aile à mourre* (1976-1977), Unpublished translation by Dan Collins from the French as published in *Ornicar?*. Session of March 8, 1977. “handle”: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XXIII: The Sinthome* (1975-1976), Cambridge, Polity, 2016, page 101. For development of this, see chapter 2, “An Easy Handle on the Real,” in Thomas Svolos, *The Aims of Analysis: Miami Seminar on the Late Lacan*, New York, Midden Press, 2019.

[7] Jacques-Alain Miller, “The Real Unconscious,” *The Lacanian Review*, Issue 6, p. 29.

[8] Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*, New York, Orbit/Hachette Book Group, 2020.

[9] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London, Verso, 2007.

[10] Jacques-Alain Miller, "L'anguille en politique," Radio broadcast on France Culture, June 22, 2005. See also Thomas Svolos. "The Body Politic," chapter 8 of *Twenty-first Century Psychoanalysis*, London, Karnac, 2017, pp. 93-102.

[11] Joshua Rothman, "Can Science Fiction Wake Us Up to Our Climate Reality? Kim Stanley Robinson's novels envision the dire problems of the future—but also their solutions," *The New Yorker*, January 24, 2022, p. 34.

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Notes on references

[3] See [Seminar X: The Anxiety \(or Dread\): 1962-1963: begins 14th November 1962: Jacques Lacan](#) or [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=212](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=212) The unedited translation from taperecordings is recommended, available at www.LacanianIreland.com

[6] Seminar XXIV : 8th March 1977. See [Seminar XXIV : 'L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre' : 1976-1977 : begins 16th November 1976 : Jacques Lacan](#) or [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12223](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12223) . Cormac Gallagher's English translation available from www.LacanianIreland.com. Note : the term 'catch hold' is not given in Gallagher's translation. This could be a translation difficulty or the difference between unedited transcripts & edited ones.

Quote from p98 of Cormac Gallagher's translation : If there were not these savants who looked after these particles, there would not be psarticules either and this forces our hand to think that, not alone is there the parl'être, but that there is also the psarl'être, in other words that all of this would not exist if there were not the functioning of this thing which is nevertheless so grotesque and is called thought.

Everything that I am saying to you there, has no more value I think than what my grandson recounts. It is rather annoying that the Real can only be conceived of as being improper. It is not quite the same as language. Language is only improper for saying anything whatsoever. The Real is only improper by being realised; according to the usage of the word to realise [in English] that means nothing other than to imagine as sense. There is one thing which is in any case certain, if indeed a thing can be so, it is that the very idea of the Real involves the exclusion of all sense. It is only insofar as the Real is emptied of sense, that we can grasp it a little which obviously brings me to not even give it the sense of the One, but one must hang onto [catch hold] something, and this logic of the One is indeed what remains, what remains as existence. There you are.

I am very annoyed at having conversed with you today in this kind of extreme. It is necessary all the same that this should take a different turn, I mean that to end up on the idea that the only thing that is Real is what excludes any kind of sense, is exactly the contrary of our practice. Where our practice is bathed in this kind of precise indication that, not simply names, but simply words have an import.

- See [Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome or Joyce and the Sinthome: 1975-1976: beginning on November 18th 1975 : Jacques Lacan](#) or [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=971](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=971)

p101 of Adrian Price's translation is probably Seminar XXIII : 16th March 1977. It is problematic that the printed text is not available today. The term 'handled' is only used once in this session in the unedited translation of Cormac Gallagher :

pIX 1 of Cormac Gallagher's translation (Part 2) : As a result I will not realise today what I would like – and you will see that in short I will illuminate this – what I would (136) like, is to give you a bit (bout), it cannot be called otherwise, a bit of Real.

pIX 2-3 of Cormac Gallagher's translation (Part 2) : Naturally I also, I dreamt, and this is to be taken in the literal sense, of this easy way to present him. I dreamt about it last night. You obviously, obviously as they say, you obviously were my public, but I was not there, I was not an actor. I was even not the slightest bit an actor. What I was telling you about was the way in which I, not at all an actor, a scribbler, I would rather call it, the way in which I judged characters other than my own. In this way, obviously, I got out of my own, or rather, I had no role. It was something along the lines of a psychodrama; which is an interpretation. That Joyce made me dream of, of functioning like that must have a value; an easier value to extract moreover. Since, as I said, he suggests that to anyone at all. That there must be an easy [way] to handle Joyce. He suggests that because of the fact that there is psychoanalysis. And it is indeed onto this track that a whole lot of people precipitate themselves. But it is not because I am a psychoanalyst and, at the same time, too involved, that I must refuse to envisage him from this angle. There is here, all the same, something objective. Joyce is an a-Freud, I will say; playing on the word affreux. He is an a-Joyce.

- Thomas Svolos : An Easy Handle on the Real : April? 2020

Blog toward the cancelled May 2020 NLS Congress in Ghent, see

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