

Does Solarpunk Fiction Motivate Climate Action?

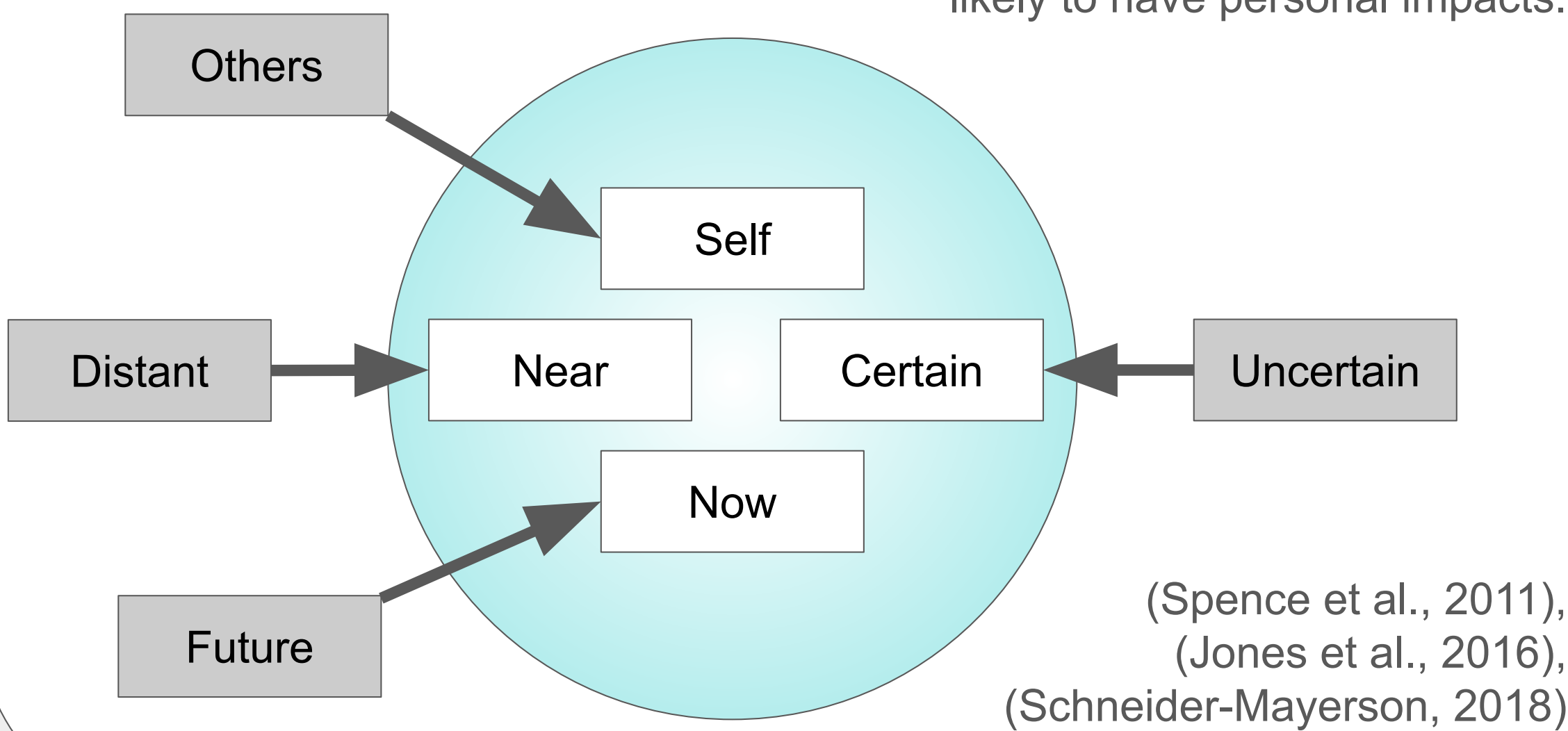
Luka Dowell

Independent Scholar, Institute for Social Ecology
Host of the *Solarpunk Now!* Podcast
email: lukadowell@gmail.com
web: luka.dowell.digital

Narrative Elements of Solarpunk

Reducing Psychological Distance

After reading climate fiction, we imagine climate events to be closer in space and time, more certain, and more likely to have personal impacts.



Persuasion

Cognition - critical reflecting of
and on reality (Suvin, 2005)

Transportation
into a fictional
world...



...and Identification with characters
(Schneider-Mayerson et al., 2023)

Education of Desire

- The protagonist's desires develop ours (Weik Von Mossner, 2024)
- Vivid depictions make desires more tangible
- Narrative pleasure + satisfaction
- Stories depict both the objects of desire and obstacles in the way (Haines, 2024)
- Hopeful futures are achievable



"AI Rest" by Honora, licensed under CC BY 4.0

Climate Messages Motivating Action

Threat

When climate events feel close to us, they are perceived as bigger threats (De Graaf et al., 2024). High-threat messages motivate us to establish a sense of control (Hornsey et al., 2015), but if solutions aren't readily available, these messages can lead to despair.

Hope & Doubt

Constructive hope is hope in individual/collective human actions (not blind faith). Constructive doubt is rational concern about the obstacles we face. A message combining constructive hope and constructive doubt is most effective (Marlon et al., 2019).

Efficacy

Working on a problem requires belief in solutions. A sense of collective efficacy is better than individual efficacy at motivating climate action (Schneider-Mayerson, 2013), (Marlon et al., 2019), (De Graaf et al., 2024). In other words, stories about large-scale, collective solutions are the most encouraging.

Actions, Not Issues

We know climate change is an issue, but we don't know what to do about it. Stories of people like us (in similar social positions) who take climate action show us opportunities to act and develop our agency (De Meyer et al., 2020). Those who "lead by example" increase others' willingness to act (Westlake et al., 2024).

Results & Discussion

Solarpunk is effective at expanding the reader's imagination of potential climate futures. Hopeful stories conveyed through imaginative, immersive fiction are as effective as nonfiction climate messaging, if not more so (Schneider-Mayerson et al., 2023). Climate communications researchers find that presentations of threat, efficacy, constructive hope, realistic obstacles, and concrete actions are most effective at motivating readers to take action. All of the above are central themes in solarpunk!

There is sufficient evidence to support the causal claim that solarpunk fiction motivates readers to act on climate. However, the effects are only moderate and short-lived. And motivation to act isn't the same as acting—there is much less research on actually occurring behavior. Reading one book is not enough, and we can't expect authors to save the world. And yet, the solarpunk community draws people in across disciplines, inspiring new authors and activists. Solarpunk is an active call for more solarpunk (Williams, 2019). Perhaps if we engage not just as readers but as writers—as teachers, game developers, filmmakers, parents, leaders—solarpunk might soon have the cultural force our planet needs for challenging days ahead.

Works Cited

De Graaf, J., Bal, M., De Wit, J., & Stok, M. (2024). Climate change doom communication from a fear appeal perspective. *European Journal of Health Communication*, 5(4), 26–50. <https://doi.org/10.47368/ejhc.2024.402>

De Meyer, K., Coren, E., McCaffrey, M., & Slean, C. (2020). Transforming the stories we tell about climate change: from 'issue' to 'action.' *Environmental Research Letters*, 16(1), 015002. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/abc05a>

Haines, C. P. (2024). Response 3: "Unshakeable want": Solarpunk, petromodernity, and the Death Drive. *Utopian Studies*, 35(2–3), 508–518. <https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.35.2-3.0508>

Hornsey, M. J., Fielding, K. S., McStay, R., Reser, J. P., Bradley, G. L., & Greenaway, K. H. (2015). Evidence for motivated control: Understanding the paradoxical link between threat and efficacy beliefs about climate change. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 42, 57–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2015.02.003>

Jones, C., Hine, D. W., & Marks, A. D. G. (2016). The Future is Now: Reducing Psychological Distance to Increase Public Engagement with Climate Change. *Risk Analysis*, 37(2), 331–341. <https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.12601>

Marlon, J. R., Bloodhart, B., Ballew, M. T., Rolfe-Redding, J., Roser-Renouf, C., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. (2019). How hope and doubt affect climate change mobilization. *Frontiers in Communication*, 4, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2019.00020>

Schneider-Mayerson, M. (2013). Disaster movies and the 'Peak Oil' movement. *Journal for the Study of Religion Nature and Culture*, 7(3), 289–314. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsnc.v7i3.289>

Schneider-Mayerson, M. (2018). The influence of climate fiction. *Environmental Humanities*, 10(2), 473–500. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7156848>

Schneider-Mayerson, M., Von Mossner, A. W., Malecki, W. P., & Hakemulder, F. (Eds.) (2023). *Empirical ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change*. U of Minnesota Press.

Spence, A., Poortinga, W., & Pidgeon, N. (2011). The psychological distance of climate change. *Risk Analysis*, 32(6), 957–972. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1539-6924.2011.01695.x>

Suvin, D. (2005). Estrangement and Cognition. In Gunn, J. E., & Candelaria, M. (Eds.), *Speculations on speculation: Theories of Science Fiction* (pp. 23–35). Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Weik Von Mossner, A. (2024). Wish we were there: hope, desire, and utopian community in contemporary solarpunk. *Utopian Studies*, 35(2–3), 467–489. <https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.35.2-3.0467>

Westlake, S., Demski, C., & Pidgeon, N. (2024). Leading by example from high-status individuals: exploring a crucial missing link in climate change mitigation. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03787-8>

Williams, R. (2019). "This shining confluence of magic and technology": Solarpunk, energy imaginaries, and the infrastructures of solarity. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.329>

Reading List

Becky Chambers - *Monk and Robot series*

Cory Doctorow - *Walkaway*

Eman Abdelhadi and M. E. O'Brien - *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052–2072*

Kim Stanley Robinson - *Ministry for the Future*, *New York 2140*, and *Pacific Edge*

Nick Fuller Googins - *The Great Transition*

Octavia Butler - *Parable of the Sower*

Phoebe Wagner (Ed.) - *Fighting for the Future: Cyberpunk and Solarpunk Tales*

Phoebe Wagner and Brontë Christopher Wieland (Eds.) - *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation*

Ruthanna Emrys - *A Half-Built Garden*

Sarena Uilbari (Ed.) - *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers*

Starhawk - *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *City of Refuge*

Ursula K. Le Guin - *The Dispossessed*



"The Floating Village" by Commando Jugendstil, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0