

Nostalgic and Precarious: The Affective Power of Objects in Olga Ravn's *The Employees* (2018)

Marta Lopes Santos

Abstract

Olga Ravn's *The Employees: A workplace novel of the 22nd century* (2020 [2018]) is made up of statements by the employees - both human and humanoid - of the Six-Thousand Ship, detailing their interactions with the objects that have been brought on board to increase productivity. The cryptic objects, collected by the employees in nearby missions to the planet New Discovery, are described as being a mix between biological and technological and diffuse sounds and smells stimulative to the senses, "as if the objects only existed to awaken particular feelings ... by way of their form and material." Set in the future, I argue *The Employees* ultimately mobilises longing for an irrecoverable past, and an impossible future, to criticise the inherently anxious work-focused, late-capitalist society of the twenty-first century. To do so, I will engage with affect theory to shed light on how Ravn's novel conceptualises work. By considering affect as shared and political, I will connect it to nostalgia, an affect which I will be claiming also has a political dimension. It is through a nostalgic longing for a different reality that the employees will be confronted with their own alienation, as the unattainability of dreams of happiness (Sara Ahmed) and of the "good life" (Lauren Berlant) is exposed. The shattering of such illusions is what will ultimately lead the humanoid employees to revolt, while the humans remain attached to a doomed promise of the "good life". In the end, I will show how the novel illustrates that a sense of precarity is not exclusive to those who are captive of a flexible, casualised labour market, but to everyone who must work to remain alive.

Keywords: affect, nostalgia, alienation, promise of happiness, cruel optimism

Introduction

The issue of precarity as understood today emerged as a consequence of the shift in the political economy to neoliberalism, which has become the globally dominant ideology since the 1970's.¹ In the move from Fordism to post-Fordism, there was a shift in attitudes towards work, as employers began to "want more from their employees than was typically demanded in the factories of the industrial era: not just the labour of the hand, but the labours of the head and the heart."² These increasing demands of employers from their workers, which included more "flexibility, adaptability, and continual reinvention",³ were made possible by rising job insecurity. An increase of "temporary, part-time and casual positions",⁴ as well as

Marta Lopes Santos is a Literary Studies Research Masters student at the University of Amsterdam.

¹ Emily J. Hogg, 'Introduction', in *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, ed. Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 8.

² Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 69.

³ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, p. 70.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 82.

unemployment rates,⁵ put workers under pressure to comply with new demands. For Bourdieu, precarity, which in *Acts of Resistance* (1998) he terms “casualisation of employment,”⁶ makes “the whole future uncertain,” preventing “all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively.”⁷ In that manner, precarity functions as a “mode of domination,” that forces “workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation.”⁸

In *State of Insecurity* (2015), Isabell Lorey, in a similar vein to Bourdieu, claims that precarisation enables the emergence of governable biopolitical subjects. Governmental precarisation means:

not only destabilisation through employment, but also destabilisation of the conduct of life and thus of bodies and modes of subjectivation. Understanding precarisation as governmental makes it possible to problematize the complex interactions between an instrument of governing and the conditions of economic exploitation and modes of subjectivation, in their ambivalence between subjugation and self-empowerment.⁹

This ambivalence between subjugation and self-empowerment can be seen at play in the shift in attitude toward work between Fordism and post-Fordism identified by Kathi Weeks. In tracking the evolution of what she terms the work ethic, Weeks notes:

The ethic’s consistent prescriptions for our identification with and constant devotion to work, its elevation of work at the rightful centre of life, and its affirmation of work as an end in itself all help to produce the kinds of workers and the labouring capacities adequate to the contemporary regime of accumulation and the specific modes of social labour in which it invests.¹⁰

The pressure for workers to put work at the centre of life emerges at the same time as the process of precarisation identified by Lorey. In their foreword to Lorey’s work, Butler points out how this process of precarisation makes insecurity the main preoccupation of the subject.¹¹ This form of power, Butler continues, defines populations “by their need to be alleviated from insecurity, valorising forms of police and state control, promises of global investment, and institutions of global governance”, instead of critiquing and resisting.¹² In *The Employees: A workplace novel of the 22nd century* (2018), Danish author Olga Ravn seems to take the pressure for workers to put work at the centre of life to the extreme, while questioning how far workers can be pushed until they reclaim their capacity for resistance.

⁵ Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, p. 84.

⁶ Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, p. 85.

⁷ Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, p. 82.

⁸ Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, p. 85.

⁹ Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (London and New York: Verso, 2015), p. 13.

¹⁰ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, p. 76.

¹¹ Judith Butler, ‘Foreword’, in *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, ed. Isabell Lorey, trans. Aileen Derieg (London and New York: Verso, 2015), p. ix.

¹² Butler, ‘Foreword’, p. ix.

Upon the release of its English translation by Martin Aitken in 2020, *The Employees* was received to critical acclaim in the Anglophone world. Shortlisted for the 2021 International Booker Prize and for the inaugural Ursula K. Le Guin Prize for Fiction in 2022, the novel was lauded for its experimental structure and poetic, yet deceptively simple, prose.¹³ Critics have called it an “unforgettable novel about the psychic costs of labour under capitalism”,¹⁴ one that is “dreamlike and sensual.”¹⁵ It offers “an audacious satire of corporate language and the late-capitalist workplace, and a winningly abstracted investigation into what it means to be human.”¹⁶ ¹⁷ This investigation into what it means to be alive is at the core of the novel: *The Employees* was initially written as a fictional accompaniment to Lea Guildditte Hestelund’s solo exhibition *Consumed Future Spewed Up as Present* (2018), at Overgaden, Institution of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen.¹⁸ Behind Hestelund’s installations and sculptures was an interest “in making forms that were not really human, but still living.”¹⁹

Hestelund’s “not really human, but still living” sculptures inspired the cryptic objects found in Ravn’s book. The novel takes place in the twenty-second century, when the Six-Thousand Ship has left Earth on a mission to orbit around the planet New Discovery. The book is organised in statements that result from interviews conducted by the organisation of the Six-Thousand Ship with the employees of the ship. Through them, the organisation aims to understand the objects’ impact and illuminate “their specific consequences for production.”²⁰ Yet, the novel never makes clear exactly what the ship produces. Some employees describe going on missions “to search for objects.”²¹ However, the rooms in which the objects are placed are described as “recreation[al],”²² not as labs or storage. Nonetheless, the workers of the Six-Thousand Ship dedicate their lives to work. There are both human and humanoid employees in the ship, but the distinction between the two is only seldom discernible from the contents of the statements. The employees are workers above everything. It is when the objects are brought on board, seemingly to help the workers with productivity, that the workers begin awakening and confronting themselves with their own alienation. These objects seem to trigger a longing for the aspects of human experience outside of work in both human and humanoids alike.

¹³ ‘*The Employees: A workplace novel of the 22nd century* by Olga Ravn’, Lolli Editions. At: <https://www.lollieditions.com/books/the-employees>. Accessed 18/06/2023.

¹⁴ Adrienne Westenfeld, ‘The 50 Best Sci-Fi Books of All Time’, *Esquire*, 21 March (2022). At: <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/g39358054/best-sci-fi-books/>. Accessed 18/06/2023.

¹⁵ Westenfeld, ‘The 50 Best Sci-Fi Books of All Time’.

¹⁶ Justine Jordan, ‘*The Employees: A workplace novel of the 22nd century* by Olga Ravn review – ‘Am I human?’’, *The Guardian*, 12 May (2021). At: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/12/the-employees-a-workplace-novel-of-the-22nd-century-by-olga-ravn-review-am-i-human>. Accessed 18/06/2023.

¹⁷ The review ‘Fit for office: A new generation of novelists shows up for work’ is of note, as it traces the recent developments in the workplace fiction trope, of which *The Employees* is an example. Richard Lea, ‘Fit for office: A new generation of novelists shows up for work’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 June (2021). At: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-other-black-girl-zakiya-dalila-harris-black-buck-mateo-askaripou-the-employees-olga-ravn-the-startup-wife-tahmima-anam-review-richard-lea/>. Accessed 18/06/2023.

¹⁸ Olga Ravn, ‘Reading with the Mouth: A Conversation with Olga Ravn’, interview with Rosie Ellison-Balaam, Lolli Editions, 26 January (2021). At: <https://www.lollieditions.com/lolli-in-conversation/reading-with-the-mouth>. Accessed 18/06/2023.

¹⁹ Ravn, ‘Reading with the Mouth’.

²⁰ Olga Ravn, *The Employees: A workplace novel of the 22nd century*, trans. Martin Aitken (London: Lolli Editions, 2020), 11.

²¹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 28.

²² Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 41.

However, longing is mobilised not only within the plot of *The Employees* but also through it. Sara Ahmed discusses how dystopias and utopias can be used to “explore the strange and perverse mixtures of hope and despair, optimism and pessimism within forms of politics that take as a starting point a critique of the world as it is, and a belief that the world can be different.”²³ Ravn sets up *The Employees* as a dystopia that works to critique the world as it is, becoming what Sieglind Lemke conceptualises as a “precarious text”. For Lemke, a precarious text “begs, implicitly or explicitly, to reform the precarious conditions (outside the text) it describes”, rather than just describe the experience of precarity.²⁴ These literary texts might seek to both depict fragility but also to enact it in formal terms, via “the strategic deployment of certain poetic, plot and intertextual devices.”²⁵ By confronting the reader with the question of what it means to be human, Ravn mobilises, through plot and poetic devices, longing (from the imagined future) to criticise the precarious conditions of the present, where work is at the centre of life.

In this article, I argue that *The Employees* ultimately mobilises longing for an irrecoverable past, and an impossible future, to criticise the inherently anxious work-focused, late-capitalist society of the twenty-first century. To do so, I will engage with affect theory to shed light on how Ravn’s novel conceptualises work. By considering affect as shared and political, I connect it to nostalgia, an affect which I will be claiming also has a political dimension. It is through a nostalgic longing for a different reality that the employees are confronted with their own alienation, as the unattainability of dreams of happiness (Ahmed) and of the “good life” (Berlant) is exposed. The shattering of such illusions is what will ultimately lead the humanoid employees to revolt, while the humans remain attached to a doomed promise of the “good life”. In the end, I will show how the novel illustrates that a sense of precarity is not exclusive to those who are captive of a flexible, casualised labour market, but to everyone who must work to remain alive.

Affect, Precarity, Alienation

I want to start by grounding my analysis in affect theory. In fact, the turn to affect signified a return to matter and an acknowledgement that the “subject was as much a result of its own matter as it was the discourses that contoured it”, making affect a materialist theory at its root; it is a “theory of dynamic ‘matter’.”²⁶ For Raymond Williams, affect is “thought as felt and feeling as thought.”²⁷ His notion “structure of feeling”, which influenced the conceptualisations of affect developed by Lauren Berlant and the Chicago School, “is a sociohistorical category ... designed to address the structural and shared qualities of subjective experience that develop in a given historical space and time.”²⁸ Berlant follows him in defining affect as “a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the

²³ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 163.

²⁴ Sieglind Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 18-19.

²⁵ Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity*, p. 4.

²⁶ Marija Cetenic and Jeff Diamanti, ‘Affect’, in *A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, ed. Imre Szeman, Sarah Blacker and Justin Sully (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), pp. 303-304.

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132.

²⁸ Cetenic and Diamanti, ‘Affect’, p. 306.

personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now.”²⁹

This materialist notion of affect, which is both personal and public and shaped by (historical) events, can be considered “one of the structuring forces of neoliberalism” and thought of alongside notions of “precarity, precariousness, and precarisation.”³⁰ In fact, I would like to join Berlant in thinking that “affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and that bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves.”³¹ In the historical present, these shared environments and atmospheres happen to be marked by precarity and neoliberalism. It is in this context that the concept of the precariat emerges. For the economist Guy Standing, the newly emerged precariat should be seen as a social class in the making, made up of workers who have lost the employment security granted by labour movements of the twentieth-century.³² For Berlant, the precariat is an affective class. According to Berlant, neoliberalism is characterised by its “efficiency at distributing and shaping the experience of insecurity throughout the class structure and across the globe.”³³ In this manner, precarity cuts across different classes, affecting people differently. The common element of the precariat is a shared “sense of precarity”³⁴ driven by the corrosion of security.³⁵

On the Six-Thousand Ship, the human employees have paid dearly for the promise of security that comes with life-long work: they have lost their humanity. They are never referred to as people and only rarely by their names; mostly they are named as “co-workers,”³⁶ or by their roles: “captain,”³⁷ “officer,”³⁸ “cadet.”³⁹ This is heightened by the fact that the statements never make clear whether the employee is human or a humanoid; they are simply workers, and the reader is only seldomly offered some cues of their identity. The fact that humans would need to feel they are more than workers initially comes as a surprise to one of the humanoid employees:

My human co-worker sometimes talks about not wanting to work, and then he’ll say something quite odd and rather silly.... *There’s more to a person than the work they do, or A person is more than just their work?* ... But what else could a person be?⁴⁰

The inability to appreciate a subject’s humanity hints to the normalisation of alienation in the ship. Alienation, for Marx, represented the “split between life and labour, ... between the

²⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 4.

³⁰ Pepita Hesselberth and Yasco Horsman, ‘Affect’, *50 Key Terms in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Joost de Bloois, Stijn De Cauwer and Anneleen Masschelein (Kalmthout: Pelkmans, 2017), p. 32.

³¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 14.

³² Hogg, ‘Introduction’, p. 1.

³³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 193.

³⁴ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 195.

³⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 193.

³⁶ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 33.

³⁷ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 36.

³⁸ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 16.

³⁹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 33.

workers' physical activity and their humanity, their essence as humans",⁴¹ but also an estrangement from nature.⁴² In the sterile ship, an entirely artificial environment, they do not feel like they are living. One of the employees phrases it like this: "since I was brought here I've been convinced that I'm dead";⁴³ another employee wishes to "perish at someone else's wish"⁴⁴ to "feel ecstasy, if only once, on the Six-Thousand Ship."⁴⁵

In that sense, they are not merely alienated, but have been fully objectified, turned into commodities. Sara Ahmed describes alienation as:

both an alienation from the products of one's labour - a kind of self-estrangement - and a feeling-structure, a form of suffering that shapes how the worker inhabits the world. Workers suffer from the loss of connection to themselves given that the world they have created is an extension of themselves, an extension that is appropriated.⁴⁶

In the ship, it remains unclear what it is that the workers create, but everything, including the worker's body, has been appropriated. Even sleep. One of the employees states: "I find it hard to sleep, which I hope you'll forgive me, I realise sleep is our own responsibility here on the ship."⁴⁷ In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary claims that sleep, which cannot be eliminated, remains the last major obstacle to the realisation of 24/7 capitalism.⁴⁸ But in the Six-Thousand Ship there remain no obstacles: the human workers owe it to the organisation to be well-rested for production. Even if actual production does not take place 24/7, the worker's body belongs to the organisation around the clock.

Still, the cycles of life cannot be fully surpassed. One of the employees responsible for the production of the humanoids relates how it takes "perhaps 20 years ... before we've got a capable [human] employee."⁴⁹ However, even then there is a lot that can go wrong, "not to mention the huge risk that the human mother will fail to bring up the worker correctly."⁵⁰ A humanoid worker, on the other hand, can be produced in 18 months, followed by a "two-month training period" after which they are "ready for employment".⁵¹ In this process, the team seems to emulate human parenting techniques, perhaps to make sure the humanoids would integrate with their human counterparts, though this is not made clear. This employee mentions "emulating the tendency of parents to talk to the foetus",⁵² in order to experiment with "empathy-developing techniques",⁵³ while injecting the humanoids with "good hormones", particularly "high-dosage shots of oxytocin" before they saw humans for the first time, so that

⁴¹ Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), p. 22.

⁴² Joseph L Scarpaci, 'Material Culture and the Meaning of Objects', *Material Culture*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2016), p. 2.

⁴³ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 92.

⁴⁵ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 92.

⁴⁶ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 167.

⁴⁷ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 42.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 17.

⁴⁹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 112.

⁵⁰ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 112.

⁵¹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 112.

⁵² Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 112.

⁵³ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 112.

the sight of them “would fill them with feelings of security, love and general well-being.”⁵⁴ Whilst these *feelings* given to the humanoids appear to have been designed to ensure obedience, it is also through their connection with those human feelings that the humanoids will come to terms with their own alienation. They too come to reject their objectification and appropriation. It is through their interactions with the objects that the employees, both human and humanoid, begin to awaken to their own alienation: in the ship workers are denied their human essence in favour of work. They will have to claim it (in the case of the humanoids) or reclaim it (in the case of the humans).

The introduction of the novel mentions the statements we are about to read are being collected by the organisation of the Six-Thousand Ship.⁵⁵ Their aim is to gain “insight into how [the employees] related to the objects [brought on board from missions in the nearby planet New Discovery] and the rooms in which they were placed.”⁵⁶ This would allow them to understand the objects’ impact and illuminate “their specific consequences for production.”⁵⁷ The objects are described in an ambiguous and fragmented manner, by both the organisation and the employees. They are described by the organisation as being a mix between biological and technological.⁵⁸ From the employees’ statements, we can discern that there were nineteen objects,⁵⁹ although not all of them remain on board. Some of them have been sent to Homebase.⁶⁰ One has laid an egg,⁶¹ some are warm and others cold.⁶² One is described as being “about the size of a small dog, ... shiny like a maggot from a different world”,⁶³ another as a “stone sandy in colour, with black veins that peter out.”⁶⁴ They emit smells, as the rooms in which they are placed are described as fragrant. One room smells of citrus fruit or the stone of the peach⁶⁵ and another of “soil and oakmoss, incense, and the smell of an insect captured in amber. A brown scent. Pungent and abiding.”⁶⁶ The objects are said to have feelings;⁶⁷ sometimes they are sad, others hostile and indifferent.⁶⁸ They make employees touch them against their will.⁶⁹ One employee says they communicate through smell.⁷⁰

The employees’ descriptions of the objects are intriguing, but not as much as the reports of how the objects make them feel. The reactions they cause in both human and humanoid employees are bodily. The objects are described as having “qualities stimulative of the senses,”⁷¹ as if they “only existed so as to awaken particular feelings ... by way of their form

⁵⁴ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 112.

⁵⁵ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 128.

⁵⁹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 70.

⁶⁰ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 91.

⁶¹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 13.

⁶² Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 14.

⁶³ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 59.

⁶⁴ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 58.

⁶⁵ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 18.

⁶⁶ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 20.

⁶⁷ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 13.

⁶⁸ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 14.

⁶⁹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 14.

⁷⁰ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 30.

⁷¹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 27.

and material.”⁷² They are experienced as “a taste that lingers, a ticklish splinter close to the heart, travelling through the flesh.”⁷³ They create “a sense of attachment,”⁷⁴ connection,⁷⁵ love,⁷⁶ erotic desire,⁷⁷ addiction,⁷⁸ obsession⁷⁹ and obsessive thoughts (“before I know it I’ll be thinking about it”⁸⁰), and shame.⁸¹ Through these descriptions, it becomes clear that the objects provoke strong reactions in the employees who engage with them. The employees develop what the organisation in their closing statement calls “olfactory hallucinations, disturbing dreams, skin eruptions, abnormal levels of mental activities verging on the pathological.”⁸² The organisation cannot be sure if these symptoms were caused by the objects themselves, but the employees seem more certain. Upon feeling low, “moping about, weeping into my papers”, one of the employees suspects their sadness is related to the objects, when they ask their interviewer whether “these feelings got anything to do with the rooms?”⁸³ Many of them, particularly the humans, also relate having dreams. In one case, the memory of the natural and the scents from earth, which have since disappeared, becomes conflated with the rooms:

I dream that their walls are covered with great sheaves of hay ... And in the dreams, twigs and branches appear from out of the sheaves as if they were alive, and we try to escape them, but they come crawling out after us from under the door and cause us to faint.⁸⁴

Instead of following the anti-intentionalism of versions of affect that follow affect scholar Brian Massumi, who conceptualised it as prior to cognition, and in that manner, excluded from a response to the world,⁸⁵ I am considering that “immediate and mediated experiences take place in a world that is shaped by history, and that our automatic responses to it are no less historical than our more measured ones.”⁸⁶ In this mode of thinking, affect is understood as a mediation between thought and feeling. Consequently, the automatic reactions that the employees have to the objects unveil a deeper atmosphere of deprivation that is sensory as well as affective.

The feelings that the objects awaken, “by way of their form and material,”⁸⁷ seem to be symptoms of a nostalgic longing that is linked with two temporalities - the humans long for a past they lost (namely the earth, as in the example above), and the humanoids for a future they can never have. In a statement, an employee confesses:

⁷² Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 40.

⁷³ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 28.

⁷⁴ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 28.

⁷⁵ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 76.

⁷⁶ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 102.

⁷⁷ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 20.

⁷⁸ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 76.

⁷⁹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 58.

⁸⁰ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 28.

⁸¹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 31.

⁸² Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 129.

⁸³ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 58.

⁸⁴ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 35.

⁸⁵ Ruth Leys, ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2011), p. 443.

⁸⁶ Cetenic and Diamanti, ‘Affect’, p. 304.

⁸⁷ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 40.

She was born of a human body and has walked on the planet, and when we talk she nearly always tells me she misses Earth. She's not proud of the fact, because she does want to be a good employee ... In the same place that she feels this longing for Earth inside her, I feel a similar longing to be human.⁸⁸

Even though they understand that their main task in the Six-Thousand Ship is to be “a good employee”, they also become aware that work is not enough to make them happy. As a result the humans long for Earth and the humanoids to be human. Both longings emerge from discontent with their current situation, marked by a deficiency that can generate either nostalgic or promissory longings.

Nostalgic Longings, Desire, Revolution

In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as a modern condition that emerges from a discontentment with modernity and its linear ideas of time, progress and history. It is collective rather than individual, and hence different from melancholia, which is reserved to individual consciousness. Nostalgia is placed “between personal and collective memory”; it is “about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations.”⁸⁹ In her definition of nostalgia “(from nostos-return home, and algia-longing) [as] a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed,”⁹⁰ Boym opens up the possibility to read the feeling as being split into two directions, either facing the past (a home that no longer exists) or the future (a home that has never existed). Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, in “The Dimensions of Nostalgia” concur with the idea. For them, “nostalgia becomes possible at the same time as utopia. The counterpart to the imagined future is the imagined past,”⁹¹ as both emerge from “some sense that the present is deficient.”⁹² This sense of deficiency is what creates the space for a longing, a desire for a different reality that can be either past or future focused.

The objects are the physical aspect that allow for the development of nostalgia. For Shaw and Chase, there are three conditions for nostalgia, the first two are “a secular and linear sense of time” and “an apprehension of the failings of the present.”⁹³ The third one is “the availability of evidences of the past.”⁹⁴ They argue that for the conditions for nostalgia to be met, “objects, buildings, and images from the past should be available”, as “they become talismans that link us concretely with the past; but the aura they carry is ambiguous and even ironic.”⁹⁵ This ambiguous aura of talismans from the past is also discussed by Susan Stewart in *On Longing*, particularly in her discussion of souvenirs. About souvenirs, she states:

⁸⁸ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 47.

⁸⁹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xvi.

⁹⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. xiii.

⁹¹ Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, ‘The Dimensions of Nostalgia’, in *The Imagined Past: history and nostalgia* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 9.

⁹² Shaw and Chase, ‘The Dimension of Nostalgia’, p. 3.

⁹³ Shaw and Chase, ‘The Dimension of Nostalgia’, p. 4.

⁹⁴ Shaw and Chase, ‘The Dimension of Nostalgia’, p. 4.

⁹⁵ Shaw and Chase, ‘The Dimension of Nostalgia’, p. 4.

The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia. The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only “behind,” spiralling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future.⁹⁶

She concludes “that the realisation of re-union imagined by the nostalgic is a narrative utopia that works only by virtue of its partiality, its lack of fixity and closure: nostalgia is the *desire for desire*.”⁹⁷

In *The Employees*, the objects are not souvenirs *per se*, but the employees perceive them as such. One of the human employees states: “After the objects came on board everyone’s mood had lifted noticeably, but to [the humanoids] it’s something special. To us, the objects are like an artificial postcard from Earth. To them, they’re a postcard from the future.”⁹⁸ Even if they are perceived as artificial postcards from Earth, they are still described, by a different employee, as familiar, as “if they came from our dreamsm,” “like a recollection without language,” or, most strikingly, “like a memory.”⁹⁹ Even if they are not real souvenirs, they are invested with such meaning and fuel a “desire for desire.” The organisation seems to have planned for the objects to soothe the human employees and prevent them from “buck[ling] under nostalgia and becom[ing] catatonic.”¹⁰⁰ However, instead of fostering employee productivity, the objects ultimately work to confront the employees with the impossibility of their desires precisely by offering them an opportunity to reconfigure their desire. This is true of both human and humanoid employees, even if the reconfiguration of their desire takes place in distinct ways.

If there is no prospect of reward for labour, no glimpses of a life beyond work in the Six-Thousand Ship, or an indication that they might think the future holds something different, then it is unclear why humanoids would have been programmed into having desire. The human need to follow what Sarah Ahmed calls the path to happiness seems to have been instilled upon them:

The dreams are something you’ve given me so that I’ll always feel longing and never say, never think a harsh word about you, my gods. All I want is to be assimilated into a collective, human community where someone plaits my hair with flowers and white curtains sway in a warm breeze; where every morning I wake up and drink a chilled glass of iced tea, drive a car across a continent, kick the dirt, fill my nostrils with the air of the desert and move in with someone, get married, bake cookies, push a pram, learn to play an instrument, dance a waltz. I think I’ve seen all this in your educational material, is that right?¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 135.

⁹⁷ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 23.

⁹⁸ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 84.

⁹⁹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁰ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 46.

¹⁰¹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 25.

The fact that here they are aware that “dreams are something you’ve given me” and to the wish of being “assimilated into a collective, human community” hint at this being a statement by a humanoid employee. After claiming that “all [they] want” is to be assimilated into a human community, they go on to list all the objects of their desires, which are included in the “educational material.” If these objects have been included in the educational material, apparently as something that should be wanted, they become what Ahmed calls good or happy objects. Ahmed claims:

A happy life, a good life, hence involves the regulation of desire. It is not simply that we desire happiness but that that happiness is imagined as what you get in return for desiring well. Good subjects will not experience pleasure from the wrong objects (they will be hurt by them or indifferent to them) and will only experience a certain amount of pleasure from the right objects. We learn to experience some things as pleasure - as being good - where the experience itself becomes the truth of the object (“it is good”) as well as the subject (“we are good”).¹⁰²

Further on, she expands that “it is important that we share this direction with others... To be affected in a good way by objects that are already evaluated as good is a way of belonging to an affective community.”¹⁰³ To belong to this affective “human community” seems to be the desire of this humanoid employee, and if the humanoids have been created to want these “good” things in a process of artificial socialisation, then we are led to the conclusion that that is because humans do too.

For humanoids as well as humans these objects and goals associated with happiness are unattainable:

I know the smell of oakmoss, because you've planted it inside me, just as you've planted the idea that I should love one man only... All of us here are condemned to a dream of romantic love, even though no one I know loves in that way, or lives that kind of a life. Yet these are the dreams you've given us.¹⁰⁴

It becomes clear humanoids have been created to desire things they can never have, just like humans have been taken away from the things that made them happy. The humans often describe with longing the “weather conditions on a lost place”¹⁰⁵ (the Earth), which one of the employees states is the only thing they can bear to have in common with one another. “All of [them] miss the weather”¹⁰⁶ and this comes through in poetic descriptions of the natural; such as “light in may when everything came to life”¹⁰⁷ or “the smell of gravity.”¹⁰⁸ This vibrancy of the earth is put in contrast with the enclosed, sterile spaces of the Six-Thousand Ship in the following passage:

¹⁰² Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 37.

¹⁰³ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁴ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁵ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁶ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁷ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁸ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 35.

The birds in front of my house perched on the electricity lines, and behind them the sky was rose-coloured, and beneath them the road was wet, and a pink cloud rose up from the road, and it spoke to me. The weather was misty, and the strings of electric light twinkled in the haze ... Now that I inhabit the small, enclosed spaces of the Six-Thousand Ship, I am confined.¹⁰⁹

In contrast, the humanoids rejoice at having human feelings that are a deviation from the programme, be it sadness¹¹⁰ or love.¹¹¹

Ravn repeatedly questions whether there is a difference between the workers who were made and the workers who were born. The difference might not have been very important at first, if their roles as producers defined both classes of employees. But the humanoids progressively start deviating from the programme and connecting to their human emotions. One of the humanoid employees expresses appreciation for the sadness that they feel, because they “know it’s a deviation from the emotional behaviour [they were] allocated” and a “sign [they]’re starting to disengage from the update.”¹¹² They “like being alive,”¹¹³ which in their case is a form of rejecting inhumanity and oppression. This employee ends the statement with such a provocation: “I may have been made, but now I am making myself.”¹¹⁴

The humanoids’ attachment to their aliveness comes into contrast with the humans’ feeling that they are not living at all. In a statement, one of the humans admits to feeling they have been dead since they’ve been brought into the ship.¹¹⁵ One of the human employees goes as far as to accuse the organisation of not being “sure of which of the objects in its custody may be considered to be *living*”, which they call “dangerous.”¹¹⁶ “It raises questions,”¹¹⁷ they say, and it does. Are they referring to the objects, or to the humanoids? Ravn leaves it to the reader to ponder upon such questions. The objects are presented as possibly living, the humans as nearly robotic workers alienated from their humanity and the humanoids as robotic workers in search of their humanity. The novel asks what or who is the commodity in this ship. The answer seems to be all three: humans, humanoids and objects.

In the end, the affects that evade control cause the humanoids to revolt. For Ahmed, “consciousness of alienation involves both recognition of suffering and recognition of what produces that suffering,”¹¹⁸ and they know that the organisation is at fault. The formation of a revolutionary consciousness relies on “feeling at odds with the world, or feeling that the world is odd,”¹¹⁹ as well as with collective desire. One of the humans notes the humanoids have “started sitting at the same tables together in the canteen”, a phrasing that evokes the idea of conspiracy.¹²⁰ Then, they move on to threaten that “violence is by no means inconceivable,”¹²¹

¹⁰⁹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 61.

¹¹⁰ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 87.

¹¹¹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 102.

¹¹² Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 87.

¹¹³ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 87.

¹¹⁴ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 87.

¹¹⁵ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 39.

¹¹⁶ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 42.

¹¹⁷ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 42.

¹¹⁸ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 167.

¹¹⁹ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 169.

¹²⁰ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 83.

¹²¹ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 95.

fail “to appear for their regular installations and are no longer plugging in on a daily basis.”¹²² One of them goes as far as to kill a human, which they state “felt good.”¹²³

Returning to Ahmed, “we might consider the very politics of who or what gets seen as the origin of violence: the revolutionaries expose violence, but the violence they expose is not recognised as violence: structural violence is violence that is veiled.”¹²⁴ In revolting against the organisation,¹²⁵ the humanoid employees are exposing its violence. The revolt causes the biological termination of the ship, but the humans remain sympathetic, with one of them stating: “I don't think they can be blamed for anything. They're trying to shape their own destinies, just as any human would. Everyone's fighting for their own survival, you can't hold that against them.”¹²⁶ They too feel the violence of their oppression, and know, sadly, that death will be their only release, a juncture which they have awaited with “unspoken longing.”¹²⁷ Unlike the humanoids, the humans fail to revolt. Regardless of how relieved they are by the humanoid revolt, they do not start one themselves. Their attachment to the objects can be said to be cruelly optimistic. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant tracks “precarity in terms of the desperation and violence that have been released when the capitalist “good life” fantasy no longer has anything to which to attach its promises of flourishing, coasting, and resting.”¹²⁸ Cruel optimism, then, exists as a relation when “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”¹²⁹ The objects, by reminding humans of the earth and connecting them with their memories, seem to function as a lingering promise of the “good life.” By being attached to it, the humans fail to act on the desperation that their attachment has created in them. Whilst the humanoids revolt, with hope they are re-uploaded into a better version of this world they currently live in,¹³⁰ the humans prefer to remain living in a nostalgic fantasy.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Ravn presents the employees of the Six-Thousand Ship first and foremost as workers to criticise the centrality of work in post-Fordist society. The insecurity inherent to the experience of precarity, which according to Bourdieu and Lorey makes it possible to dominate and govern subjects, has been eliminated from the enclosed, alienating space of the ship. Still, in being subjected to work for the organisation, workers appear dominated by the organisation, which owns the bodies of both human and humanoid employees, limiting their possibilities of resistance. This highlights how a sense of precarity is an affective condition that is not exclusive to those who are captive of a flexible, casualised labour market, but to everyone who must work to remain alive.

¹²² Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 105.

¹²³ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 123.

¹²⁴ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 170.

¹²⁵ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 69.

¹²⁶ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 121.

¹²⁷ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 110.

¹²⁸ Jasbir Puar, ‘Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović’, *TDR*, vol. 56, no. 4, Precarity and Performance: Special Consortium Issue (2012), p. 171.

¹²⁹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 1.

¹³⁰ Ravn, *The Employees*, p. 126.

A limitation of the possibility of resistance is particularly felt by the human employees, for whom revolution implicates death and detachment from their memories of the Earth, to which they remain cruelly attached. Nonetheless, the introduction of the objects, which may or may not be living, ends up disrupting the carefully constructed environment through the strong affective reactions they provoke in the employees who engage with them. These affective reactions lead to the employees' reconnection with their desires. For the humans, these reactions create only a hopeless nostalgic longing that allows them to come to terms with their own alienation from human experience in its entirety, something they choose not to act upon. On the other hand, the affective reactions provoked by the objects lead the humanoids to claim their humanity and to fight for their own destinies, which they do through a revolt that ultimately results in the termination of the mission. In contrasting the two experiences, Ravn seems to be asking, from the imagined future to the present, why won't humans act on their own destinies. By all the accounts in the novel, human relations and the Earth are what make humans happy, not work. It would seem like it's time to create a reality that reflects it.