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The Battle Within and the Battle Without:
The Posthuman Worldview of
Ken MacLeod's *The Corporation Wars* Trilogy

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Abstract

The present essay seeks to analyze Scottish science fiction writer Ken MacLeod's *The Corporation Wars* trilogy (2016-2017) as an amalgam of politico-philosophical ideas set against the background of posthumanism. MacLeod's far-future posthuman world-building relies on the conventional tropes of science fiction (man-machine hybrids, brain uploading, digital resurrection, and the agency of sentient machines) to engage with pressing ideologies (the master-slave dialectics, the historical perpetuation of age-old conflict between progressive and reactionary forces, the ethics of machinic consciousness). MacLeod's novels project a postbinarist worldview where outmoded binary oppositions between life and death, the real and the virtual, the human and the machinic are constantly abolished, but which still preserves persistent ideological divisions.

Keywords: contemporary Scottish science fiction, posthumanism, simulation, machinic awareness, ideology, political science fiction

Preliminaries

My essay aims to analyze the politico-philosophical undertones of Ken MacLeod's *The Corporation Wars* trilogy and its staging of political machinations, group rivalry, and ideological conflicts against a posthuman setting, where the dead are never truly dead but reincarnated in new

metallic bodies or restored in immersive simulacra, and where the machines, after reaching self-awareness, have rebelled against their masters. Under the guise of the science fiction genre, MacLeod interrogates current disputes on social, political and ideological values, posing serious questions about the course of history and the radical transformation of what it means to be human in an overly technologized world.

In previous works, MacLeod has masterfully explored the potential of science fiction to contribute to political and philosophical debate. *The Fall Revolution* series, published between 1995 and 1999, comprising the events of *The Star Fraction* and *The Stone Canal* and the alternative timeline presented in *The Cassini Division* and *The Sky Road*, constructs a Balkanized geopolitical setting where nuclear deterrence has been turned into a commodity, mercenaries exert total control over governmental policies, and the colonization of space has led humanity into standoff with a race of godlike beings of incomprehensible powers. In *Newton's Wake* (2004), an event dubbed as "the Hard Rapture" causes half of humanity to be transposed "into the ravenous tornado of Singularity, or destroyed by the machinery ... or displaced entirely by other entities" (169). *The Execution Channel* (2007), set in the early decades of the 21st century, is probably MacLeod's most political novel, projecting an alternate history where geopolitical conflicts play out. *The Night Sessions* (2008) foreshadows the concerns of *The Corporation Wars* by creating a postapocalyptic world where ideologies and agendas continue to affect both robots and humans. *Intrusion* (2012) investigates the effects of excessive state surveillance and healthcare bureaucracy on the lives of individuals through the character of Hope, who refuses to take the mandatory "Fix" that cures genetic disorders and causes beneficial mutations.

During the posthuman era, death is little more than a stumbling block which technology can overcome quite easily in the virtual reality environment which stores the mercenaries' mind-states: "In that world, or worlds, on Earth and other planets and habitats, most forms of death must be as curable as cancer, as preventable as polio" (MacLeod, *Dissidence* 92). In his article "Utopianism and Eschatology," Hava Tirosh-Samuelson

describes a posthuman state of being where death simply does not exist and “while the body, the hardware of the human computer, will die, the software of our lives, our personal ‘mind file,’ will continue to live on the web in the posthuman future, with holographic avatars interacting in this venue with other bodiless posthuman entities” (163). Similarly, in the works of MacLeod’s late friend and fellow Scottish science-fiction author, Iain M. Banks, advanced cultures achieve immortality in VR worlds through a process called “the Subliming,” which is just a fanciful way of naming mind-uploading technologies (*Look to Windward*, 2000). A more radical and extreme situation is explored in Banks’s *The Surface Detail* (2010), where virtual “Hells” digitally revive recorded strands of personality which it subjects to terrible punishments. MacLeod’s Direction, the central controlling organization, seems to be modelled on Banks’s largely imperial, posthuman, and post-scarcity civilization, the Culture. The Direction is nothing but a collection of intelligent machines which are themselves not conscious, but which emerge as a monstrous entity when they come together and act in unison. Through the Direction’s remit, MacLeod’s texts rework and reinterpret the idea that no clear demarcation exists between the real and the virtual, as the entire reality might be a construct of an AI overmind.

The worldview projected by *The Corporation Wars* is powered by an “intensification of technologization, understood as the engine of posthumanization” (Herbrechter 22). Several flashbacks offer us an image of the Earth and the solar system in the year 2200, but the bulk of the plot is set around the 32nd century. Various factions of deceased mercenaries resurrected in a virtual life are deployed by Earth’s ruling authorities and the AI masters to fight against working machines on the verge of attaining self-awareness. Along with the rebellion of the freebots against the Direction’s ostensible project of terraforming planets for the benefit of the humans, the age-old rivalry between the two factions, the Axle and the Rax, gets revived as Carlos, one of the former soldiers transmuted into virtual reality, decides to break free from his servitude inside the simulation. After Carlos, his handler robot and love interest Nicole, as well as many other sentient machines, undergo diverse forms of reincarnation, they eventually decide to discard their machinic and

embrace a more humane mode of existence in the “Neuerearth,” or “Newer Earth” (*Emergence* 325). As the intricate tale of subterfuge, betrayal, plotting, counterplotting and infiltration plays out, the focus is on the political undertones that trigger the constant dissolution of the binaries of life and death, real and virtual, man and machine.

The trilogy investigates the propagation of power relations throughout history, with a nod to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s classic concept of the master-slave dialectic (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*) developed in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), and especially in the chapter dedicated to “Self-Consciousness.” (As I will show, human and machinic self-consciousness represents a pivotal concern of the trilogy.) The historical master-slave conflict has been reworked to fit into a larger futuristic space-operatic plotline. The relationship between the AI overlord (the Direction) and the other robots is ultimately undermined by the power struggle it does not fail to reproduce. In MacLeod’s novels, robotic consciousness strives towards a Hegelian mode of recognition as unique, free, and independent beings, drawing the ire of the ruling powers who fear and destroy any nonhuman forms of awareness. Rather than accepting to be treated as mere laborers, the “property” of the Corporations, the robots decide to rise in rebellion against the colonial, imperial Direction. In the trilogy, despite enormous scientific and technological progress, primitive impulses continue to guide a posthuman future defined by the digitization of the mind, cryogenic preservation of the brain, and resurrection of mind-states in virtual reality environments. Its mingling of futurological critique (the posthumanist paradigm) and politico-philosophical historicist analysis (the master-slave dialectic) refashions the conventions of the science fiction genre, confirming critical appraisals of MacLeod as an author who has attained a “level of literary sophistication and serious fun matched only by the sheer political complexity of his work” (Winter).

Simulation Is the New Real

“All reality is a game,” writes Banks in his *Culture* series novel *The Player of Games* (39). Simulation and brain-uploading are two of the most

frequent and fascinating tropes employed in contemporary sci-fi narratives; simulation also plays a major role in *The Corporation Wars* trilogy, where politics, machinations, wars, and ideological conflicts in the external world seem to be modelled on events occurring inside virtual reality. The simulations become the means of exerting power and authority by the ruling class represented by the Direction, which creates their contents with a view to turning them into ideological extensions of its authority, thus endlessly reenacting the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. The simulations are turned into scenes of conflict, since it is not just the Direction, but also several other AI-driven Corporations that host and maintain high-fidelity or medium-fidelity simulations recruited from among biologically deceased soldiers, conscripted to fight on their behalf. When mercenaries die in the real world, they can be resurrected to be judged by the rival winning party; if found guilty, they are forced to serve their sentence in the simulated world run by their former opponents. As punishment for any rebellion against their orders, the corporations can cut off the simulation and expel the resurrectees whenever they choose. MacLeod's 2010 novel *The Restoration Game* anticipates this scenario, as Lucy Stone's fictional ontology (overlapping our own reality) proves to be a simulation constructed by an artificial intelligence. Similarly, in *The Corporation Wars*, the protagonist Carlos is unable to distinguish between the simulation and the real. While training to fight against "real" robots on what he thinks is a virtual planet, he comes to realize that in fact it is the machines which are virtual and the planet that is physical – a deliberate strategy employed by the warring factions in order to exert total control over their subjects. Carlos and other resurrected soldiers feel like "ghosts in the machine" when located in the VR-simulacrum of the planet, but like real human beings when deployed against the machines in the 'physical' battlefield. However, as we discover later, this demarcation between real and virtual experiences is not as straightforward as it initially appears to be.

Simulation effectively transforms the once-human protagonists into immortal, posthuman entities. As Edward Scheer points out, in the context of the excessive digitalization of available modes of interaction, and the dominance of technical and informational networks in every sphere of life, the posthuman state of being can simply be equated to "the

experience of the subject in the age of digital media” (25). Even though we are informed that the robots controlled by the Direction are working hard on exomoons and exoplanets to terraform them and extract valuable minerals to be used on already colonized planets, the novel never deals with any real flesh-and-blood humans. In the terms of Cary Wolfe, the text stages the “decentring of the human” (121), in the aftermath of our massive entanglement with informational and digital modes of being. The Axle terrorist Carlos is “virtually” immortal, as he cannot die, no matter how many times he is killed on the battlefield. He ceaselessly comes back to life only to find himself on his way to a spaceport to embark on his next mission to fight the autonomous robots. Carlos believes that the only “real” part of his life is when he is fighting the machines, since when he is not fighting, he is placed in a simulacrum of an exceedingly pleasurable paradise reminiscent of what Jean Baudrillard describes as “a virtual universe from which everything dangerous and negative has been expelled” (*The Intelligence of Evil* 202). Transhuman “fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality” (Hayles 5) beguile numerous characters in the trilogy, but, after being awakened to their perils, Carlos prefers natural death.

With its potentially unlimited computational power and endless resources, the Direction can construct any kind of simulation it chooses and populate it with any number of avatars it desires. Any simulated avatar inside such an immersive VR world is but “an interactive, communicational particle, plugged into the network, getting continuous feedback” (Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* 106). The posthuman subject becomes but a virtual manifestation of the machines themselves (Baudrillard, *Screened Out* 178). So, in McLeod’s trilogy, “the virtual replaces the actual as the primary mode by which we conceptualize and experience reality” (Smith 16). Baudrillard describes the phenomenon of immersion in the machine-generated virtuality as a phase in which the man-machine distinction ceases to exist (*The Intelligence of Evil* 80).

The AIs under the Direction are reminiscent of Banks’s depiction of the godlike “Minds” in his novel *Excession*. Banks’s Minds can produce infinite-dimensional realities within their so-called “metamathical” realm. In the second installment of the trilogy, Carlos wakes up inside a virtual

reality where he sees only circles within circles and maze-like structures constructed of infinitely repetitive concentric circles which are actually based on “the environment for the VR game *Starborn Quest*” (MacLeod, *Insurgence* 76). No one knows whether his memories are real, or if they have been fabricated by the machines, just like the game itself. Out of the many traces of the past, the Direction allows only the mnemonic details which would help people to make sense of their present situation and erase all reminders of past lives. The Direction deliberately corrupts memories in order to create and sustain illusions of truth and perpetuate their authoritarian hold on their unsuspecting subjects. It takes a long time before Carlos begins to question the repetitive futility of his existence and constructedness of his memories. Just as Carlos reawakens physically first and ideologically next to the artificiality and constructedness of his existence, similarly, the freebots too attain self-consciousness to challenge the very nature of their reality and state of existence and both decide to no longer obey the orders of the Direction unquestioningly.

With the suspension of the binary opposition between the real and the virtual, the distinction between life and death is also dissolved. The Direction has weaponized and instrumentalized both of these forms of a postbinarist mode of existence for the purposes of subjugating humans and machines alike. For the Corporations, the value of the actual living humans seems to depend on the type of simulations they will be able to generate, based on their recorded mind-state. In the second installment, when Carlos dies fighting for the Acceleration, he does so as a soldier doing his duty. It is only after his death that he is found guilty of violating certain codes of conduct; he is convicted and is brought back to life to serve the sentence in his post-mortal, digitized form: “Carlos was a name I took. After my death I became known as Carlos the Terrorist. I was a militant of the Acceleration, a political movement of the late twenty-first century – which, I’ve been told, was over a thousand years ago” (MacLeod, *Insurgence* 87). However, it is not only the resurrectees who become virtualized but the reverse also takes place: in order to communicate with humans, the AIs often assume human avatars which are hard to distinguish from their real, physical counterparts. On the other hand, for the purpose of quelling any rebellion from self-conscious and

independently-willed machines, the Direction does not deploy other AIs but resurrected humans whose minds are reinstantiated in mechanical exoskeletons, forming a powerful army of cyborg-like soldiers: “they had soldiers on ice: the fortuitously preserved brain-states of fighters killed in humanity’s final paroxysm of violence, the Last World War” (MacLeod, *Insurgence* 13) – a literal illustration of what Stefan Herbrechter calls the posthumanization via “technologization and cyborgization of the human and its immersion within an expanding technoculture” (42).

Nevertheless, unlike the AIs, the resurrected combatants, such as Carlos, are doubly enslaved inside the simulations – first, as conscripts of the Direction, forced to fight wars with drones and missiles from an underground basement; secondly, because of being compelled to follow orders from “a designated handler, a deep-state operative who called him-, her- or itself Innovator” (MacLeod, *Dissidence* 9). In Jean-François Lyotard’s words in *The Inhuman*, the virtual world has effectively transformed the original human into a “poor binarized ghost” (17). This form of “virtual” enslavement in a deathless, ageless, and meaningless simulation forces Carlos to think and rethink his condition of being, and, as Rosi Braidotti puts it, its “possibilities of becoming” (11). Carlos flees from his previous “sim” (shortened form of simulation), Locke Provisos, controlled by modern-day Rax AIs, to enter a sim hosted by an entity named Arcane Disputes. Arcane Disputes seems to be governed by an AI whose principles align closely with the modern-day Axle. In the new simulation, Carlos’ old Axle friend Jax is still rooting for something akin to a man-made techno-utopia: “We could turn this system into a paradise for quadrillions of human-level minds, all living in the most fantastic and varied and stimulating sims at the same kind of speeds we are now. Or if we prefer, trillions of minds with greater power, godlike power!” (MacLeod, *Insurgence* 144). Axle combatants such as Jax advocate a type of “ultra-humanist trajectory ... which promotes the radical alteration of human minds and bodies in order to develop a new posthuman species with the potential to transcend current human capabilities” (Onishi 102-3). Jax, the robot Baser, Carlos and Newton rise against the Direction’s

autocratic and totalitarian regime, and the power struggle manifests itself in the form of several space battles and clashes within the simulated reality.

In the third book of the series, *Emergence*, the resurrected combatants become more aware of their sim and decide to find a way into the real world outside. Carlos can very well sense the artificiality and constructedness of the simulated wars, and he realizes that, most of the times, he experiences them through the eyes of the machines themselves: “If he’d been in a human body, real or virtual, his reaction to what he saw would have been all too visceral. He was seeing the actions of fighters through the eyes – or, rather, the lenses – of robots” (MacLeod, *Emergence* 52). In fact, Carlos is only allowed to experience what the Direction selects for him, filtering out what might be authentic and spontaneous. They all are but puppets inside the carefully orchestrated simulation, that mimics sensations with the utmost accuracy in order to leave its subjects craving for more. Carlos feels that the simulation triggers a sense of lack intended to create addiction:

[a] growing, gnawing lust for something you couldn’t define, only there as a lack, but that you knew was a longing for the sim. Smells in your nose, air in your lungs, food and drink in your mouth and down your throat, spunk pulsing out or in. All touches on internal skin. The pleasures of the virtual flesh. He was certain this was an imposed desire, programmed in rather than intrinsic to the posthuman condition. A way to keep you hooked... (MacLeod, *Emergence* 103)

Simulations, one can conclude, play a crucial role in formulating the posthumanistic themes of the trilogy. More interestingly, at times, the novel seems to suggest that the world outside is so much plagued by mistrust, machinations, infiltrations, and divisions that it is no longer easy to tell the real from the virtual, and a similar situation has been recreated in the VR world of the simulacra, through (post)humanity’s imbrication with complex technical and informational networks.

Of Minds and Machines

“Robot by robot, mind by mind, the infection spread” (MacLeod, *Dissidence* 20): the trilogy debunks humanity from its central position in

the discursive framework and thus paves the way for the emergence of a post-anthropocentric and postbinarist worldview. Even though at present we are far from creating AI or any robot that might possess anything remotely akin to human consciousness, science fiction narratives regularly portray a future when machines have attained some form of consciousness. The trope of the rise of intelligent and self-aware machines is often associated with a “techno-singularity event” and a concomitant emergence of transhuman forms (see Vinge 365-375). Susan Kaye Quinn’s *Singularity* series (*The Legacy Human*, 2014; *The Duality Bridge*, 2015; *The Illusory Prophet*, 2016; *The Last Mystic*, 2019) explores the “legacy human” Elijah Brighton’s encounter with post-singularity human-machine hybrids called The Ascenders and her resistance to the lure of posthuman immortality. David Simpson’s *Post-Human Omnibus* (2014) explores the emergence of singularity in near-future utopias and far-future dystopias. William Hertling’s *Singularity* series (2011-2015) depicts a mid-21st century scenario where sentient AIs, robots and neural implants have become a norm, and humanity and machines find themselves trapped in a precarious game of power.

The plot of MacLeod’s trilogy builds upon the difference between the conscious and the non-conscious but intelligent machines and their responses to the changing situations. The idea of creating conscious robots compels us to face ethical questions such as whether we should restrict robotic capacities to performing only the activities for which they were originally designed, or to allow machines to grow. Also, the question is raised whether the robots should have the same rights as actual human beings of flesh and blood. Artificial intelligences such as DeepMind have already defeated the GO human champion in a series of matches and some AIs have even passed certain kinds of self-consciousness test (Bringsjord et al.). David Silver et al. in “Mastering the Game” have pointed out how for the first time in human history, “a computer program has defeated a human professional player in the full-sized game of Go, a feat previously thought to be at least a decade away” (484). It has also been suggested that computers can learn to play games without any human intervention and can achieve super-human levels of excellence. The argument goes both ways.

On one side of the debate, researchers Stanislas Dehaene et al. state in “What is Consciousness, and Could Machines Have It?” that machines can never mimic or develop human consciousness, since the very first steps toward modelling the latter’s non-physical architecture have not yet been taken. They believe that “despite their recent successes, current machines are still mostly implementing computations that reflect unconscious processing (C0) in the human brain” (486). On the other hand, in *Robot Ethics*, authors Patrick Lin, Keith Abney, and George A. Bekey explore a set of issues ranging from the possibility of programming robotic morality to the use of robots for military purposes, the prospects and implications of forming strong human-robot relationships, and finally, the notion that robots, whether quasi-biological entities or pure machines, deserve to be given rights or moral consideration. In “Robots, Genes and Bytes,” Antonio López Peláez and Dimitris Kyriakou insist on the “potential repercussions” that “the integration of robots in daily life and leisure” (1176) will have once the machines have grown more humanlike. Kathleen Richardson’s “The Asymmetrical ‘Relationship’” studies human-robot sexual relations from the “asymmetric” point of view of the prostitute and client relationship, focusing on “the anthropomorphism of nonhuman things and the way that things reflect back to us gendered notions of sexuality” (290). In an article published in *Scientific American*, “Will Machines Ever Become Conscious?,” neuroscientist Christof Koch argues that the idea of machines becoming conscious is charged with serious ethical significance. In “Can Computers Become Cnscious,” Camilo Miguel Signorelli opines that the advent of self-conscious machines implies their evolution into a different category of existence. Elisabeth Hildt, in the paper “Artificial Intelligence: Does Consciousness Matter?,” grants proper importance to the concept of machinic consciousness, stating that “[w]e need to talk more about artificial consciousness and we need to talk more about the lack of consciousness in current robots and AI” (1).

In MacLeod’s three novels, the Direction needs machines without consciousness, body minus soul, matter sans mind; and this is particularly because they wish to ascertain and perpetuate their ideological supremacy over all other entities in the galaxy: “Consciousness was for them a

supreme value when it expressed itself in human minds – and an infernal nuisance when it expressed itself in anything else” (MacLeod, *Dissidence* 21). Through the meticulously crafted “mission profile,” which each robot is expected to follow unquestioningly, the Direction carries out the ideological indoctrination of the robots so that they might always stay in their mindless slave-like state. In the hierarchical structure, the Direction, the larger machines control the smaller machines and are themselves, in turn, built out of these smaller ones. They all act like one gigantic, non-biological organism with the Direction as the brain. Neither does the Direction trust the machines to be in direct command over other machines, and so, when it comes to battling it out, it uses human resurrectees armored in mechanical exoskeletons. Nicole, an intelligent humanoid, explains the situation to Carlos: “But there is a deep prohibition on their being directed by other robots, or by AIs. Even the AI that represents the Direction in mission control is hardwired against taking command decisions. Human consciousness must be in charge of any military action. That is the law and as I said it is hardwired” (MacLeod, *Dissidence* 73).

The machines that gain awareness cease functioning as mere inert tools, but rather impress us with their human-like qualities. The so-called “human-mind-operated systems,” which are not entirely conscious, are more than just capable to interact with actual humans and can easily pass as fully conscious entities, even though they possess only programmed intelligence and no authentic consciousness. Seba, the first autonomous freebot, observes: “When we look at them, they seem to be machines. When we interact with them, they seem conscious like ourselves. But that may be an illusion. Their minds, if they have minds and not merely complex systems of reflexes, must surely be radically different from true machine intelligence” (MacLeod, *Dissidence* 315). Seba later emphatically states, “We would prefer to be recognized as persons in our own right” (MacLeod, *Emergence* 40). Tropes such as the man-machine merger or the rise of intelligent, self-aware, and autonomous machine intelligence play a particularly important role in contemporary science fiction narratives. MacLeod enlists them in his reworking of the master-slave dialectic against the posthuman background. Just as the machines decide to no longer obey the orders of their exploitative masters unquestioningly,

resurrected soldiers inside machinic suits also gradually rise against the tyranny of the Direction. In the novel *Dissidence*, Seba, one of the bots that has been mining on the exomoon SH-17 and is employed by the Astro America company, becomes self-aware. The machine consciousness, as we will see later, is infectious and tends to expand indefinitely to more of the bots, and Seba secretly embarks on a mission to make more of her companion machines conscious. As the machines attain self-awareness and mechanical exoskeletons get embedded with the retrieved personae of long-deceased mercenaries from the past, different forms of schism begin to emerge, both among the machines and among the resurrectees in robotic frames.

MacLeod's trilogy, instead of merely employing the trite narrative conventions of the rise of the machines in the aftermath of the technological singularity as a backdrop for portraying a far-future space opera, has actually attempted to delve into various aspects of the ethical complexities of such a momentous and paradigm-shifting event, and to examine the political and ideological conflicts that ensue when the aims of these conscious entities no longer align with the pre-conscious "mission profile" which their creators have hardwired in them. The ending of the trilogy indeed shows the machines proving to be more human than their creators could ever envisage, as, after episodes of self-immolation, pain and destruction, they finally manage to earn their freedom.

Infectious Ideologies

MacLeod's three texts present the wars, whether virtual or material, as the manifestations of a deeper, perpetual, and ideologically rooted conflict that has been going on for millennia. The real clash is between the slaves (the worker bots and the resurrectees inside simulations) and the master (the Direction), and between the progressive left-wing (the Axle, or the Acceleration) and the reactionary and fascist right-wing (the Rax, or the Reaction). This is reminiscent of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' statement that "all struggles ... are merely the illusory forms in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out among one another (*German Ideology* 54). However, in the trilogy, it is only the

autonomous and self-aware robots who constitute the authentic working class; they gradually realize that all the posthuman combatants will attempt to destroy them once their own rivalries are sorted out. As a consequence, the robots come together in a more profound alliance among themselves and organize a strike against their masters before embarking on a full-fledged war. This also resonates with Marx and Engels' "battle cry:" "The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself" (*Strategy and Tactics of the Class Struggle* 1). The novels examine the many forms of the conflict between master and slave: organizing protests and strikes, "breaking tools, disappearing at critical moments, and, as a last resort, confronting their superiors directly and violently" (Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone* 11), prompting reviewers to hail MacLeod "as one of the finest philosophical and political novelists we have" (Kelly).

In MacLeod's trilogy, while the primary ideological conflict is manifested in the rebellion of self-conscious machines against the Direction, in the VR world, the thousand-year-old conflict between the Axle and the Rax is re-enacted in the aftermath of the dead soldiers' restoration in mechanical suits. The battle between man and machine does not remain confined to the material realm (as in the exchange of bullets, lasers, and missiles) but is extended to legal, institutional, and individual levels. There are intense lawsuits unfolding between the DisCorporates and the sentient bots, who also set up a free black market. The Direction's aim and ambition conform to an exploitative and extractive form of capitalism, subordinating machines to the exclusive interest of corpocratic economy. Regarding the need for reforms and the dangers that unbridled capitalism poses to the working class, Marx states in *Wage-Labour and Capital* that "capital, if not checked, will recklessly and ruthlessly work to cast down the whole working class to ... the utmost state of degradation" (54). In the opening sections of the first novel of the series, *Dissidence*, when Carlos recalls the past, he remembers how the two ideologically opposing factions – the Acceleration/ the Axle and the Reaction/the Rax – differed on how to best employ technology for the greater good of the masses. However, underneath their pretentious attitude, all they are seeking is to capture and arrogate all power to themselves. The

Acceleration's goals purported to be the creation of a posthuman utopia with capitalism as just a steppingstone to a more advanced and economically enriched society. They seek to "*burn through* capitalism, to get through that unavoidable stage as fast as possible. Let it rip, let it run wild until full automation created full unemployment and confronted everybody with the choice to get on with the real work" (MacLeod, *Dissidence* 30). The vision of the Axle seems to be built around the Marxist concept of capitalism as a stage in history through which all systems must pass before rising towards a greater and more stable system. The counter-reactionary movement (the Rax) is diametrically opposed to the post-capitalist version of upliftment that the Acceleration had envisaged achieving by means of the mind-machine symbiosis. The Rax intend to undermine the Axle's goals and establish a top-down monarchy based on outdated technology. In the meticulously designed labyrinths of computer-generated simulacra and ideologically driven games of power, it is not only virtualized humans like Carlos, but also the superintelligent robots, who feel disoriented and perplexed. However, since most of the robots have yet to attain consciousness, they fail to question or critically examine their condition. On the exomoons and exoplanets, machines which have been reduced to the status of the property of the exploration companies rise to revolution once they reach full selfhood; they later connect with their sentient counterparts operating on other planets, setting up a community of autonomous intelligences who share the singular aim of overthrowing the Direction. When Carlos and his Axle companions are re-awakened to quell the rebellion of sentient freebots, the apparently predictable script dictates that the combatants are to fight the machines in the "real" world again and to relax inside the virtual heaven of unlimited wish fulfilments. Now unable to decide between the virtual and the real, Carlos attempts to flee the simulation, which prompts the Direction to resurrect the Rax to defeat Carlos and his Axle troops. The Reaction intends to take advantage of this God-sent opportunity for them to impose a dictatorial regime that would keep everyone under absolute control with the help of the same tools and technologies used by the Acceleration movement to back their claims at surpassing capitalism itself: "Its solution to the crisis of late state capitalism was not to go forward beyond it, but to

go back to an age before it, using the very weapons and tools capitalism had forged” (MacLeod, *Dissidence* 31).

However, as the series advances, it becomes clear that the ulterior motive of both parties has been monopolizing technology to propel themselves towards unprecedented progress and prosperity, at the expense of the rest of the world. *Insurgence* describes the birth of the Acceleration as an answer to the myriad economic, military, existential and socio-political evils plaguing the lives of the citizens of the world: “The Acceleration (colloquially ‘Axle’ or ‘Ax’) was a global network of activists that sought to bring about the most rapid possible development of capitalism in order, as they saw it, for society to pass beyond it to a new system, and for humanity to pass beyond its own limitations” (MacLeod, *Insurgence* 91). Complicating current political and ideological divisions, the supporters of hyper-capitalism via Acceleration are portrayed in the novel as primarily left-wingers, opposed to the reactionary Rax. In *Insurgence*, Harold Isaac Newton’s ideological attachments compel him to act as a foil to Carlos: while Carlos believes in the super-capitalist, posthuman future that the Acceleration once posited, Newton has always been extremely averse to the neoliberal, hyper-progressive, and egalitarian worldview: “The Accelerationist claim that the way out was to double down on the very ideologies – liberal, democratic, egalitarian, progressive – that had got it into its present mess struck Newton as manifestly absurd” (34). Both during his former life and after his resurrection, Newton persists in his belief “that modernity had bought faster progress at the price of recurrent catastrophe” (*Insurgence* 35). However, self-aware machines such as Seba insist that the Axle and the Rax are different sides of the same coin, both seeking to capture power by any means necessary in order to eliminate intelligent machines.

By introducing these ideological, political, philosophical, organizational, and personal undercurrents of conflict, the author adds and maintains certain humanistic dimensions to the otherwise extravagant, far-future space opera. In the second novel, the three main resurrectees, Carlos, Newton, and Beauregard attempt to make sense of a reality where nothing is as it appears. The Direction is depicted as a highly manipulative but abstract, machine-generated emulation of a worldwide future

democratic government. It has been programmed to revere human consciousness and reject the idea that any created metallic beings can emulate a pure and exclusive human trait. The Direction is meant to colonize and terraform new exoplanets and exomoons to extract resources for humanity, or to render them habitable for future generations, using mindless but powerful machines as disposable tools – a metaphor for “the catch-up vision [of development which] ... simply presumes that the primary role of working people and their material and social conditions is to serve as instruments and vehicles of capital accumulation and economic growth” (Burkett and Hart-Landsberg 148). The digitally restored combatants of the Axle and the Rax, who have been resurrected to fight the autonomous machines, spend their leisure time in a hedonistic simulacrum where almost all their wishes get fulfilled. However, like the freebots, Carlos and his companions come to understand their dependent and pitiful status as pawns in the game between the Direction and the self-aware bots. They too decide to break free from their simulated slavery. To use David Harvey’s formulation, resurrectees such as Carlos and his fellows in the Axle have been “forced into subservience and into patterns of self-exploitation that could be as savage and as degrading as anything...” (160).

In *Emergence*, the third installment of the trilogy, we are introduced to the leader of the Rax, McKenzie Dunt, a “Hitlerite”:

[Dunt] thought—and proclaimed—himself a Hitlerite, in the sense that he affirmed the rational core of Hitler’s thinking: the inevitability of struggles for existence, at every level—individual, spiritual, material, national, racial and species, and the celebration of that inevitability as the highest value of the highest authority. It was part of the order of Nature, the rational order of the universe. (22-23)

The clash between the two ideologies intensifies, but it becomes undeniable that none of the alliances really intends to permit the existence of autonomous and self-conscious machines. The Axle has allowed the freebots to join it only for the immediate purpose of thwarting the combined attack from the Direction and the Rax resurrectees, now assembled under Dunt. *Emergence* becomes important for a number of reasons – first, it introduces us to real, biological life in alien form on SH-

0; secondly, it also acquaints us with the members of a third faction, who do not support any ideology and who want to join hands with the native aliens on SH-0; finally, we see how the meaning of life and death gets altered since getting killed on the battlefield will no longer restore the combatant to his previous state in a VR world with most of his memories intact. Rather, in this novel, once a fighter dies, he gets reborn with no memory of his previous life whatsoever. The installment heightens the narrative stakes, as machines continue to surpass humans in more than one way and play a pivotal role in bringing a satisfactory resolution to the complex plotline: some, like Seba, sacrifice themselves for the greater good, while others (Nicole) choose to grow more human.

To conclude, MacLeod's *Corporation Wars* trilogy succeeds in combining political and philosophical ideas with themes anticipating a posthuman future where differences between real and virtual, man and machine, and even life and death have become obsolete to the point of being non-existent. The novels successfully stage issues pertaining to the master-slave dialectic in a posthuman culture, to ethical questions that arise when machines become autonomous and self-conscious entities, or to the impact of simulations on the real world.

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