Anything but Human: Alienation, Robotization, and Capitalistic Consequence in *Burning Vision* and *R.U.R.*

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What is most important to the twenty-first century worker? Is it the career's wage, its influence on the world, or the meaning it provides the worker herself? Concerns to the worker of today also concerned Karel Čapek, a Czech playwright, who in his 1920 play *R.U.R.* asks: is the worker under capitalism more machine than human? Marie Clement's *Burning Vision* engages with the same question eighty years later, reflecting on the assembly line of the Manhattan Project's atomic bombs. Together, these plays' shared understandings of twentieth-century capitalism establish that capitalistic labour's monetary core leaves little room for workers to maintain a relationship with their labour. Connecting the alienation of the human worker with the absence of free will and meaning, both the retrospective *Burning Vision* and speculative *R.U.R.* suggest that the propensity for workers and owners alike to contribute to harmful industry is, by nature of omnipresent alienation, inherent to labour under capitalism.

Focused on the wage they receive rather than the consequence of their labour, *Burning Vision*'s workers experience Marxist "alienation" from the products of their labour. Concerning various labourers in the production of the atomic bomb, *Burning Vision* explores the relationship several workers have to their precarious financial situation. Captain Mike, who ships the uranium ore, says to his stevedores, "we're all workin' togeder 'cause we all git to tink of our families and how'd hell we

gonna feed dem" (Clements 90). Likewise, Fat Man, whose sole purpose as a dummy is to be destroyed by a test bomb, views his work from a similarly wage-centred viewpoint, saying, "This is not exactly what I had imagined for myself but it buys the beers" (36). At its most extreme, the wage directly contrasts starvation. The Dene Ore Carrier, for example, tells his wife, "My girl, I have to go to work. It is the only job in these parts. Do you want to starve?" (60). Though each worker holds a different role in the atomic bomb's creation, they fill them for the same purpose: within an economic system that requires money to sustain life, labour represents a wage before it produces any meaningful or self-expressive product. As a result, each wage-focused worker in *Burning Vision* experiences "alienation" from the tangible consequence of their work. Zachary Biondi adopts Karl Marx's term "alienation" to describe the distant, if not fully severed, relationship that wage labourers have with the products of their labour. Biondi adds that under capitalism, "Labor becomes nothing more than the means for producing objects that are not our own" (1097). Alienation explains why the workers of *Burning Vision*, concerned with their very survival, so easily contribute to a product of extreme harm, an atomic weapon. Under an assumed necessity of wage labour, workers in *Burning Vision* perceive no cognitive relationship between the labour they perform and the product of that labour. In other words, Clements's play suggests that alienation, in removing the workers from their own work, in turn removes that work from its worldly repercussions, however catastrophic.

When examined alongside *Burning Vision*'s retrospective portrayal of worker alienation, the quintessentially alienated Robots of *R.U.R* elucidate the lack of agency

humans in modernity have over their own labour. Robots in *R.U.R.*, produced by Domin's company out of simplified biological matter, are purposefully alienated to become a maximally obedient servant class. When Domin imagines his Robotic utopia, he explicitly states that humanity will become "an aristocracy nourished by millions of mechanical slaves" (Čapek 67). While *R.U.R.*'s unpaid alienation appears more absolute than that within *Burning Vision*, the labour forces of both plays are engaged in an identical problem: the alienation of both groups deprives them of free will. Recall that the Dene Ore Carrier has little choice in his dangerous and harmful occupation because his wage, within a capitalist Canadian economy, means survival. The Ore Carrier's precarity reflects the concept of modern wage slavery as described by David Neilson and Michael Peters, who claim that "extreme levels of formal subordination that facilitate absolute surplus value approaches begin to blur the practical difference between wage slavery and full slavery" (481). More simply, people who must sell their labour to survive appear to have no meaningful choice in their working conditions or in what they contribute. If the illusion of a binary choice between life or death overwhelms a person's ability to conceive of their own actions in their world, a person's self-preservation will not only follow the illusionary necessity of a dangerous job, but justify its disastrous consequences—for example, the deployment of an atomic bomb—as beyond their capacity to choose. As both worker and Robot are deprived of agency, alienated from any meaningful connection to labour, and objectified as working bodies for the benefit of the owner of their labour, the difference between the circumstances of the Dene Ore Carrier and a Robot in *R.U.R.* is disconcertingly obscured. Neilson and Peters further explain that

"as in slavery, the labourer is compelled to work for the 'other' in order to live" (479). From this understanding, it is not so much labour itself that is problematic, but more so the deprivation of free will innate to capitalist alienation. However caring he may be to his family, the Dene Ore Carrier perceives no choice in his field of labour, nor does he, not owning his own labour, identify ownership over the harm his labour causes. Only discernable from Robotic alienation by his wage, the human worker cannot see—and ostensibly cannot avoid—the assembly line of harm to which he contributes.

Though a functional sameness blurs the line of slavery between the working class and the Robots of *R.U.R.*, Domin's relationship to his industry, even as the head of Rossum's Universal Robots, suggests that alienation and its capacity to enact harm is not a side effect of capitalism but an intrinsic component of the economic system. Initially, Domin's motive for producing Robots seems altruistic and self-expressive: he imagines that "everybody will be free from worry and liberated from the degradation of labor" (Čapek 32). Here, Domin's ability to connect his own self-determination with his industry establishes his privilege over his relationship to Robots. Nevertheless, just as wage slavery suppresses the will of *Burning Vision*'s workers, the demand of financial relevance renders Domin's idealization irrelevant. When concern of Robotic warfare emerges from universities, "the R. U. R. shareholders, of course, won't hear of it" (52) and production of Robots continues; in Helena's words, "Domin can't know what they're to be used for. When an order comes for them he must just send them" (45). Even as its owner, Domin follows his company's financial parameters before his organic motivations; he has been

alienated from his own company and presumes no responsibility over how his customers utilize his product. Domin's relationship with his Robots demonstrates that alienation exists on every level under a capitalist economy, removing a person from identifying with their labour product regardless of whether they are owner or producer. The problem therein is twofold. In both *Burning Vision* and *R.U.R.*, capitalism denies the worker freedom to express in her creations something meaningful or to pursue a connection with the effects of her labour. More broadly, the intrinsic link between alienation and the lack of free will means that without collective resistance, workers have no control over the harm their labour elicits into their shared reality. Both *Burning Vision* and *R.U.R.* illustrate that the harmful products of alienated labour are inherent to the system of capitalism as a whole. Under its guise of prosperity and progress, capitalism reduces the creation of a bomb to a wage and human massacre to the profit of shareholders.

Though a continent and eighty years apart, *Burning Vision* and *R.U.R.*'s similar engagement with capitalism attests to its power and pervasiveness. The workers in *Burning Vision*—mining, carrying, and shipping ore, for example—are alienated from the products of their labour and in this alienation can unknowingly or inevitably contribute to systems of harm. While the unpaid Robots of *R.U.R.* are superficially different from the workers of *Burning Vision*, their growth in self-consciousness and the emergent struggle in being denied any agency in their labour dissolves any clear distinction between the outcomes of Robotic and human alienation. While he maintains some free choice over his labour force, Domin too experiences alienation from the tangible impact his Robots have over the world,

elucidating that alienation's propensity for harm pervades the very scaffolding of capitalism. If *R.U.R.* warns against the future of capitalism's alienation problem, *Burning Vision* suggests as a reflection that there is, in viewing the consequence of their labour, little difference in the material impact between a man convinced he must carry uranium to financially survive and a Robot fighting a war because they have no cognition to refuse. Rather than misunderstand, as with Domin, the problem as intrinsic to "labour" itself, *Burning Vision* and *R.U.R.* illustrate that the absence of free will and meaning within labour prompts worker dehumanization. While a meaningful economic future will recognize the humanity in the worker, this solution must exist outside the monetary core of capitalism altogether, choosing instead to weave meaning, agency, and self-actualization into the work we can offer, both to ourselves and one another.

Works Cited

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