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Crisis Managed: Forging Postcapitalist Futures in Kim Stanley Robinson's Recent Political Science Fiction

ABSTRACT

Kim Stanley Robinson uses science fiction as a means of political inquiry and a literary simulator of alternative socioeconomic solutions. In his novels, he frequently refers to the pressing need for a systemic transformation and envisions viable postcapitalist alternatives. The article discusses various aspects of the postcapitalist transition depicted in two of Robinson's recent novels: *New York 2140* (2017) and *The Ministry for the Future* (2020).

KEYWORDS

political science fiction; capitalism; postcapitalism; capitalist realism; utopian science fiction

Kim Stanley Robinson's political science fiction deftly combines a comprehensive critique of capitalism with visions of egalitarian, sustainable, non-capitalist futures. According to the novelist, all of his over three decades' long writing career has been devoted to "imagining various postcapitalisms" (Robinson & Feder, 2018, p. 91), yet it is only his two recent novels – *New York 2140* (2017) and *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) – that thematize the process of a postcapitalist transformation itself. The novels are the author's response to the perceived void in economics and in speculative writing with regard to the transitional stage on the path beyond capitalism (p. 92). *New York 2140* (*NY2140*) and *The Ministry for the Future* (*TMftF*) dramatize Robinson's political and socioeconomic convictions, in particular his criticism of neoliberal capitalism and his endorsement of socialist options. The envisioned futures become a testing ground for real-life schemes and solutions – either only theorized or already experimentally implemented in the extratextual reality. Pluralistic and inclusive in their approach, the novels become literary simulators of tangible and workable solutions to the contemporary crisis of capitalism.

1. SF vs. capitalism

Despite the growing awareness of the interconnection between capitalism and the polycrisis the world is faced with, many remain unable or unwilling to acknowledge

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either the system's limitations or its social and ecological ramifications. This attitude may stem from a sort of collective cognitive crisis, diagnosed by Robinson as "a failure in imagination" which affects the whole society (de Vicente, 2017). He explains that the condition manifests itself in general disregard for the future implications of capitalism and an inability to think beyond it. Already in the 1990s Fredric Jameson, who happens to have been Robinson's mentor, noted that this problem results from "some weakness in our imagination" (as cited in Grattan, 2017, p. 8). Capitalism is so deeply entrenched that it seems an inseparable part of economic, social and even cultural life, impairing political imagination with regard to future alternatives.

Within late capitalist discourse, the system is presented as the only viable option: the height of socioeconomic evolution, superior to its historical predecessors. For Mark Fisher (2009) this attitude has become a defining feature of the postmodern period, which he labels "capitalist realism" (p. 2). Accordingly, capitalist economic solutions and their social consequences are normalized and naturalized as the inviolable status quo. The position of capitalism is further fortified as the system is juxtaposed with even less desirable alternatives, mainly communism. Such a dichotomizing approach inevitably enforces a comparison, from which capitalism typically emerges victorious – not through its own merits but by its perceived superiority over a highly undesirable alternative.

According to Evan Watkins (2011), the key to overcoming capitalist realism with its stranglehold on socioeconomic imagination lies in unmasking the fundamental flaws and incoherencies of neoliberal ideology (p. 109). A similar view is shared by Fisher (2009): "Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort" (p. 16). Watkins considers such an exposure to be a political undertaking; however, it seems that literature can and should be seen as a useful accessory to this task. SF enables the readers to rethink capitalism by confronting them with alternatives. It offers an estranged, critical perspective on the present, while providing a conceptual arena for the exploration of possible non-capitalist futures that might be extrapolated from this present. Robert Markley (2019) observes that this ability to combine a forward-looking orientation with an insightful commentary on the present turns Robinson's SF into a "powerful descriptive tool" (p. 6), superior to traditional realism, which seems ill-equipped to deal with either present or future ramifications of climate change. By tackling this and many other aspects of capitalist crisis with an impressive degree of realism, Robinson transforms SF into "a critical component of contemporary literature, sociopolitical thought, and utopian speculation" (p. 2–3). Robinson's fusion of the literary and the political within SF can also be seen to turn the genre into a "political form of postmodernism" (Booker & Daraiseh, 2023, p. 251). While Robinson's recent novels display many formal features

associated with postmodernist literature, as evidenced by their multigeneric and polyphonic character, he defies its pessimism and even provides feasible solutions to the real-world crisis he so vividly and realistically depicts (p. 251). In sum, Robinson redefines the boundaries of not only SF, but also of both postmodernist and political fiction. The transgressive nature of his works is also evident in their interrogation of capitalist realism, which is challenged by Robinson's adamantly utopian stance. In fact, utopianism has been identified by both Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson as a means of disrupting the horizon of capitalism (Noys, 2014, p. 74). Due to its subversive and visionary character, Robinson's utopian science fiction challenges neoliberal hegemony: it reframes the readers' perception of the capitalist system and remedies deficiencies in political imagination with regard to postcapitalist options.

2. Conceptions of postcapitalism

An acknowledgement of capitalism's systemic failure inevitably necessitates attempts to think beyond it. As Slavoj Žižek (2011) observes, "the taboo is broken, we do not live in the best possible world: we are allowed, obliged even, to think about the alternatives" (2011). Robinson sees the assumption that there could be no successor to capitalism as short-sighted, because "everything evolves" (de Vicente, 2017). Paul Mason (2015) makes a similar observation: "capitalism is an organism: it has a lifecycle – a beginning, a middle, an end" (p. 5). Mason confidently predicts the end of capitalism and even points to the likely starting point for the transition: it is to be precipitated by "external shocks" (Mason, 2015, p. 7), the most obvious of which are climate change-related events. It is such external shocks that give rise to anti-capitalist energies in *NY2140* and *TMftF*: a drastic sea-level rise in the former and a lethal heatwave in the latter, both of which set the wheels of revolution in motion.

There is a certain degree of consensus, in particular amongst left-wing economists and thinkers, as to the fundamental features of the emergent postcapitalist society, in particular its points of divergence from capitalism. Meaningful change is to be contingent on curbing neoliberalism: its austerity measures, uncontrolled markets, unchallenged corporate dominance, state-protection of high finance, the impoverishment of the underprivileged majority and the exploitation of earth's resources. The first manifestations of a new socioeconomic model are expected to emerge from horizontal practices and micro-mechanisms which challenge the capitalist market system. Mason points to the signs of change already being visible within the fabric of capitalist markets:

Capitalism ... will be abolished by creating something more dynamic that exists, at first, almost unseen within the old system, but which breaks through, reshaping the economy around new values, behaviours and norms. (Mason, 2015, p. 8)

The seeds of the approaching transition can be seen in such phenomena as anti-capitalist and alter-globalization social movements, collaborative production, self-managed cooperatives, the growing popularity of living off the grid, the commons, sharing economy, or grassroots organizations. Many of these alternatives are featured in *NY2140* and *TMftF*. Their cooperative and communal character can be seen as an expression of the set of values that is to characterize postcapitalism. With the neoliberal emphasis on material profit and individual success, capitalism consistently devalues the importance of solidarity and sharing (p. 9). Priority must therefore be shifted towards these values for an effective systemic transformation to occur.

3. Postcapitalism in Robinson's fiction

Robinson's vision of a transition away from capitalism has been quite consistent throughout his career. In *Pacific Edge* (1990), *Blue Mars* (1996) and *2312* (2012) he introduced and rehearsed some of the same solutions which he elaborates upon in *NY2140* and *TMftF*. All these novels are premised upon the idea of capitalism reaching a critical point, which turns the transformation into a necessity. There are also clear parallels regarding the envisioned arrangements. In environmental terms, protecting the biosphere and all its ecosystems is prioritized. In socioeconomic terms, non-capitalist solutions are launched: free basic services, decentralization, dismantling corporations and replacing them with worker's cooperatives, common ownership of natural resources, governmental control of the necessities, and relegation of the non-essentials to the residually capitalist margins of the system. Thus, capitalism is not completely eliminated but marginalized. The new system combines in a hybrid fashion some elements of capitalism with those of its successor system, in agreement with Raymond Williams' concept of the residual and the emergent, which Robinson endorses (Robinson & Feder, 2018, p. 93). Consequently, postcapitalism is not meant to be a polar opposite of capitalism; Robinson even sees the first step towards it in "a reformed capitalism" (Vion-Dury, 2022), and talks about the possible stages of such a transition, referring to known economic models: "I think we need first a refusal of austerity and neoliberalism, by way of Keynesian stimulus; then social democracy; then democratic socialism; and then on from there" (Vion-Dury, 2022). The transitional steps described by Robinson show an undisputed affinity with the socialist economic model. The author realizes that this may evoke skepticism or even outright criticism. Aware of the historical burden of the term, he avoids putting labels on his postcapitalist visions: "I don't characterise it [postcapitalism] with any one term because they're weighted with baggage from the past, so I'm perfectly happy to talk about any postcapitalist future, social democracy or democratic socialism, communism" (Robinson & Feder, 2018, p. 91). He does, however, repeatedly admit that postcapitalism is going to be more socialist and he advocates some of the solutions contained within the socialist program. At the

very least, he sees them as a transitional stage between late capitalism and an unspecified postcapitalist future that “we don’t have a name for” (O’Keefe, 2020).

Robinson’s social imagination is partly influenced by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel’s idea of participatory economics (Robinson & Feder, 2018, p. 92), a libertarian economic model based on participatory decision-making, instead of authoritative centralized planning characteristic of capitalism. It assumes a departure from the market system and its replacement with a non-hierarchical and non-competitive economic organization – a decentralized economy, with workers’ self-management, consumer councils, remuneration based on effort, and common ownership of the means of production. Parecon largely inspired the future reality from *2312*, and can also be traced in *NY2140* and *TMftF*.

In all of the above-mentioned novels Robinson emphasizes the necessity of legislative intervention to consolidate and legitimize the developments which have either evolved organically at the micro level, or were introduced in deliberate opposition to the capitalist economic model. In *Pacific Edge*, legislation is described as “a revolutionary power” (Robinson, 1990, p. 56). Robinson (2012) expands on the possible circumstances in which such a revolution might be enacted in *2312*:

Take large masses of injustice, resentment, and frustration. Put them in a weak or failing hegemon. Stir in misery for a generation or two, until the heat rises. Throw in destabilizing circumstances to taste. A tiny pinch of event to catalyze the whole. Once the main goal of the revolution is achieved, cool instantly to institutionalize the new order. (p. 334)

That is precisely the sequence of events that constitutes the pivot of the transformations in *NY2140* and *TMftF*. Both show capitalism as an inherently unjust and unstable system, in which the majority feel miserable but too powerless to initiate change, until crisis escalation propels them into action.

4. Postcapitalist transitions in *New York 2140* and *The Ministry for the Future*

In *TMftF*, the pressing need for change crystallizes as millions perish within a week in a deadly heatwave which strikes India in mid-twenty-first century. It is India, therefore, that begins decisive actions to address climate change. The internal transformation includes a number of measures – electrical power companies are nationalized, coal-burning plants are decommissioned, clean sources of energy are introduced, for which a whole infrastructure is built. This is labor-intensive, but ensures job availability for the Indians, with full employment becoming one of India’s primary policies. This points to the totality of the transformation – apart from carbon elimination and the introduction of new technologies, far-reaching social and political reforms need to be introduced for climate equity to be achieved. The caste system is dismantled and political power is given to previously excluded social groups, also through land reform which prioritizes local ownership.

Robinson underlines the presence of postcapitalist roots in existing trends, by referring to the real Indian districts of Kerala and Sikkim, which in *TMftF* become models for the whole country and later the world: Kerala due to its tradition of strong local government and Sikkim owing to the successful use of pesticide-free regenerative organic agriculture. The implementation of the Sikkim model starts from the bottom-up, with single districts and local governments, later to spread throughout India and the world. This pattern of postcapitalist progression is endorsed by Mason (2015): “It has to be based on micro-mechanisms, not diktats or policies, it has to work spontaneously” (p. 6).

Another real-life example of a successful non-capitalist venture featured in *TMftF* is the Spanish Mondragon. The corporation consists of employee-owned cooperatives, including banks and insurance companies. Robinson (2017) emphasizes the company’s spirit of solidarity as the cornerstone of its success and devotes a whole chapter to its history and mode of organization: “open admission, democratic organization, the sovereignty of labor, the instrumental and subordinate nature of capital, participatory management, payment solidarity, inter-cooperation, social transformation, universality” (p. 272). Mondragon is a notable example of participatory economics already in operation, proven successful and ready to be applied elsewhere. In the novel, the model is indeed transplanted across Europe, gradually ousting free-market capitalism.

In *NY2140*, the transition similarly begins locally: amongst ordinary New Yorkers who experiment with cooperative solutions in the twenty-second-century metropolis – partially flooded due to sea-level rise. This can be observed on the example of the Met – a partly submerged building in which the ensemble of the main characters live. The Met is a cooperative – run and owned by its residents, who contribute to its day-to-day maintenance, with everyone participating in its management. The Met’s operation is partly based on the principles of Albert and Hahnel’s parecon: equity, self-management, solidarity, diversity, and collective decision-making. When the Met is threatened with a hostile takeover, the residents concoct a plan, which starts out as a defensive response but evolves into a global revolt against the system. As many other buildings around Manhattan have found themselves in a similar situation, the Met group realize that the world of big business possesses such global power that it can hardly be opposed by a single cooperative: “It’s a global problem. So if there’s to be any chance of fighting it, it’s got to be at the macro level” (p. 435). A global plan is thus devised – to deliberately collapse the economic system by coordinated fiscal non-compliance.

The Met group spread the information about the planned civil disobedience online: “there should be an everybody strike. Now. Today ... If enough of us do it they can’t put us in jail, because there will be too many of us. We’ll have taken over” (Robinson, 2017, p. 526). The use of a popular internet platform to spread anti-capitalist content is a case of coopting capitalist tools for an anti-capitalist

cause. Mason (2015) writes that the growth of information economy may help spread revolutionary attitudes, as the internet allows for the networking of vast numbers of individuals and keeping them informed: “info-capitalism has created a new agent of change in history: the educated and connected human being” (p. 8).

The plan proves successful as more and more people withhold their payments. Soon, other forms of non-violent resistance and deliberate non-participation are employed: “Strategic defaulting. Class-action suits. Mass rallies. Staying home from work. Staying out of private transport systems. Refusing consumer consumption beyond the necessities” (Robinson, 2017, p. 531). In *TMftF* an analogous set of collective actions is undertaken: students’ fiscal strike, mass withdrawals of bank deposits, dismantling private banks by choosing “alternative cooperative financial institutions” (Robinson, 2020, p. 287). A non-capitalist takeover of social media is also executed, via the introduction of a new social media site – a cooperative co-owned by all its users, who retain ownership of their data and obtain profits from advertising fees. This poses a challenge to the global data economy and leads to “the decapitation of Facebook . . . and all the rest like it” (p. 242), effectively turning social media into a commons. Moreover, the site allows the user to conduct financial operations, as it enables “postcapitalist crowd banking” (p. 379).

In both novels, resistance against high finance by deliberate non-engagement results in banks losing liquidity. Bankers appeal for assistance, expecting the same financial relief as was provided during the real-life crisis of 2008. Instead, governments respond with “salvation-by-nationalization offers” (Robinson, 2017, p. 602): a buyout instead of the expected bailout at the cost of the tax payer. Consequently, neoliberal capitalism is dealt a lethal blow: “This was either nationalizing finance or financializing the nation . . . Definancialization of a sort. End of neoliberalism” (Robinson, 2020, p. 376). Ordinary people, acting through their elected representatives, now control financial resources, which can be invested in pro-social reforms. Robinson refers to nationalization as “one of those processes by which capitalism may be non-revolutionarily changed into something else” (The Humanities, 2011).

The success of the whole endeavor is contingent on international cooperation and governmental intervention through legislation. Robinson considers the current crisis an “all-hands-on-deck situation” (Cohen, 2021), requiring pro-climate collaboration of nation-states, institutions, and nationalized central banks. While localized micro-economies are crucial and can be seen as a good starting point, Robinson deems them insufficient in the grand scheme of things (Robinson & Feder, 2018, p. 93). In this, he might be following utopian theorists like Carl Friedman, Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, all of whom have drawn similar conclusions with regard to the scale and scope of anti-capitalist efforts. Friedman (2013) observes that it is doubtful “that utopia can be achieved through . . . essentially individualist means . . . without any need for the revolutionizing

of society as a whole” (p. 84). Similarly, Levitas and Sargisson (2003) comment that “the personal is not political enough” and remain “unconvinced about the translation of micro-changes into macro-changes” (p. 23). Robinson expresses similar skepticism when he talks about the “focus on local solutions in Naomi Klein” (Robinson & Feder, 2018, p.93), a remark which likely refers to Klein’s 2014 book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, in which she applauds the emergence of localized resistance to extractive practices. While Robinson does introduce such incipient anti-capitalist activities forcing change from below, he stresses the necessity of a top-down follow-up to these initiatives in the form of regulatory measures that would enforce new rules of operation.

In *TMftF* globalized actions are coordinated by the titular Ministry for the Future – a UN international body tasked with protecting the rights of future generations. The Ministry compiles a multilayered plan consisting of geoengineering, as well as economic and legislative solutions to be implemented with the assistance of sympathetic governments and banks. The linchpin of the plan is carbon quantitative easing, a system of incentivizing successful attempts at going off carbon. Countries and individuals are paid for not using fossil fuels and for sequestering carbon from the atmosphere. This is paired with increased taxation for not reducing CO2 emissions. Eventually, oil becomes less lucrative, causing solar energy to be the preferable option.

Carbon quantitative easing is described in *TMftF* as “a huge multi-variant experiment in social engineering” (Robinson, 2020, p. 344), as it is not merely an economic solution but also one targeted at shaping attitudes. Robinson believes that the destructiveness of the current system stems from its primary operating principle: investment at the highest rate of return, which cannot be obtained while ensuring justice and sustainability (Cohen, 2021). Robinson (2020) is realistic about the unlikelihood of successfully convincing people to stop burning carbon merely for the planet’s sake. Instead, the law needs to be changed so that carbon-burning as a profitable activity is undercut. The sociopsychological mechanisms behind this solution are perhaps aptly explained in *2312*, where an AI trying to simulate a global turn in humanity’s mindset speculates: “When the goal of self-interest is seen to be perfectly isomorphic with universal well-being, bad people will do what it takes to get universal well-being” (p. 435). This is how decarbonization is achieved in *TMftF* – by blending biosphere welfare with profitability.

In both novels, the entire transformation culminates in far-reaching socioeconomic reforms, largely derived, by Robinson’s admission in *TMftF*, from socialism and Keynesianism. The reforms identify the necessities – “food, water, shelter, clothing, electricity, health care, and education” (Robinson, 2020, p. 409) as human rights – never to be exploited for profit. Further non-capitalist mechanisms evolve as a commons is established for every necessity. The number of such citizen-owned cooperative enterprises is on the rise; public utility districts

are established. The highest possible income is regulated by law to ensure equal wealth distribution. States guarantee not only basic services, but also jobs and universal minimal income. Such targeted modifications of the system subvert it from within; Fredric Jameson (2005) notes for instance that full employment as a utopian dream has the potential of dismantling capitalism, by infiltrating the basic tenets of the system (p. 110). Lastly, emphasis is placed on gender equity, climate justice, as well as wildlife and landscape restoration.

In both transformations a variety of real-life approaches are combined. With regard to the revolutionary process itself, Erica Chenoweth's and Joshua Clover's views on the necessity of civil disobedience and a general strike to effect change are referred to, as is J. M. Keynes' concept of the euthanasia of the rentier. As for the shape of the postcapitalist world, Aldo Leopold's notion of doing what is good for the land is presented as a primary principle to replace the capitalist axioms prioritizing profit-making. Other models featured in the novels include the Green New Deal, E. O. Wilson's Half-Earth plan, Albert and Hahnel's participatory economics, Keynes' MMT, liberation theology, the Public Trust plan, as well as socialist, even communist postulates. On the whole, Robinson's novels either dramatize solutions which are only theorized in the extratextual reality, or scale up those which are already in operation. Stephen Frug (2021) observes that the preexistence of these concepts is not a flaw of Robinson's fiction, but its major advantage, as the novels introduce readers to ideas they might not be familiar with and render them less abstract. The amalgam of approaches becomes the textual novum, which directs attention towards the radical potential latent in the present moment. Robinson considers such an inclusive approach to the climate crisis indispensable, advocating the application of "a bricolage of whatever helps to dodge the mass extinction" (Vion-Dury, 2022), be it socialism, geoengineering, or even eco-terrorism.

Eco-terrorism is a prominent theme in *TMftF*, in which pro-climate activists resort to targeted assassinations of climate criminals, such as oil executives, financiers, petro-billionaires, and carbon oligarchy held responsible for the devastation of earth: "all death dealers. Mass murderers for cash" (Robinson, 2020, p. 136). The aim is to influence patterns of behavior – those of individuals, institutions, and nation-states – to get people "scared away from burning carbon" (p. 109). Even passenger jets are shot down to discourage air travel. This proves effective, but the radical extremity of the means used is likely the most controversial aspect of Robinson's vision. The author seems to suggest that, considering what is at stake, the rightness of any methods available is nondebatable. In the words of one of the protagonists, self-defense is always justified, even if it involves murder. Robinson believes that with an increase in the frequency of ecological disasters, violence is bound to follow, as traumatized victims of climate change will see it as their only recourse. Still, Robinson also claims that violence is ultimately ineffective due to

the resentment it generates (Cohen, 2021). This is in agreement with Jameson's assertion that violence is counterproductive and cannot be seen as the utopian agent of change (Jameson, 2005, p. 232). Still, terrorism is a successful strategy in *TMftF*. The radical measures seem to be further justified by the repeated use of the phrase "War for the Earth," which not only legitimizes the use of violence, but also specifies that to save the biosphere a powerful opponent needs to be defeated. The novel casts the plutocratic elites in this role – they become the dystopian monstrosity that stands in opposition to utopian endeavors. Ecoterrorists are referred to as "resistance warriors" (p. 368); Robinson even goes as far as to say that they could be regarded as "freedom fighters" resisting capitalism (Cohen, 2021).

Lastly, the modified socioeconomic system is not meant to be entirely antithetical to capitalism. In fact, following Raymond Williams' residual-emergent model, the successor system retains some elements of its predecessor. Robinson observes in *TMftF* that "when things fall apart, something from the old system has to be used to hang the new system on" (Robinson, 2020, p. 410). This ties in with Peter F. Drucker's assessment of the postcapitalist transition:

The new society – and it is already here – is a postcapitalist society. It surely . . . will use the free market as the one proven mechanism of economic integration. It will not be an 'anti-capitalist society.' It will not even be a 'non-capitalist society'; the institutions of capitalism will survive though some, e.g. banks, may play quite different roles. (Drucker, 2013, p. 6)

Robinson makes it clear that within the postcapitalist blend of the residual and the emergent, the market, money, and the nation-state system cannot currently be eliminated – they will only be used differently. Paul Mason (2015) maintains that such a coexistence of the market sector and postcapitalist forms will continue for decades (p. 8).

5. Concluding remarks

The postcapitalist transition envisioned in *NY2140* and *TMftF* can be encapsulated as follows: it is to privilege the biosphere and social justice, while suppressing the power of global capital via a combination of bottom-up non-capitalist practices and top-down political processes. The depicted transformations consist in a recognition of emergent, localized, horizontal, postcapitalist tendencies already in place within the capitalist system, collective action, international cooperation and legislative intervention. Such a transition is contingent on people's ability to see through and consciously transcend the normative notions of capitalism's supposed superiority and irreplaceability. This can be enabled by speculative narratives – in Jameson's words, utopian SF counteracts "the atrophy of the utopian imagination and of the political vision in our own society" (Jameson, 2005, p. 308). Robinson similarly believes that political SF can play a pivotal role in overcoming cognitive limitations

with regard to imagining non-capitalist options, as he emphatically appeals to young SF writers “to write that story so people can imagine it in advance – and then try for it” (Vaughan, 2021). He expresses a similar opinion in *TMftF*: “[the decisive moves] would happen first in the realm of discourse, then afterward in the realm of material existence” (p. 274). Perceived in this manner, literary speculation might rupture the seemingly impermeable horizon of capitalism by conceptualizing postcapitalist options, which are thus prefigured and imaginatively rehearsed. Political SF also uncovers latent postcapitalist potential in real-world trends and practices. Hence, SF is neither escapist, nor merely predictive, but descriptive with regard to the author’s reality, as well as potentially preventive and intensely inspirational.

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