

What is Solarpunk?

From the perspective of the early 21st century, things look pretty grim. A deadly cocktail of crises engulf the people of planet Earth and all other forms of biotic life which share it: a geopolitical crisis, an economic crisis, and a worsening ecological crisis due to global warming, which stems from a political-economic system that requires fossil fuels to power its technostructure.

Culture, having as it does a symbiotic relationship with material conditions, reflects a lot of these crises in fiction and the arts. The 2000s and 2010s were replete with apocalyptic imagery of a future ravaged by war, totalitarianism, runaway weapons technology, killer viruses, zombies, and environmental collapse. Not that such narratives are unneeded. At best, they can serve as a wake-up call for those caught up in the myth that we had reached the “end of history” with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the triumph of capitalism on a planetary scale. But if they remain the primary vision our globalised culture has of the potential future, they can end up reproducing the pervasive cynicism and despair which makes all crises seem inescapable.

This is why solarpunk is of value.

Solarpunk is a Revolt of Hope Against Despair

Solarpunk is a rebellion against the structural pessimism in our late visions of how the future will be. Not to say it replaces pessimism with Pollyanna-ish optimism, but with a cautious hopefulness and a daring to tease out the positive potentials in bad situations. Hope that perhaps the grounds of an apocalypse (revelation) might also contain the seeds of something better; something more ecological, liberatory, egalitarian, and vibrant than what came before, if we work hard at cultivating those seeds.

Any tour of the geeky parts of the Internet will reveal an assortment of different traditions ending in the suffix “punk”: steampunk, dieselpunk, clockpunk, biopunk, cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk, and so on. All the many different punk science-fiction movements imagine how things could turn out if society and technology took a different turn. While steampunk imagines a past that might have been, based on Victorian-age technology, solarpunk imagines a future that could be, based on current-age technology. It anticipates the type alternative history science-fiction the people of the future might write about us if things turn out horribly. But more than just a new science-fiction or fantasy subgenre, it's also practical vision for (maybe) bringing the things it imagines into being in the real world.

You may ask what exactly is meant to be “punk” about what a cynic might see as the lovechild of hippies and futurists. After all, isn't punk meant to denote anger and rage at the “the system”, as well as black leather and spikey hair? Punk is more of an ethos than a specific set of signifiers, implying rebellion against, and negation of, the dominant paradigm and everything repressive about it. So in that sense, in a world being torn apart by a planetary system based on avarice and power-lust and ecocide, solarpunk might be the most “punk” movement of all.

Solarpunk is Eco-Speculation, in Both Fiction and Reality

Solarpunk is a (mostly) aesthetic-cultural and (sometimes) ethical-political tendency which attempts to negate the dominant idea which grips popular consciousness: that the future must be grim, or at least grim for the mass of people and nonhuman forms of life on the planet. Looking at the millennia-old rift between human society and the natural world, it sets as its ethical foundation the necessity of

mending this rift, transforming our relation to the planet by transcending those social structures which lead to systemic ecocide.

It draws a lot from the philosophy of social ecology, which also focused on mending this rift by restructuring society to function more like ecology: non-hierarchical, cooperative, diverse, and seeking balance.

Solarpunk's vision is of an ecological society beyond war, domination, and artificial scarcity; where everything is powered by green energy and a culture of hierarchy and exclusion has been replaced by a culture founded on radical inclusiveness, unity-in-diversity, free cooperation, participatory democracy, and personal self-realisation.

This would be a world of decentralised eco-cities, 3D printing, vertical farms, solar glass windows, wild or inventive forms of dress and design, and a vibrant cosmopolitan aesthetic; where technology is no longer used to exploit the natural world, but to automate away needless human labour and to help restore the damage the Oil Age has already done. Solarpunk desires societies of polycultural ethnic diversity and gender liberation, where each person is able to actualise themselves in societal environment of free experimentation and communal caring; and driven by an overriding ethos of compassionate rationalism, where science and reason are not seen as antithetical to imagination and spirituality, but as concepts which bring out the best in each other.

It attempts to bring such values in being in the here-and-now, prefiguring the world to be created, through science-fiction and fantasy literature, arts, fashion, filmmaking, music, games, and a set of ideas which inform political, economic, and ecological activism.

Solarpunk stories are likely to feature characters from (currently) oppressed or marginalised groups living more freely, equally, and inclusively than they are able to now; exploring an exotic world of body modification, gender and sexual discovery, new forms of technology – and dealing with conflicts from the remnants of the old world as well as the unique problems which are sure to arise in a very different social scene. Solarpunk arts are driven by mixtures of multimedia technology and more traditional handcrafts, blending such disparate things as anime, Art Nouveau, Afrofuturism, indigenous American designs, and Edwardian fashion into a stew of artistic cross-pollination. And all of the above try to take the existing aspects of our current world and repurpose them into something more liberatory, specialising in reframing, pastiche, and reimagining of existing characters, styles, and trends in a very different context. Blending the diverse aesthetic styles of several different cultures, solarpunk engenders a celebration of hybridity while still being sensitive to the problems of cultural appropriation – “taking” instead of “partaking” – from subordinate cultures by dominant cultures

Solarpunk is the Positive Articulation of a Better World

Not content to accept the dictates of a tomorrow ruled by authoritarian states, rapacious corporations, and a despoiled biosphere, solarpunk is an eco-futurist movement which tries to think our way out of catastrophe by imagining a future most people would actually like to live in, instead of ones we should be trying to avoid; a future characterised by a reconciliation between humanity and nature, where technology is utilised for human-centric and eco-centric ends, and where a society driven by hierarchy and competition has given way to one organised on the basis of freedom, equality, and cooperation. It's purpose is to serve as a compelling counter-narrative to the material and ideational conditions which keep us trapped in an authoritarian and ecocidal world where, as Margaret Thatcher put it, “there is no alternative”.

There already exist bits and pieces of just such an alternative right now, if only their potentials were drawn out. Worker cooperatives, self-sufficient eco-communities, directly-democratic popular assemblies, voluntary federations of small polities, mutual aid networks, community land trusts; all of these could form, it utilised, a very different kind of political-economic structure than the one being pushed by neoliberal globalisation. Likewise, technologies such as solar and wind and wave energy, 3D printing, vertical farming, micro-manufacturing, free software, open-source hardware, and robotic machinery which can automate away human labour all serve to illustrate the possibilities of an ecological and decentralised technostructure where the means of production are under popular control, rather than used to enhance the profit and power of a ruling elite.

In politics, solarpunk belongs to the wider tradition of the decentralist left, associated with such thinkers and activists as Peter Kropotkin, William Morris, Emma Goldman, Lewis Mumford, Paul Goodman, E.F. Schumacher, and Murray Bookchin. It rejects the false choice between the Scylla of market capitalism and the Charybdis of state socialism, between rugged individualism and smothering collectivism, instead opting for a society which reconciles a healthy individuality with communal solidarity.

A solarpunk polity would replace centralised forms of state government with decentralised confederations of self-governing communities, each administering themselves through many forms of direct and participatory democracy, with countless kinds of horizontally-structured voluntary associations taking care of judicial, environmental, and societal issues in ways which seek to maximise both personal autonomy and social solidarity.

A solarpunk “economy of the commons” would dispense with both profiteering corporations and statist central planning in favour of worker-run cooperatives, collaborative exchange networks, common pool resources, and control of investment by local communities. The aim of the economy would be reoriented from production-for-exchange and industrial “growth” to production-for-use and increasing the bio-psycho-social well-being of people and planet. Production would be moved as close as is possible to the point of consumption, with the long term aim being a relative self-sufficiency in goods and manufacturing. Decentralist forms of eco-technology would be used to help make work more participatory and enjoyable – “artisan-ising” the productive process itself – as well as automate away dull, dirty, and dangerous forms of work wherever possible. After realising an appropriate degree of post-scarcity, local self-sufficiency, and labour automation, it may even be feasible to abolish money as an unneeded nuisance in the allocation of resources.

A solarpunk culture would strive to dissolve every form of social hierarchy and domination – whether based on class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, or species – dispersing the power some individuals or groups wield over others and thus increasing the aggregate freedom of all; empowering the disempowered and including the excluded. It is rooted in the legacy of such liberatory movements as anti-authoritarian socialism, feminism, racial justice, queer and trans liberation, disability struggles, animal liberation, and digital freedom projects.

Solarpunk is Practical Utopianism

As you can see, there have always been alternatives, conventional wisdom just dismisses them out of hand as “utopian”. But is utopianism really such a bad thing? In one way, yes. The word itself, coined by Thomas More, is a Latin pun which means both “no-place” (ou-topia) but also “good-place” (eu-topia); implying a place so good it couldn’t exist. Before and after More, there were attempts by utopian dreamers to craft perfect worlds in which no real problems existed, such projects also tended to be totalitarian and centrally planned societies with little personal freedom.

Yet there have also been attempts to craft future societies which weren't flawless "end of history" scenarios, but that tried to eliminate the structural conditions which limited personal autonomy and enforced inequality upon people. Such eutopian visionaries mixed a spirit of hopefulness with an attitude of practicality, with one tempering the other. It is this latter tradition that solarpunk tries to take its cues from. So it is not utopian in the negative sense of wanting to design a "perfect" world without any problems – a outopia (no-place) – but it is utopian in imagining a better world which will inspire people to create it in reality – a eutopia (good-place).

So solarpunk is not utopian in the negative sense of wanting to design a "perfect" world without any problems – a outopia (no-place) – but it is utopian in imagining a better world which will inspire people to create it in reality – a eutopia (good-place). It sees utopia as a constant process of approximating an ideal, not reaching a light at the end of a tunnel. Solarpunk acknowledges that our utopia of social liberation and ecological stewardship may never be achieved 100%, but if we at least keep that vision in mind, throwing our efforts into making the world a bit better wherever we can, then at least every step we take towards achieving that utopia will be a step in the right direction. It will be progress, and, for those it positively impacts, liberation.

As Oscar Wilde once said, "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of utopias."

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