

What is Solarpunk?

Saint Andrew

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Introduction

One of my favourite fusions of art and politics. Solarpunk is everything from a positive imagining of our collective futures to actually creating it. It derives its name from the cyberpunk genre, and all the other punks it has spawned.

Rell quick, there's steampunk, which focuses on the Industrial Revolution and steam-powered tech. It's one of the most popular after cyberpunk. There's dieselpunk, focused of the designs of the interwar period. There's atompunk, focused on atomic power. Steelpunk, focused on late 20th century hardware. Stonepunk, which is neolithic. There's even nowpunk, which is set...today.

Solarpunk is a shining vision of a positive future, grounded in our existing world, that emphasizes the need for environmental sustainability, self-governance, and social justice. It's a movement dedicated to human-centric and eco-centric ends. It looks beyond the limitations of capitalism and beyond the current rift between humanity and nature. It's a futurism that focuses on what we should hope for rather than on what to avoid.

Solarpunk recognizes that climate change, the consequences of centuries of damage, aren't averted in the future. Yet it still manages to incorporate hope. A future where we've got a lot of work to do, but we're doing better. We're using technology for more uplifting ends. Like seed bombing drones and solar ovens. Solarpunk emphasizes real-world application. It's all about what we do here and now, from DIY projects to larger organization. Solarpunk is also very aesthetic, as I'm sure you've realized. It uses a lot of nature motifs and takes inspiration from art nouveau, upcycling, and Asian and African styles and artistic movements.

Sidenote: lemme talk real quick about what isn't solarpunk. It isn't slapping flowers and trees on concrete buildings or steel skyscrapers with some green on it. That's greenwashing. It has the appearance of sustainability, but it's actually really damaging to the environment. A lot of water is used to maintain those "green" buildings and they often aren't built with sustainable or durable material. Don't get mamaguy.

In the short time it has been conceived of, solarpunk has found a place in contemporary media. It's a literary genre, after all, but it has been retroactively assigned to other things, since the term was really popularized in 2014. Solarpunk, for example, includes films like Miyazaki's Princess Mononoke or literature like Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*.

Cyberpunk might be grim and depressing, exploring a world of unchecked corporate power, but solarpunk rejects it entirely. It emphasizes collective living and the fulfillment of both nature and humanity in a mutually beneficial relationship.

A Brief History of Solarpunk

There's a full history of it linked below, but basically, around 2008 a blog named Republic of the Bees published the post, "From Steampunk to Solarpunk", which conceptualized solarpunk as a literary genre inspired by steampunk. There were a few articles and works here and there, but it gained more steam, or should I say solar, with Miss Olivia Louise's Tumblr post in 2014, establishing some of the aesthetics of solarpunk. Quote:

"A world in which children grow up being taught about building electronic tech as well as food gardening and other skills, and people have come back around to appreciating artisans and

craftspeople, from stonemasons and smithies, to dress makers and jewelers, and everyone in between.”

Her post was later referenced by Adam Flynn, in his Notes Toward A Manifesto in late 2014. He describes the difficulty of being a futurist under 30, watching the world dive down the path of cyberpunk, with the ever present existential threat of climate change. Solarpunk, to him, is the only alternative to denial or despair. It rejects the individualistic, unsustainable approaches of some futurists, who refuse to acknowledge the limits of energy on our Earth. Solarpunk is about “ingenuity, generativity, independence, and community.” It’s suffixed by punk because it opposes our existing world. It creates local resilience, authorities be damned, from rooftop solar to guerilla gardening. Finally, a group called The Solarpunk Community published Un Manifesto Solarpunk in 2019. It’s a short article, written in Spanish, that basically reiterates some of the previous ideas, albeit more succinctly.

As for my relationship with solarpunk, I’ve been into it for a pretty long time. I can’t remember exactly when I first heard about it, but it was probably on Tumblr. It was also on Tumblr where I was first introduced to the basics of revolutionary and progressive politics.

The Politics & Art of Solarpunk

Although solarpunk never had a particular political ideology assigned to it, it’s been embraced by liberatory ideologies of all flavours. From social ecologists to post-civ anarchists to green socialists.

The philosophy of solarpunk and the politics of anarchism are practically built for each other. Anarchism emphasises personal freedom and collective liberation from hierarchies, authoritarianism, and exploitation. It seeks, as an ongoing project, common ownership, voluntary cooperation, horizontal organization, and mutual aid. Anarchism has generally been ahead of its time on many political issues, from queer to women’s liberation, and its approach to ecology has been no different.

Solarpunk can easily be synthesized with anarchism, and many of its various strains, as it explores the possibilities of liberatory technology, the localization of production, an end to destructive and wasteful consumption, and a reorientation of our relationship with society, work, nature, and ourselves.

It all sounds pretty goeey and feel good. But I want to briefly address those that have lost hope in a better world. Who are stuck thinking that this, largely, is the best that we can do. There’s this idea in politics these days that imagination has no place in our “pragmatic”, no-nonsense world. Which is just false. Humans are flexible creatures, capable of a whole range of social arrangement. If everyone limited themselves to the confines of what is, we wouldn’t be where we are today. It’s time to take some steps forward, with a variety of tactics in hand.

One of which is art. Art has a tremendous influence on us. Music, books, paintings, TV shows, movies, etc, they shape our ideas of what humanity is and what humanity can be. While there haven’t been many major examples of solarpunk art and entertainment yet, I think we can change that. There are interesting stories to be explored and debates to be had, through art. Imagine a novel that explores the different sides and dimensions of the debate on meat consumption in a solarpunk world or a comic that follows a community’s journey as it seeks to rewild and resuscitate the surrounding ecology.

Or picture this. Maybe alongside a game that imagines a horrifying endgame that maintains capitalism, like *Cyberpunk 2077*, we imagine an uplifting, yet still challenging game that exercises our ability to balance the needs of our local ecosystem and deal with the difficult decisions and conflicts that arise as we reorient our place in the world. Could call it *Solarpunk 2033* or something. There's a free idea right there.

Conclusion

Anyway, there are so many ways to incorporate solarpunk in your life and in your movements. It's pretty compatible with prefiguration, which I realize I need to create a video about cuz people still seem to have some weird assumptions about what I, as an anarchist, want to do. More to the point, solarpunk is truly something you can put into reality and practice and spread. Solarpunks can help create the future they want in various ways, from basic DIY living to maker workshops to creating and expanding eco living and local autonomy in our towns and cities. Solarpunk is a key piece in a mosaic of possibilities that center human adaptability and the protection of nature, which our present world is organized to destroy, but our future world must prioritize.

“Solarpunk is a future with a human face and dirt behind its ears.”

Peace.

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