Solarpunk Magazine

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NON FICTION

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T he solarpunk movement is many happy things. Hopeful, daring, environmental justice oriented, and radically optimistic (I quite like that last one[1]). This is especially necessary as climate change and the Anthropocene have become major drivers of anxiety this century, creating traumatic or pretraumatic injury (Hollister). But depending on whom you ask, solarpunk is also overly or overtly idealistic and so very, very green. Since solarpunk is a young genre, it can be all the above, varying in degree and combination. It is a perspective as much, if not more so than it is a genre. Nevertheless, the descriptor I currently find most useful is *medicinal.* Quick, somebody call Marvin Gaye, because solarpunk is conceptual healing[2]. Solarpunk dreams up the consequences of good choices to systemic problems, choices that generate futures with air we can breathe and communities successfully working off their suffering. It is exceedingly powerful and that is why I believe it should be applied to noir.

Crime fiction generally and noir specifically—in both literature and film—projected twentieth-century America's conservative, middle-class fears of the urban other, as well as its own displaced violent desires, onto the canvas that is pop culture. Over time, it morphed into a sexy, distinctly American genre, an export that some scholars would argue has evolved into mythology on the same scale as the western, though on an adjacent frequency (Maher).

But in becoming so broad, noir also became malleable; a highly memetic putty. Shaping it into a solarpunk tool—a healing poultice made of venom, so to speak—is not so far fetched. In fact, it would be *fun*[3] and an expedient means of quickly bringing solarpunk to the attention of a larger audience, which would help solarpunk

have practical application beyond us first adopters and creatives. To understand how solarpunk noir might heal, we must first examine noir's surprising relevance to global climate change, specifically the self-destructive perspective that noir has helped nurture and how it came to be.

METROPOLIS'S SHADOW

Much of noir's potency is owed to the timing of its inception. It came about as America underwent an incredible metamorphosis[4] driven by the advent of the pulp press (Naremore). Cheaply produced and mass-marketed books for the newly literate citizen meant that a story, a pocket novel with a titillating cover, could be "bought for the same price as a pack of cigarettes," thus creating a hugely expanded readership for fiction. Around the same time, the Hollywood movie industry established its dominance, pumping out an astounding number of films to monetize and codify our silver-screen doppelgangers. The cinema became the unspoken church of America (Rabinowitz).

Never before had we, and then the other Western nations, reached such a state of high transmissibility of pop culture. The mainstream widened into a canal flooded with symbols and imagery to translate a century's worth of intersectional system shocks: the Great Depression; World War I; the destabilizing speed of industrialization; the "dangerous" new mobility of women; the psychoanalytic theories of Freud; and, most of all, the centrifugal pull of the city, as historic migrations of Black Americans out of the South collided with escaping Europeans, with both of these groups seeking asylum from generational systems of oppression. Then came the second wave of shocks: World War II, the Cold War, Civil Rights, the War on Drugs (Holmes).

The 20th century was supposed to be the era of modernity. The light of progress would shine from burgeoning new cities built for an orderly future, all of them somebody's realization of utopia. But as we gloried in the benefits of our world order built overnight, the deepening anxieties around neoliberal progress and capitalism were reborn in film and paperback, and they were narcotically popular. They were noir: Metropolis's dystopian shadow, an indictment of urbanism and the new bourgeois society embedded in hypermasculine fantasies (Naremore).

Most people have not parsed the timeline or genesis of modernism, postmodernism, urban studies, urban theory, noir, neo-noir, proto-noir, Godzilla noir[5], nor any of the other fancy words coiled around critical dialogues of the genre. But we have a powerful gestalt sense of noir anyway. To us, noir is a gritty montage of

images shaped from fractured shadows, streets, government, and people—i.e., criminals. It is delectably unclean. The title of the iconic graphic novel *Sin City* is a semiotic near-rhyme for the intoxicatingly entropic nature of the synthetic ecosystem and the souls of its inhabitants, as noir would have us believe (Holmes).

We have gotten used to this sense of noir from the images and archetypes in visual media we have been inhaling like oxygen for a century (Rabinowitz). We found ourselves exhilaratingly disoriented and lost in concrete jungles detached from any center and filled with murder-hungry women or degenerate thugs of every variety, though encrypted with liberal platitudes and Black and brown darkness. The urban cowboy/hardboiled detective could no longer survive without becoming changed by the lycanthropic Dark City, dehumanized by it, or even more disturbing, revealed by it. Time to retire to the safety of suburban pastures protected by aggressive policing, neighborhood associations, highways, Charles Bronson, and Reganisms (Holmes).

Urban and critical theorists like Fredric Jameson and others have repeatedly demonstrated how the city, both its concrete and psychosocial realities, has a special material and institutional relationship with the development of cinema (Maher). Alison Landsberg, Director at the Center for Humanities Research at George Mason, called the contemporary process of culture building *prosthetic memory:* the graying distinction between real and *reel* experiences, and the generative nature of cinematic, i.e., visual narratives. Reel storytelling techniques based on and expanding upon pulp artfully arranged set pieces for broad mass appeal, effectively condensing history, psychology, and tragedy into the same Dark City (Landsberg). This includes both explicitly fictional narratives as well as purported nonfiction. Or, put differently, reel storytelling can take the form of the nightly news, specifically tailored to a zeitgeist pre-conditioned to the negative connotation of the urban environment and the devilish nature of man it released.

March 13th, 1964, 3 a.m. A young bar manager named Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death steps from her door in Kew Gardens, Queens, New York. According to the press, thirty-eight of her neighbors witnessed the crime but did nothing. Her murder galvanized the dystopian city narrative worldwide, Exhibit A of the so-called "bystander effect," a common theme magnifying and distorting urban alienation and isolation. Kitty's death was one of many that grew into a magnetic trope used over, and over, and over in textbooks, TV, and film (Holmes).

As should be clear, noir has been impactful in curating our collective memory of the fictional city[6], and through it, reinforcing sentiment of real cities for an entire period of American history, meshing the symbolic, architectural, and political narratives. The fable of Kitty's death was written long before she was born, thus

becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a single genre, we have combined many of the ideas that solarpunk rebels against. But as professor emerita of English at University of Minnesota and editor-in-chief of the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature Paula Rabinowitz has said, "America is fabricated in and through its fabrication." It goes both ways, from tragedy to catharsis. A broken thing demands mending, and there are many ways solarpunk can help.

CONCEPTUAL HEALING: FUNCTION AND FORM OF SOLARPUNK NOIR

If we pop the hood of noir's growling, sleek 1940's automobiles, we will discover components of noir that solarpunk creatives would be particularly excited to play with even before retrofitting them with a solar prefix. Noir can be a critique of unchecked capitalism and the lives ground under its wheels (Holmes). The plot of the classic neo noir film "Chinatown," for instance, starring Jack Nicholson, centered on attempts of the rich and powerful to steal control of water in Los Angeles for their own profit.

Noir narrative voice also revels in the subconscious, contextualizing motivations and actions with deep meanings and implications for society, particularly with its use of violence. Noir description is atmospherically lush, ripe for contrast and juxtaposition. Furthermore, it has the capacity to draw the mind into the setting, foregrounding the background (Hollister) of competing ecosystems in the guts of the city, which often have their own dramatis personae.

By now, the genre is very self-aware and wide open to experimentation, stream of consciousness, magical realism, and pastiche, repurposing what has come before (Trisnawati). And though noir has done much to create the *generic city* (Prakash) outlined in the previous section, both literature and film have become both a global phenomenon and hyperlocal thanks to publishers like Akashic Books. There's Brooklyn noir, Alabama noir, Iran noir. Southeast Asian noir treats the symbolic darkness as a variable where x equals indigenous magical and folklore beliefs (Trisnawati). Solarpunk noir would follow their example and change the meaning of its own darkness. The healing process starts with the shadows we choose to fight.

The Twentieth Century brought us modernism and its sister, postmodernism. Very, *very*, broadly speaking, you could think of the former as irrational exuberance in the rationalist utopia, and the latter its equally exuberant deconstruction. Said deconstruction is programmed by a viral cynicism and disillusionment with people, the RNA of dystopia. Talk about ism-schism! While the resulting worldview was an

understandable reaction to trauma, since then its orchard has borne too many strange fruits.

A quarter of the way into the 21st century, we find ourselves asking "What comes next ?" (Basulto). Whatever this new perspective is called, it must be inherently solarpunk, because solarpunk is science fiction, not nostalgic fantasy; truth-facing rather than fear-inducing. Medicinal. The differentiating truth underlying solarpunk's focus on systemic ecological solutions is a better understanding of what makes us human, and a goddamn revelation to the typical noir worldview.

Yes, Kitty Genovese from Kew Gardens was murdered, but multiple people heard *something* and called the police. Furthermore, there were as few as two actual eyewitnesses, not thirty-eight. One of those witnesses ran to get help from Kitty's neighbor, who rushed to her side without a thought for their own safety. Days later, Kitty's murderer was apprehended by neighbors, not the police. In 2019, Dr. Marie Lindegaard, a psychologist in Amsterdam, published her study "Would I be helped? Cross-National CCTV Shows that Intervention is the Norm in Public Conflicts," in the *American Psychologist* documenting how urban bystanders—strangers—in an emergency help each other 90% of the time (Bregman). In fact, recent research finds this to be true especially in the face of natural or human-caused disasters (Older).

This is the seed that solarpunk can plant in the heart of the Dark City. A person is not inherently sinful. People naturally want to come together despite organized oppression. While yes, urban lifestyle can be a visceral experience (Holmes; Maher), there is little evidence that our polarity magically reverses at an imaginary critical mass of population density. This point is critical and necessarily one of the things that separates potential solarpunk noir from other climate fiction like ecological noir, also known as *crimate* (King), for which there is a surprisingly large and international canon.

The pessimism of both noir and "realist" ecological fiction feed off each other in crimate fiction, accelerating the erosion of our individual and collective agency (Hollister). The reason for this is that their story outcomes still rely on neoliberal readings of society and fall into a logic trap: putting the ultimate onus on the individual to act runs into the impossibility of the individual to change outcomes for the better. The scale of the ecological problem combines with the broken noir lens for human nature.

Instead, solarpunk noir would start with systemic agency. In doing so and combining that with a new understanding, a better understanding of our humanity, we can step away from the all-or-nothing, inherently religious paradigm of utopian/apocalyptic outcomes, and bring it back to the realm of relatable decisions

made by human beings. Solarpunk noir's darkness would be the inevitable backlash from powers invested in our maladapted status quo. Therefore, in solarpunk noir, all violence is political violence.

By focusing on the political element, i.e., systems of people in conflict over what is legitimate and what is criminalized, we take climate change, a phenomena that exists at a scale and complexity that most people find severely difficult to confront in their day to day lives, and put it in human terms with human limits. Doing so can return agency to us as individuals dreaming for a better future.

The presupposition to any solarpunk story is that *we* have made a good systemic choice to solve a problem connected to climate change. Our antagonist in a solarpunk noir story would exist as the shadows of said good choice, as the darkness against which we are fighting. Solarpunk noir protagonists, be they organizers, detectives, criminals, or others, would face the inevitable violence and machinations that follow. That means stories around political choices in the city or the impacts of national policies on the same. "Political" would not necessarily mean city councils, but vested interests vying for power; the narrative would focus on a contest between those with the ability to imagine greater versus those who cannot see a world where they are not in control. Sometimes an individual character would triumph, already a change in many noir stories. Other times, the story would end in individual tragedy. But despite the drama (or sometimes because of it) the new systems put in place would move forward, changing like the phases of the moon.

READER, WELCOME TO THE CITY

One final tool to consider deploying in solarpunk noir stories would be the use of the second-person perspective as a narrative device. Though part of the Western canon since at least Homer, second-person is generally considered experimental, even as it has grown in popularity since the 80s and been used, at least in parts, in works as diverse as Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and N.K. Jemisin's trilogy, *The Broken Earth*. These authors' use of the second-person narrative gives the impression of *nowness*, as if the story were being co-created with the reader, simultaneously addressing them directly and giving the narrative a special driving force. But beyond the narratological effect, there are underlying thematic reasons for use of the second-person perspective in solarpunk noir.

Second-person stories call for an *active* reader. The reader must constantly negotiate personal identity with the addressee as used in the story. The second-person pronoun's ambiguity (in English) invites the reader into dialogue at different

rhetorical levels. By default, solarpunk noir has an intertextual relationship with previous noir-influenced media. Second-person has become a post-modern tool in support of radical personal change and an appropriate mode for re-evaluating the past, a necessary step to imagine futures without forcing a complete break with history. It is engaging with the past even as it speaks to our immediate future (Iliopoulou) and that is quintessentially solarpunk.

WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN THE WORLD: SOLARPUNKED NOIR

Solarpunk noir would be both exciting and experimental, as provocative as the phrase suggests. Noir is mainstream and riveting, a fun world to play in, but no fun to live. Solarpunk noir would rectify that, by changing the conditions and assumptions of the generic city, expanding the media landscape's idea of possible, until solarpunk is seen by all. While I absolutely plan on writing solarpunk noir stories of my own, I would be beyond excited to see others publish ahead of me (my projects list is long and full of deadlines). If you are looking for templates, look no further than "Soylent Green is People!" by Carlos Orsi, translated by Fábio Fernandes. It is the very first story in the first anthology of solarpunk, *Solarpunk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World*. It is very much an inheritor of the stylistics of cli-fi and crimate narratives but retains its generic independence. Years ago, it was my gateway to solarpunk, and it still blows me away.[7]

As I draft this essay, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* is streaming on Netflix. The Sandman, endless king of dreams, has a pertinent exchange with the Corinthian, one of his creations, a nightmare, who had gotten loose in the real world, causing untold havoc. He tells the Corinthian that he created nightmares to force people to face their fears and thereby overcome them. Sandman's only choice was to destroy the Corinthian and rebuild him better able to fulfill his purpose. I feel very much the same way about noir: a genre of nightmares that has run amok, straying from its original purpose to teach and to warn, with real-world consequences. Solarpunk would be noir's second life. For what are cities if not the shape we give to the world we want to live in? The concentrated, living production of human dreams?

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1 Quoting Justine Norton-Kertson from [checks notes] Solarpunk Magazine.

2 The author is allowed one dad joke per essay. That is the way.

3 Victor LaValle talks about the experience of inverting Lovecraft on episode 151 of "Imaginary Worlds"

4 Noir is a retroactive title that was not used until after World War II by the French expressionists and surrealists. Then Hollywood picked up the label. But at that point it was "aware" of itself, so noir had technically moved into neo-noir. Thus, I use the term broadly. The distinctions, while important, are not necessary for the creation of solarpunk noir stories. Technically, by my definition, all solarpunk noir stories are post-neo-noir. We will get into that later.

5 Okay, I made that last one up, but I was not the first. Search for "Legs That Could Kill: A Godzilla Noir," by Adam Bakst.

6 My good friend Sam Schreiber, an adjunct instructor of science fiction and fantasy at New York University's Tandon School of Engineering, reminded me of Harlan Ellison's 1973 short story "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs." According to Sam, "It was explicitly inspired by the Kitty Genovese case—basically, an eldritch god in the sky demands we murder each other because *that's how the universe works, deal with it, snowflakes*." This just goes to show how deeply ingrained this broken sense of self has become. Even when asked to come up with greater worlds, we end up digging in the wrong direction.

7 Please let me know on the Twitter machine @cprwords

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