

ANNA GILAREK

HISTORICIZING CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM:  
FUTURE RETROSPECTION  
AND TEMPORAL ESTRANGEMENT  
IN KIM STANLEY ROBINSON'S *NEW YORK 2140*  
AND NORA K. JEMISIN'S *EMERGENCY SKIN*

Despite using such forward-looking strategies as speculation and extrapolation, as its primary formulas, science fiction as a genre is not only future-oriented and predictive, but also descriptive, insofar as its projections of the future map out such potential outcomes as can be produced by the current conditions, thus shedding light on the present and its latent potentialities. The historical continuity between the reader's present and the diegetic future enables a reevaluation of contemporary reality from the perspective of a speculatively posited future world. Thus historicized, the present ceases to be perceived as solid and immutable, and the reader's deeply entrenched conceptions about its definite status are contested, or even shattered.

This approach is adopted in two recent science-fiction texts: Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *New York 2140* (2017) and Nora K. Jemisin's Hugo Award-winning novella *Emergency Skin* (2019). Both envision climate change-ravaged Earth, whose environmental and social collapse is unquestionably attributed to the economic principles of late capitalism. The futuristic setting of both texts becomes a vantage point from which contemporaneity can be viewed—disguised as the textual past. Robinson and Jemisin problematize the perceived crisis of the contemporary world, extrapolate its consequences, and diagnose its causes. While Robinson's novel is an example of finely nuanced political SF, Jemisin's novella reads slightly like a heavy-handed cautionary tale. Still, both authors successfully use historicization to target neoliberal capitalism: they envision post-capitalist futures, while simultaneously providing a critique of the system

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in response to which these futures evolved. The historically estranged frame of reference established in Robinson's and Jemisin's texts creates cognitive distance and liberates the reader from viewing the present order in terms of an absolute, revealing both its inadequacies and transformative potential.

### 1. SCIENCE FICTION AS A HISTORICIZING GENRE

Despite its status as a predominantly non-mimetic futuristic genre, science fiction can in fact be a useful tool in overcoming challenges to objectivity with regard to the present reality. To quote utopian writer William Morris, "no age can see itself" (qtd. in Beaumont 33) owing to "the murky smoked glass of the present condition of life among us" (Morris qtd. in Beaumont 50). Utopian theorist, Ernst Bloch, describes this inability of the moderns to perceive their reality in an unbiased fashion as a "blindspot in the mind ... the darkness of the lived moment" (qtd. in Beaumont 35). Countering cognitive deficiencies of this sort is seen by Fredric Jameson as the fundamental task of science fiction. He questions the human capacity to imagine the future in any accurate manner, be it in a literary form or any other. Instead, says Jameson, "[science fiction's] multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come" ("Progress" 152). Jameson points to a degree of realism within science fiction, which he finds in the genre's "representationality" ("Progress" 151) with regard to the present reality, along with its capacity for restructuring the reader's experience of this reality by means of defamiliarization. Kim Stanley Robinson, who happens to have been Jameson's student, similarly believes that any and all attempts to envision the future are doomed to failure; he points to the realistic potential of science fiction, a genre to which he has repeatedly referred as "the realism of our time."<sup>1</sup> In light of these considerations, Robinson's novel and Jemisin's novella can be perceived as cultural artefacts, products of their social and political time, which lend themselves to new historicist readings. They shed light not so much on the potential avenues of change, but upon the lived present of their authors.

Historicity, according to Jameson, allows one to "grasp the contemporaneous as part of an historical process" (Beaumont 33), which enforces the perception

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, "Kim Stanley Robinson: Science Fiction Is the Realism of Our Time." *YouTube*, uploaded by Center for Values in Medicine, Science, and Technology, 7 Mar. 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApA0\\_OyV0XE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApA0_OyV0XE).

of contemporaneity as mutable, rather than monolithic and static. This perspective corresponds with Bertolt Brecht's<sup>2</sup> concept of estrangement, or *Verfremdung* (the V-effect), whose political and didactic function lies in the fact that it "leads to the realization that things do not have to be the way they are, that any current state of things is not a natural given, but a product of historical processes, which can change and will be changed" (Spiegel 370). When applied to near-future SF, the V-effect may facilitate an acknowledgment of this fluidity, by situating the known reality of capitalism in a temporally estranged perspective. As a literature of cognitive estrangement,<sup>3</sup> SF has the capacity for making the habitually accepted reality appear strange, thus enforcing a sort of perceptual renewal.

Darko Suvin observes that "the historically crucial shift of the locus of estrangement from space to time" (10) is a standard device in SF, which can in fact be seen as a historicizing genre. Carl Freedman sees this aspect of SF as a point of convergence with the historical novel, as both oscillate around a dialectical axis juxtaposing two different temporal plains. Moreover, both add a historical perspective to the manner in which contemporary reality can be interpreted. In particular, they serve the role of "denaturalizing the present by showing it to be neither arbitrary nor inevitable but the conjunctural result of complex, knowable material processes" (56). Fredric Jameson makes a similar comment regarding historicity, defined by him as

neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future (although its various forms use such representations); it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective. ("Postmodernism" 192)

The historical distance thus created is seen as indispensable for an accurate and unbiased perception of contemporary reality. The epistemic shift in judgement which results from such temporal perceptual displacement entails the ability to expose and possibly resist what Fredric Jameson described as "the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners" ("Progress" 153). In Jameson's view, this intellectual imprisonment stems from the dominant ideology behind capitalism. In order to perpetuate and solidify itself, neoliberal capitalism promotes the conviction that

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of Brecht's concept of estrangement (*Verfremdung*) and the use of estranged historical perspective for challenging the perception of contemporary reality as static see Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*.

<sup>3</sup> SF was first described as such by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*.

it is the only viable system—a stance famously encapsulated in the oft-quoted statement that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Despite a growing awareness of some destructive implications of neoliberal hegemony, the most glaring of which include increasingly acute economic inequality and environmental destruction, capitalism continues to be justified, legitimized and universalized as the unchallengeable norm or a timeless monolith. Such capitalist realism, to use Mark Fisher’s well-known term, handicaps our ability to think beyond the limitations of contemporary socioeconomic reality. This is symptomatic of what Kim Stanley Robinson sees as a global failure of imagination with regard to the future. He refers to this condition as an aporia—defined by him as “non-seeing” (de Vicente) or “a strategically located mental blind spot” (*New York* 140). The novelist believes that this condition can be remedied by speculative fiction narratives (de Vicente). By positing alternative futures such narratives facilitate the conceptualization of non-capitalist options. At the very least, they resist neoliberal ideological closure by raising the readers’ awareness of their own systemically imposed limitations, which prevent them from comprehending the system’s underlying principles.

## 2. TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CAPITALISM IN *NEW YORK 2140* AND *EMERGENCY SKIN*

*New York 2140* (*NY 2140*) and *Emergency Skin* (*ES*) both depict futures whose links to the authors’ present are quite transparent. In fact, both authors make interesting narrative choices in order to facilitate the recognition of these ties. Jemisin’s novella is narrated by a collective AI consciousness programmed by capitalist “Founders.” It therefore serves as their mouthpiece, allowing the reader to comprehend their mindset and to see it as a continuation of contemporary capitalist thought. Robinson opts for multiple narrators, with one narrative voice, dubbed “the citizen,” recounting the timeline of Earth’s deterioration. The citizen serves as a meta-narrator, whose often sardonic account creates a global, collective, and detailed perspective upon the history of their era—framed by the reader’s present as the starting point and the citizen’s present as the closing juncture. These strongly expository passages make use of realist conventions: the topography of New York is portrayed with uncanny verisimilitude, and detailed scientific explanations regarding climate change and sea level

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<sup>4</sup> The statement is variously attributed to either Fredric Jameson or Slavoj Žižek, see Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*

rise are provided, as are economic explanations regarding repeated economic crises, reaching back to the twentieth century.

Such part fictive and part realist presentation of the textual past ensures the readers' recognition of this reality as theirs, while simultaneously denaturalizing it, which might lead to an acknowledgement of the system's flaws. The most fundamental of these is the self-destructive potential of contemporary reality that both Robinson and Jemisin emphasize by introducing an apocalyptic event extrapolated from current trends. Catastrophic sea-level rise and mass species extinction are shown to result from mankind's Anthropocenic activity, regulated by neoliberal ideology with its prioritization of big business and profit-making. In both texts, the money-owning elites are unwilling to amend their policy even in the face of a looming disaster. Invariably, they prioritize the maintenance of their hold on capital and power, rather than the general welfare of the planet and its population.

The citizen in *NY 2140* also points to one of the main ills of capitalism that its critics highlight: the unequal distribution of capital within society, with its accumulation in the hands of a narrowly limited number of people—the proverbial one per cent. This leads to a growing financial divide between capital-holders and the labor class. As a result, individuals are not affected equally by the sea level rise:

This remarkable rise had been bad for people—most of them. But at this point ... the top one percent owned fully eight percent of the world's wealth. For them it wasn't so bad. This remarkable wealth distribution was just a result of a logical progression of the ordinary workings of capitalism ... (205)

Both Robinson and Jemisin highlight the fact that it is the underprivileged who generally bear the brunt of capitalism's exploitative and unsustainable character. Social vulnerability is thus directly proportional to income disparity and this unequal distribution of risk is typical of risk societies, as characterized by sociologist Ulrich Beck.<sup>5</sup> In a risk society risk exposure and the consequences of potential catastrophes affect the disadvantaged in a more pronounced manner, which further deepens the gulf between this social group and the privileged. As Dean Curran points out, the accumulation of capital in the hands of the one per cent is precisely what enables them to avoid the consequences of the risks generated by human activity in the Anthropocene (101). In *ES*, the one percent (the story's Founders) turn Earth into a barely habitable zone and then promptly leave it for another planet, with the rest of the world's population left to face

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<sup>5</sup> See Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* and *World at Risk*.

the crisis. In *NY 2140* an analogous situation takes place: those who can afford it, including the US government, abandon the flooded areas, leaving the afflicted inhabitants to fend for themselves, in particular in the so-called intertidal region, which is partly and periodically submerged. In the intertidal many underprivileged New Yorkers struggle with poverty and precarious living conditions. Social inequality is acute, as the rich occupy high-class buildings in the dry parts of the city, while those living in the flooded areas face constant danger of construction disasters due to the weakened structure of the partly submerged buildings. The citizen specifies that capital flight is a standard feature of capitalist ventures—as soon as the commercial potential of a region is thoroughly exploited, the capital moves on. The AI-narrator in *ES* presents this economic principle as the only rational approach and a justification for the elites' departure: "We left because it would've cost too much to fix the world. Cheaper to build a new one" (18).

And yet, as soon as ordinary people restore an area's functionality, the world of high finance is back with a vengeance. When New Yorkers in Robinson's novel manage to adapt the intertidal sections of the city through their collective effort, real estate speculators strike immediately—a significant part of the plot revolves around their ruthless attempts to take over the reclaimed property. The novel presents this approach as an element of capitalist *modus operandi*: exploitation of an area, capital flight, property recapture by the corporate sector. The AI in Jemisin's novella reveals a similar profit-oriented attitude. On observing that with the sea levels back to normal the land has been reclaimed, the narrator is clearly surprised that the it is not utilized for commercial purposes: "we are astonished that no one has redeveloped it, or at least clear-cut the forest. We find such chaos ugly and inefficient" (9).

The AI's inability to see value in anything non-financial marks it as a product of capitalist realism—it suffers from the cognitive impotence which Robinson has described as an *aporia*. On the pages of *NY 2140*, the citizen narrator elaborates that the *aporia* stems from an evolutionary mechanism of denial, protecting individuals from visualizing potential future disasters. Any warnings, from scientists and SF writers alike, are cheerfully ignored:

They published their papers, and shouted and waved their arms, and a few canny and deeply thoughtful sci-fi writers wrote up lurid accounts of such an eventuality, and the rest of civilization went on torching the planet ... that's how much they believed their scientists. (140)

Although this description concerns the past of the citizen's world, it may well be associated with the reader's present reality—scientists do predict an environmental disaster in mid-twenty-first century,<sup>6</sup> and numerous climate fiction novels, such as Robinson's *NY 2140*, get written<sup>7</sup> and yet the general unconcern persists. The citizen dubs mankind "*Homo sapiens oblivious*" (377), due to their nonchalant attitude to the apocalypse even when it is already upon them.

The historicizing and diachronic approach is deepened in both texts by interweaving actual historical events within the plots. These are shared as the common past by both the characters and the readers. In *ES* the Industrial Revolution is cited as the starting point for the deterioration of the planet. In Robinson's novel the meta-narrator quotes from economic history and studies the solutions adopted in the twentieth and twenty-first century to deal with the consequences of economic downturns. The citizen contrasts the methods of alleviating the effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the economic crisis of 2008. The first included limiting corporate power and prioritizing general public's welfare, while the second involved introducing austerity measures and the bailout of banks with public money. Robinson clearly sides with Keynesian interventionism of the New Deal, while the 2008 solution is shown to mark the emergence of a dangerous pattern, whose success in the eyes of high finance is likely to result in the repetition of the scenario:

Book goes like this: finance says to government, Pay us or the economy dies. Congress, assuming its paymasters on Wall Street know what they're talking about, because it concerns the incomprehensible mysteries of finance, agrees to fork it over. Standard practice, precedent well established. (*New York* 602)

The narrator singles out these destructive patterns in American socioeconomic history, identifying the state as a pawn of global finance, whose dominance rests not only on their financial leverage, but also upon their supposed expertise in the field of crisis management. As Naomi Klein indicates in her well-known study of disaster capitalism, "in moments of crisis, people are willing to hand over a great deal of power to anyone who claims to have a magic cure" (210), and Robinson's novel exposes precisely this misconception—the magic cure only serves the magician.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the reports regarding the contemporary climate emergency compiled by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

<sup>7</sup> For an extended discussion of the surge in climate fiction writing see Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, Gregers Andersen, *Climate Fiction and Cultural Analysis*, Kübra Baysal, *Apocalyptic Visions in the Anthropocene and the Rise of Climate Fiction*.

The citizen narrator in *NY 2140*, whose views largely correspond with Robinson's own anti-capitalist and essentially Marxist stance, identifies the working class as the main victims of the repeated cycle of bubble and burst, as well as of the neoliberal policy of crisis management:

But after every crisis of the last century ... or maybe forever, capital had tightened the noose around the neck of labor. Simple as that: crisis capitalism, shoving the boot on the neck harder at every opportunity. Tightening the noose. It had been proved, it was a studied phenomenon. To anyone looking at history it was impossible to deny. It was the pattern. (502)

Robinson uses historical perspective to show contemporaneity as a stage in an already established progression towards the consolidation of global finance and the capitalist system at the cost of labor. Studying the pattern also reveals that crisis, including environmental disasters, is beneficial from the perspective of the one percent, who exploit disasters as economic opportunities. The essence of such crisis capitalism lies in perpetuating the cycle of crisis and crisis-exploitation: "An end is a beginning ... apply more police state and more austerity, clamp down hard, proceed as before. Cleaning up the mess is a great investment opportunity" (*New York* 144). *NY 2140* explores a potential future path, in which this approach becomes standard practice. The novel's premise is that the bailout of 2008 would become a model for two more, each following a sea-level rise event. Historicizing these already functioning patterns and cycles can possibly render them discernible and comprehensible.

Similarly, in *ES*, the importance of historical perspective in viewing capitalism and its ultimate collapse is emphasized, as the Founders' representative who visits the post-capitalist Earth is taken to a museum. The experience of viewing the entire timescale of capitalism turns out to be an enlightening experience, leading to an acknowledgment that "the idea of doing something without immediate benefit, something that might only pay off in ten, twenty, or a hundred years ... was precisely the kind of thinking that the world needed to survive" (Jemisin 24). Reforming the system is thus conditional on a radical change in attitude—a shift of emphasis from immediate profit to the welfare of future generations, which can only be realized once a more global, long-term perspective is adopted. Coincidentally, this is also the basic premise of Kim Stanley Robinson's most recent novel, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020).



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### 3. UTOPIAN/DYSTOPIAN TROPES AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Carl Freedman emphasizes that historical mutability is intertwined with utopian possibility within science fiction (55), and this combination of temporal and qualitative aspects heightens the defamiliarizing effect of utopian SF. In Robinson's and Jemisin's works, the present/future dichotomy typical of SF texts is paralleled by a dystopian/utopian dialectic. Within the dialectic, neoliberal capitalism is cast as a dystopian socioeconomic reality, which allows for censoring it in ways which are both implicit and explicit. Explicit criticism is to be found in the realist evocation of the present as the imagined future's dystopian past, as well as in its projected capitalist future. Implicit criticism arises from the implied contrast between these capitalist timelines and alternative utopian futures.

Robinson's and Jemisin's dystopian critique of contemporary capitalism is to be seen in their presentation of the catastrophic developments that it produces, as well as in their prognosis of capitalism's evolutionary progression towards its future, equally dystopian versions. In *NY 2140* it is a twenty-second-century capitalism—essentially the same in terms of its basic premise, but even more entrenched. Jemisin's vision is so extreme that it verges on a caricature: the capitalist Founders, having left Earth, establish a world cut to their needs—with white supremacism, sexism, agism, and ableism as their guiding principles. Theirs is a strongly stratified society, whose numbers are strictly controlled to avoid sharing resources with “unnecessary, unproductive people” (Jemisin 11). In essence, it is a world ruled by white plutocratic males. Extreme and far-fetched as the vision may seem, Jemisin seems to suggest that the seeds of such tendencies are already present in the reader's reality.

The futures depicted in both narratives are characterized by a coexistence of dystopian and utopian developments; social and economic evolution is thus shown to be open-ended and unequivocal. Robinson observes that “both good and bad things could be emerging at once ... we have choices to make about which emerging phenomena to support and which to oppose. Thinking of this mesh of past and future is a good tool” (“Interview”). What is more, whether the imagined future is utopian or dystopian is of secondary importance in relation to the capacity of both these modes to estrange and historicize the present. As Jameson asserts, science fiction “enacts and enables a structurally unique ‘method’ for apprehending the present as history, and this is so irrespective of the ‘pessimism’ or ‘optimism’ of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization” (“Progress” 153). Jameson also argues that this is the primary function of utopia—not to imagine the future, but to expose

“our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity” (*Archeologies* 46). Utopian SF has the potential of dislodging one from a fixed present perspective by augmenting it with both the historicity and the futurity whose lack Jameson identifies as the underlying cause of the intellectual and imaginative closure with regard to the real nature of the present, or its potential future trajectories.

Consequently, both *NY 2140* and *ES* combine dystopian critique with examples of a positive transformation towards potentially utopian social and economic solutions. Interestingly, both authors make the evolution of a utopian alternative conditional on the departure of the money-owning elites and the consequent diminishing of the impact of neoliberal ideological hegemony. The devastated areas cease to hold the interest of both potential investors and decision-makers, and their consequent departure opens up a space for utopian social experimentation. In both texts alterglobalist and post-capitalist theorizing is put into practice, which results in adopting pro-socialist solutions. In *NY 2140* their implementation is further accelerated by a worldwide anti-capitalist revolution, which paralyzes the global finance system.

In both of these fictional realities, a more equitable and more sustainable way of life is developed, characterized by collective effort, sharing, and mutual support. The social progress thus achieved can be interpreted in utopian terms, but these versions of the future are not primarily meant as blueprints. They can be interpreted as lenses through which contemporaneity becomes intelligible. Through implied contrast between an improved social reality and the textual past (identified as the reader’s present), the inadequacies of the latter become apparent. As Zygmunt Bauman observes, utopian thinking corresponds with the natural human tendency to “to measure life ‘as it is’ by life as it should be (that is, a life imagined to be different from the life known, and particularly a life that is better and would be preferable to the life known)” (qtd. in Schmid 53). Matthew Beaumont makes a similar observation regarding the utopian function, defining utopia as “a fictional future from which the stain of the present assumes an intelligible historical form” (35). Utopian perspective establishes critical distance which remedies the incompleteness of our immediate experience, by reducing the limits to our perception, imposed by force of habit, custom, inherited sentiments, or propaganda.

In the two books, conceptualizing utopia as an improved and as yet non-existent time emphasizes its temporal, rather than spatial location. Hence, utopian visions such as those can be categorized as future uchronias—understood neither merely as “no-time” nor “good time,” but as “a breaking out of rigid,

standardized time structures” (Schmid 31). This cognitive dislocation allows for a refreshed perception of the reader’s present reality, depicted as uchronia’s decidedly dyschronic past. Envisioning the present as a “bad time,” highlights its temporality and transience. While dystopia may appear solid and immutable, dyschronia is more likely to be perceived as a temporary condition, subject to forces of history and human intervention. Such a perspective on utopia/dystopia may prevent it from being seen as ahistorical, as it is shown to be rooted in the present, whose historically contingent status it exposes.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The two narratives, in particular the more nuanced *NY 2140*, can be interpreted in light of the concept of the *longue durée*,<sup>8</sup> introduced by Fernand Braudel as a method of looking at long-range history, with its imperceptible progress and slow change, which preclude the perception of historical processes and world-systems in their entirety, i.e. including recurring patterns, and cycles. Long-range history can be utilized to make sense of those well-established long-term processes which “can only be grasped if the chronological field of study is extended as far as possible” (Braudel 101). This extension of the present towards plausible futures is enacted within SF, enabling a broader, more holistic look at the timescale of capitalism as a system whose origins, heyday and decline can be traced by historical investigation to its conclusion—either an apocalyptic event or a system-change—or both. A diachronic analysis of the Capitalocene, seen as a temporally circumscribed whole, permits one to trace the emergence of ever-recurring patterns and their anticipated conclusions. This helps to suppress capitalist realist perspective, which tends to mythologize the realities of capitalism as the norm. According to Suvin, SF is able to demystify phenomena which are thus universalized, as it “first posits them as problems and then explores where they lead; it sees the mythical static identity as an illusion, usually as fraud, at best only as a temporary realization of potentially limitless contingencies” (7). The *longue durée* perspective, as seen in the two texts under discussion, enables the exploration of improved futures by unlocking the closure of the present. In this it overlaps with the utopian function, conceptualized by Ruth Levitas as a method of a comprehensive

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<sup>8</sup> K. S. Robinson discusses the role of Braudelian *longue durée* in his world-building and storytelling in an interview for Big Echo ([www.bigecho.org/kim-stanley-robinson](http://www.bigecho.org/kim-stanley-robinson)).

analysis of the current limitations on economic and ecological imagination, as well as a thorough investigation of potential avenues of change (xi).

To conclude, Robinson's novel and Jemisin's novella illustrate how historicization enables the recognition of the contemporaneous—the capitalist system in particular—as part of a historical process. The present and its institutions are denaturalized, and recognized as mutable. Consequently, the reader's experience of reality is restructured and recalibrated, leading to an epistemic shift in judgement, which might entail the ability to expose and possibly resist the systemic and ideological closure that plagues modernity. Owing to historicization, futuristic narratives reveal both the evolutionary and revolutionary potential concealed within the deceptively static and fixed nature of the present reality.

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S u m m a r y

The paper looks at the historicizing approach adopted in two recent science-fiction books: Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *New York 2140* (2017) and Nora K. Jemisin's novella *Emergency Skin* (2019). In both, the authors' present is approached from the vantage point of a speculatively posited future and looked upon as the historical past of the text. The hypothesized temporal distance is meant to challenge and recalibrate the reader's perception of contemporary capitalism.

Based on Robinson's and Jemisin's narratives, the paper discusses the historicity and mimetic potential of science fiction, manifested in the genre's ability to situate the present as part of a historical process for an enhanced understanding of contemporary trends and their projected trajectories. In the two texts, the dichotomy between the envisioned future and the present-as-past is paralleled by a utopian/dystopian dialectic, wherein the reality of late capitalism is unequivocally identified as dystopian. The utopian and science-fiction perspectives combined produce the effect of cognitive estrangement, which entails a perceptual renewal with regard to capitalism, whose alleged incontestable status is challenged by the exposure of its historical mutability.

The aim of the analysis is to demonstrate that historicizing contemporary capitalism within science fiction may challenge the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism, expose its dystopian features, and indicate possibilities for the transformation of a system that proclaims to have no alternatives. Such historicization may produce an epistemic shift in the reader's perception of the contemporary socioeconomic reality, by emphasizing both its unrecognized flaws and its (r)evolutionary potential.

**Keywords:** science fiction; historicity; capitalism; cognitive estrangement; dystopia; utopia.

HISTORYZACJA WSPÓŁCZESNEGO KAPITALIZMU  
W LITERATURZE FANTASTYCZNONAUKOWEJ:  
RETROSPEKCJA SPEKULATYWNA I WYOBcowanie POZNAWCZE  
W POWIEŚCI *NEW YORK 2140* KIMA STANLEYA ROBINSONA  
I NOWELI *EMERGENCY SKIN* NORY K. JEMISIN

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Celem artykułu jest analiza historyzującej perspektywy przyjętej w dwóch opublikowanych w ostatnich latach tekstach fantastycznonaukowych: powieści Kima Stanleya Robinsona *New York 2140* (2017) i noweli Nory K. Jemisin *Emergency Skin* (2019). W obydwu tych tekstach teraźniejszość autorów ukazana jest z punktu widzenia przedstawionej w nich przyszłości i postrzegana jako historyczna przeszłość rzeczywistości przedstawionej. Hipotetyczny dystans czasowy ma umożliwić zakwestionowanie i rekalkibrację sposobu postrzegania przez czytelnika współczesnego kapitalizmu.

Opierając się na tekstach Robinsona i Jemisin, artykuł omawia historyzm i mimetyczny potencjał literatury fantastycznonaukowej, przejawiający się w sposobie, w jaki sytuuje ona teraźniejszość jako element procesu historycznego. Zabieg ten ma na celu uzyskanie lepszego zrozumienia współczesnych trendów i przewidywanych trajektorii ich rozwoju. W obu tekstach dychotomii

między wyobrażoną przyszłością a pozaliteracką teraźniejszością odpowiada dialektyka utopijno-dystopijna, w której rzeczywistość późnego kapitalizmu jest jednoznacznie identyfikowana jako dystopijna. Połączenie perspektywy utopijnej i fantastycznonaukowej daje efekt wyobcowania poznawczego, który pociąga za sobą odnowę percepcyjną w odniesieniu do kapitalizmu, którego rzekomo niepodważalny status jest zakwestionowany przez ujawnienie jego historycznej zmienności.

Celem analizy jest wykazanie, że uhistorycznianie współczesnego kapitalizmu w ramach science fiction może podważyć ideologiczną hegemonię neoliberalizmu, obnażyć jego dystopijne cechy i wskazać możliwości przekształcenia systemu, który opiera się na założeniu, że nie ma wobec niego alternatyw. Taka historyzacja może wywołać epistemiczną przemianę w postrzeganiu przez czytelnika współczesnej rzeczywistości społeczno-gospodarczej, podkreślając zarówno jej niedostrzegane dotąd defekty, jak i jej (r)ewolucyjny potencjał.

**Słowa kluczowe:** fantastyka naukowa; historyzm; kapitalizm; wyobcowanie poznawcze; utopia; dystopia.