

Solarpunk visions in youth fiction.

The pedagogical utopia of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*

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Abstract

The essay examines the traits and pedagogical potential of the solarpunk artistic and narrative movement by analyzing the specific case study of Hayao Miyazaki's animated film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). The article first presents solarpunk and its association with environmental themes and successively applies the genre's theoretical framework to the case study, as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* shares some of the movement's approaches and aesthetics in relation to sustainability. The essay concludes with a pedagogical reflection on the potential of solarpunk to imagine and create sustainable worlds. Although this artistic movement is not explicitly aimed at a young audience, solarpunk stories (or a solarpunk reading of different narratives) could lead to a new understanding of the ongoing climate change and to a constructive call for environmental responsibility starting from a young age.

Keywords: solarpunk, Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, Hayao Miyazaki, Children's narratives, ecology.

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1. The utopian and ecological drive of solarpunk

Solarpunk is a literary and artistic movement that presents a constructive and hopeful perspective on the future, ready to face the upcoming challenges in terms of sustainability and respect for the planet and the creatures that inhabit it. This genre, developed since the early 2000s mainly on the web, aims to provide a direct counterpoint to a pessimistic outlook on the emergencies that our increasingly complex society is facing, including the environmental crisis. This genre/movement has a manifesto that clarifies the goals and features of solarpunk narratives, which are joined by the desire to answer the question «what does a sustainable civilization look like, and how can we get there? [...]»

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Solarpunk is at once a vision of the future, a thoughtful provocation, a way of living and a set of achievable proposals to get there» (Aa.Vv.). In solarpunk, art serves as a tool for activating a provocative and yet pragmatic reflection that should transform into social action: its stories provide imaginative paths that can illuminate new concrete possibilities and encourage a utopian pedagogy through popular storytelling (Pinto Minerva, 2019; Stramaglia, 2012).

In solarpunk, the future is illuminated by the sun, a suggestion conveyed by the name of the genre itself: solar indicates an optimistic approach, as well as the hoped-for use of renewable energy as a sign of concern for environmental issues. The name draws on punk's rebellion as well: the genre seeks to develop a counterculture, a revolt that is both destructive and constructive and applied on multiple levels, from breaking with the distrustful approach that characterizes environmental issues in both art and culture, to discussing dysfunctional and unsustainable social models such as capitalism and anthropocentrism. Punk also evokes a sense of collectivism since the movement strives towards constructing a community that values mutual respect between individuals and towards nature (Sylva, 2015).

Solarpunk falls under the genre of speculative fiction, which comprises fictional stories set in contexts that diverge from reality. It also adopts the aesthetic and literary canons of science fiction but, in particular, it offers a contrast to cyberpunk. Cyberpunk presents worlds that are saturated with advanced technology and relentless societal issues; it portrays a pessimistic perspective in gloomy, rainy, and decadent atmospheres. Its stories do not offer effective solutions for a better world, instead, they build nihilistic and frustrated characters who, even when they want to rebel and oppose society, find it difficult to even dream of a better context. Just as cyberpunk uses the symbol of rain as a metaphor for a world lacking light and serenity, solarpunk takes the sun as a metaphor for a positive future in which issues concerned with ecology, the transformation of the planet and its cultures, and the relationship between species will be effectively addressed and solved (Sylva, 2015). Some solarpunk narratives start in eras of social and environmental stability, while others represent a world still in crisis but striving to achieve a thoughtful utopia through concrete hope (Więckowska, 2022).

Therefore, solarpunk is an artistic and literary genre characterized by environmentally-friendly themes and based on utopian overtones. Quoting its manifesto, «Solarpunk can be utopian, just optimistic, or concerned with the struggles en route to a better world, but never dystopian. As our world roils with calamity, we need solutions, not only warnings» (Aa. Vv.). On the one hand, dystopia portrays a future with negative impacts on the planet resulting from technological, social, and political developments, often depicted through decay and approached with distrust. On the other hand, utopia envisions an

ideal cultural context which is not merely an unattainable model, but a world to strive for, a stimulus to look beyond the present boundaries towards a concrete renewal, a cultural revolution. Following this direction, solarpunk provides hope for tangible and achievable change (Ricciardiello, 2020, p. 5).

Therefore, the message conveyed by solarpunk is a hymn of hope that should reach the youngest, giving them the first educative hints of environmental awareness and responsibility (Mortari, 2001; Birbes, 2016). Not a decadent and gloomy future awaits us, in a world consumed by the market and by the thirst for power and resources, but rather an eco-sustainable, peaceful global society that has found its balance between technology and nature, and where humanity is capable of living together *in* the world and *with* the world (Persi, 2015). This is a possible future, if we know how to imagine it and how to build it collectively.

2. Renewable energy and respect for otherness: *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*

As this is still an emerging genre, markedly solarpunk film narratives are not yet widespread. Even rarer are solarpunk narratives – filmic or textual – specifically aimed at young spectators, although they turn out to be a potentially great target audience precisely because of their educational ‘malleability’. The paper analyzes Hayao Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), an animated film that, while not explicitly defined as solarpunk, shares many of the characteristics that define this genre. The solarpunk manifesto specifically mentions Studio Ghibli as a reference in terms of its aesthetics, legitimizing an analysis from this perspective, but there are many other points of contact between the genre and Miyazaki’s work as the stories of the Japanese director offer valuable insight into ecological issues and encourage hopeful lines of thought among the viewers (Trisciuzzi, 2013; 2017). Moreover, Miyazaki’s narratives offer trendy and accessible contents intertwined with emerging forms of education that well adheres to the solarpunk strand and to the analytical lens of pop pedagogy (Stramaglia, 2012).

The director invites viewers to rethink their role within an ecosystem and critiques the current disharmony between humanity and nature, in some cases by proposing striking post-apocalyptic scenarios that invite us to become aware of human destruction (Morgan, 2015). However, if traditional post-apocalyptic narratives depict societies with challenging living conditions that provide no hope for future change – thus creating a sense of helplessness and fragility – Studio Ghibli’s apocalyptic works generally show a perspective capable of advancing optimistic and constructive thoughts. Just as solarpunk aims «to

envision what [the world] might be, without, however, negating the reality of the present crisis» (Więckowska, 2022, p. 347), Miyazaki encourages reflections not only on what we are losing, but also on what we might become, on what we could do.

The animated film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* takes place in a medieval world with technological remnants, but the connection to our society is evident. The story is set a millennium after a nuclear war that devastated mankind and drastically transformed the environment, which is now largely covered by the Toxic Jungle, a poisonous forest of spores. A peaceful and ecologically friendly community can be found in the Valley of the Wind. The village is pastoral and runs on renewable energy from the air and water. The houses are integrated with nature, either built into the rock or surrounded by greenery, making the villagers an integral part of the ecosystem. Their diet consists of nutritious seeds and vegetables; in fact, the inhabitants of the Valley of the Wind do not hunt animals, but use their carcasses – especially those of Ohmus (giant, multi-eyed, armored insects) – to build objects. The community embodies harmony, displays profound empathy, and demonstrates responsible conflict management practices.

In the Valley of the Wind lives Nausicaä, a young princess beloved by her people, a girl with a determined and courageous yet extremely peaceful personality (Trisciuzzi, 2013). Nausicaä utilizes wind power in a sustainable manner by traveling via glider. Additionally, she has a secret room where she cultivates and studies plants in order to understand spore propagation; here she succeeds in giving birth to harmless and uncontaminated plants, offering a first glimpse of hope with solarpunk overtones (Mumcu, Yılmaz, 2018). The protagonist displays from an early age a strong connection to the natural world, with which she develops a bond of great respect. For instance, although potentially dangerous, the Ohmus are wonderful to Nausicaä, and when they threaten the safety of the girl or the characters, she does not kill them, but placates the animals by returning them to their natural habitat. In the opening scene, when an Ohmu attacks a man, Nausicaä gently scolds him for trespassing into the territory of these insects. Nausicaä thereby re-establishes a natural hierarchy that is no longer anthropocentric. As a matter of fact, humans have altered nature and, as a result, humanity itself as part of the natural environment. This connection, however, seems to be fully understood only by Nausicaä (Mumcu, Yılmaz, 2018).

The film recalls the *becoming-with* concept theorized by Donna Haraway, through which she highlights human responsibilities over the planet and encourages a focus on the points of relation between creatures rather than on their boundaries of demarcation: «becoming is always becoming with, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake»

(Haraway, 2008, p. 244). Quoting Haraway's book title, Nausicaä «stays in the trouble» and experiences this trouble together with other species as she thinks of a solution for all, leading to a common result beyond the human (Haraway, 2016). The protagonist's desire to learn about different forms of life and about the bonds of interaction that humanity develops with them, to care for the planet and study it in order to conceive new relationships with nature, fits perfectly within the approach underlying solarpunk.

The work also depicts two human factions fighting each other, albeit with the common goal of restoring humanity to mastery of the world, but Nausicaä and the valley dwellers reject the term 'master' as symbolic of an imbalance of power that would lead to another apocalypse. If the two factions believe that insects, spore trees and humans cannot coexist in the world and that the Toxic Jungle must be destroyed, Nausicaä is the only one who understands the cause-and-effect relationships that led to the 'spore pandemic' and can therefore propose helpful solutions. Trees actually act as purifiers of contaminated soil, and spores are nothing more than the remnants of soil purification. In fact, uncontaminated soil and water result in plants that are completely harmless. The character of Nausicaä offers a constructive example – also from a gender perspective (Ulivieri, 1995; Trisciuzzi, 2013) – that tends towards solarpunk imagery: the girl observes and knows the planet, interacts respectfully with its elements, and stands as a mediating figure between different human factions and between humanity and nature: «Nausicaä is a scientist, explorer, conservationist, and martyr. This 'noble-minded heroine' respects nature and, during the course of the film, learns to understand humans' place within it» (Morgan, 2015, p. 175).

Moreover, Nausicaä's respect is not only directed towards the environment, but also towards people: when a flying boat comes dangerously close to the Valley of the Wind and is about to crash, the girl approaches to help, unaware of the evil intentions of its occupants, led by a wicked queen who is successively spared by the protagonist. Nevertheless, in moments of tension and anger, such as when her father is assassinated, Nausicaä expresses her fear of herself and of what she might do in the midst of the hatred, showing a fragile – and therefore realistic – personality. The girl knows how to express and calm her harmful instincts and does so for a higher ultimate goal, a peaceful coexistence with the world.

The film does not focus solely on the protagonism of human beings. One of the most effective strategies Miyazaki employs in his films is the use of the landscape as an active part of the narrative. In cinema, landscape creates precise atmospheres that, far from operating merely in the aesthetic sphere, set the tone of the work and stimulate interpretations and sensations. Landscapes intertwine with the narrated events, explain the relationships between characters and the

environment, and sometimes become actors of the narrative themselves (Morgan, 2015). In many of the Japanese director's films, the landscapes are central to the development of the story and are dense with spirituality: the settings are also living entities, they have a spirit and thus become true protagonists of the narrative (Mumcu, Yilmaz, 2018, p. 6). As in solarpunk, the spiritual element in Miyazaki's works is not related to religions or dogmas, but to the experience of everyday feelings. Therefore, his landscapes encourage us to reflect on our connection with the Earth. In some of his films, when we look at the landscape and the damage caused to it, we are prompted to think about solutions for new sustainable practices, we are encouraged to consider nature as a living being to be respected (Thevenin, 2013).

An interesting categorization of Miyazaki's landscapes based on the relationship between humanity and nature is elaborated by Morgan (2015), who proposes three categories for investigation: wild spaces, where nature dominates over humans, such as the forest in *Princess Mononoke* or *My Neighbor Totoro*; apocalyptic spaces, where humans dominate over nature, exploiting it and causing irreversible damage or catastrophic events; and responsible spaces, where humans are part of an ecosystem in a non-prevailing way.

Nausicaä presents features that fall into all of the three categories. It opens with a landscape that is mainly post-apocalyptic: a world destroyed by human greed and at the same time, forgetting their past mistakes, humans still trying to dominate the environment in their favour, spreading polluting spores and exploiting animals as giant weapons (Morgan, 2015, p. 174). Wild environments also find a place in the film: human pollution has led to a new, living and dynamic ecosystem, made of forests of infesting plants and fungi, hidden caves, mutant insects. This landscape is perceived as monstrous because it is deadly to humans, but actually alive and beautiful, a beauty that only Nausicaä and her people can grasp, creating responsible spaces. The ruins of destroyed and abandoned cities are not a mere *memento mori*, but fit in well within the aesthetics and symbolism of solarpunk, which seeks to reconstruct a new bond between humanity and nature without deleting the past and to give space to new ecosystems that emerge from the remains of human settlements or as a result of their dismantling (Cavallaro, 2006).

Precisely from a solarpunk perspective, *Nausicaä* closes with a peaceful and hopeful image of gliders flying through the sky and a carefully replanted forest, leaving the viewer with a final frame of a plant growing on uncontaminated soil next to the protagonist's helmet.

3. The pedagogical potential of solarpunk fiction for youth

Although youth fiction with a strong solarpunk content is not yet widespread, this genre – especially with the help of a visual apparatus and through popular media such as the picturebook, the comic book or the animated film (Faeti, 1993; Negri, 2012; Trisciuuzzi, 2013; Barsotti, Cantatore, 2019) – could foster from an early age a constructive approach to the future and respectful thinking about nature, building an ecoliteracy that can deconstruct the contemporary paradigm and stimulate new interpretive canons about our society and the Earth (Goga *et al.*, 2018; Salabé, 2013).

There has been much debate in recent years regarding the urgency of taking action promptly. Both fiction and nonfiction narratives invite us to fear an ever-closer tragic future and drive us towards fear-based change (Johnson, 2020). However, this approach not only fails to be fully functional but also lacks the critical tools to effectively deal with the threats presented. This attitude often creates a social paralysis, a silent belief that the future is unalterable and doomed (De Meyer *et al.*, 2020). This is the concept of *climate grief* as defined by Johnson (2020) – the distressing feeling of being unable to take action in light of the inescapable reality of climate change.

Perhaps the predominance of catastrophic narratives has created a gap: crushed by a dramatic vision that does not offer us constructive, inspiring stories and images, we have lost the ability to actively imagine a possible future in harmony with the planet. The exercise solarpunk proposes, thereby indicating its strongly pedagogical framework (Johnson, 2020), is to begin to conceptualize a world in which we have succeeded, a scenario in which the problems are totally or partially resolved and humans learn to coexist with nature. Science fiction, when leaning toward a concrete utopia and opposing dominant catastrophic narratives, can play a restorative function and become a creative and indirectly educational force in the community. Science fiction, and specifically solarpunk, may popularly promote constructive change from an early age, especially when directly aimed at a young audience, from early childhood to young adulthood (Lopez, 2017; Grandi, 2017).

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