Capturing the Sun
Solarpunk and the Elite Capture of Imagination

Alessio Gerola, Zoë Robaey

Abstract. *The climate emergencies of the last few years are making increasingly clear that unless the destructive and exploitative structures that support modern standards of living are dismantled and transformed, the future shall be a very hot and desolate one. Science fiction has offered a venue to reflect and envision possible futures in ways that engage our imagination and stimulate technological innovation. We argue that imagination can be understood as a collective capability that supports forms of resistance and resilience. This framing enables us to examine the consequence of the existence of power asymmetries, which may distort the potential of imagination to be a source of transformative change. To make our case, we reflect on solarpunk as a contemporary art and activism movement that envisions hopeful futures of ecological living. We argue that, as a subversive imaginary, solarpunk may be affected by processes of elite capture that could stifle its radical potential, particularly in relation to its visual identity. By reflecting on two emblematic cases, we illustrate how imagination can be captured in ways that damage its political potential. Our contribution shows that even well-intentioned or apparently innocuous uses of forms of imagination and imaginaries can have reactionary political consequences that normalize and neutralize narratives in support of radical change. Analyzing the risk of capture of sustainable future imaginaries such as solarpunk is relevant for the study of the multiple narratives, visual, literary, and academic, that are at play in public debates on the sustainability transition and climate change mitigation and adaptation, and their political consequences.*

Keywords. Imagination, capability, elite capture, solarpunk.

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1. Introduction

The climate emergencies of the last few years are making increasingly clear that unless the destructive and exploitative structures that support modern standards of living are dismantled and transformed, the future shall be a very hot and desolate one. However, imagining alternatives that could actually move the present out of the current predicament is easier said than done. Mark Fisher famously wrote how it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Fisher 2009, 32). Amitav Ghosh attributes this

challenge to the way in which modernity, through science and rationalism, has rendered certain scenarios appear so unlikely to the point of becoming unthinkable (Ghosh 2016). It is not hard to imagine alternatives per se; rather, it is nearly impossible to take them "seriously" as real possibilities. In a world that proceeds by predictable laws, truly revolutionary alternatives are considered flights of fancy at best. Despite this challenge, art and literature have been engaging with the climate crisis to envision and inspire strategies towards possible futures as well as warning against the dire consequences of continuing business as usual. Climate fiction is a genre that has been picking up a steadier pace in science fiction, from Octavia E. Butler's 1993 *Parable of the Sower* to Kim Stanley Robison's 2020 *The Ministry for the Future*, and movies such as Roland Emmerich's 2004 *The Day after Tomorrow* and Dean Devlin's 2017 *Geostorm*. These works imagine futures of extreme climate instability and the – often vain – human efforts to control them (Goodbody & Johns-Putra 2019; Trexler 2015). While climate fiction encompasses a wide variety of genres, from the post-apocalyptic adventure to the psychological thriller, several of these works feature advanced technologies of geoengineering and the dystopian aftermaths of their mishaps. They thus offer cautionary tales of the dangers that lie ahead of current Promethean paths of climate manipulating through advanced technology.

New trends in science fiction, however, have attempted to give voice to more positive visions of ecological futures that entail a radical political rethinking of human relations with nature and technology, providing new imaginative energy for transformative political projects (Jameson 2007). Solarpunk has been affirming itself as an emerging speculative movement in fiction, art and activism, that offers hopeful alternatives of habitable futures in the midst of environmental collapse and climate chaos (Reina-Rozo 2021). Taking its name from similar genres such as cyberpunk, steampunk, and dieselpunk, solarpunk attempts to reinject the future with hope by emphasizing radical decentralization, community empowerment through bottom-up innovation and the extensive use of renewable energies and sustainable technologies (Hunting 2020). Born online on blogging platforms around the 2010s, Solarpunk appeared in print for the first time in Portuguese in a Brazilian anthology (Lodi-Ribeiro 2012). Solarpunk's anarchic and communitarian futures attempt to decentralize techno-ecological imaginaries from American and European centers to areas usually considered at the peripheries of innovation and the future, as well as from the places where technology and innovation are supposed to come from, such as university laboratories and industry. For example, Italian author Francesco Verso's novels set in the narrative world of *The Roamers* and *No/Mad/Land* feature a nomadic group of maker-heroes and maintainers, the «Pulldogs», who travel the world helping marginalized communities empower themselves to become energetically independent and to repair pollution and ecological degradation that plague their environment (Verso 2023; 2024).

This ambition, however, is threatened by the increasing popularity of the genre, which risks blurring the lines that separate it from the Promethean imaginaries of ecomodernism, a vision for a future sustainable civilization based on the decoupling of economic activities from ecological impacts thanks to scientific breakthroughs and large-scale advanced technologies such as geoengineering (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015). Part of the reason for such confusion might lie in the ambiguity of sustainable technologies such as green buildings, vertical agriculture, and solar energy, which stand as hopeful imaginary symbols of greener futures but also hide darker and very concrete sides of green extractivism and colonialism (Lang et al. 2024; Roos & Hornborg 2024). Are offshore wind farms solarpunk or ecomodernist? Analyzing a technology in isolation might do little in the way of offering an answer. However, the eco-futurist scenarios of ecomodernism, focused on growth, centralized innovation, and the anthropocentric control of nature, are premised upon very different political and economic assumptions from solarpunk, which is premised on anarchic, ecological, and socially just futures (Gillam 2023). It is this ambiguity between different sustainable

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technologies and their political implications that makes solarpunk-inspired innovation and imagination products at risk of appropriation and misinterpretation.

Highlighting these differences is essential because technological imaginaries are not neutral, as they may be an expression of and an influence on current scientific and technological developments (Jasanoff & Kim 2015; Morozov 2013). Cyberpunk narratives such as *Ghost in the Shell* and *The Matrix* may have been a source of inspiration for Silicon Valley investments in computer and AI research, in the hope of achieving such products of imagination as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), sentient robots, and brain-computer interfaces. Space operas, such as Stanley Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*, might have seduced private and public fantasies of interplanetary civilization.[1] Similarly, technological imaginations of sustainable futures powered by solar sails, biorobots, and closed-loop artificial ecosystems could provide inspiration for researchers, engineers, designers, and activists searching for alternative modes of living (Gerola et al. 2023; MacKinnon et al. 2020).

If it seems plausible that technological imaginations have a social role in providing visions of desirable futures, it is most certain that there are vast inequalities in terms of how much different social actors can do to actually bring about those futures. Underfunded open software collectives might easily be outcompeted, technologically and economically, by big tech companies in terms of impact on the digital market. The existence of power relations thus extends to the sources of imagination that inspire different actors, creating distorting effects on imaginative efforts. American philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò calls «elite capture» societal processes through which attempts at radical transformation are inhibited through their appropriation by powerful actors (Táíwò 2022). These elites, in turn, may enact symbolic acts of rebranding to avoid deeper structural reforms or might frame subversive instances as perverse attempts to be condemned and repressed. We aim to show that this can be the fate of subversive technological imaginaries as well, including solarpunk. Elite capture offers a useful critical lens to make sense of social and cultural processes whereby influential actors such as technology companies appropriate and distort transformative attempts of re-imagining techno-ecological futures.

Understanding the processes and effects of imagination capture is important in order to critically examine contemporary discourses on technological innovation and highlight potential dangers of technosolutionism, green washing and other counterproductive outcomes (Illich 1975). Current debates on the sustainability transition, ecological modernization and degrowth approaches illustrate the ambiguity of sustainable innovation and the different technologies that are supposed to herald them (Kothari et al. 2019).

We begin by discussing the role of imagination as a collective capability. We then turn to elite capture and reflect on how it can distort the political value of imagination. The third section will present two cases of solarpunk art and analyze the broader implications of their capture through their display as corporate commercials. The conclusion will reflect on what we can learn from these cases about processes of appropriation of technological imagination.

2. Imagination and ethics: who gets to imagine the future, and how?

Imagination is a multi-faceted concept. While often conceived as a skill, we argue that understanding imagination as a collective capability aimed at envisioning a range of possible futures can highlight its ethical and political role in supporting citizens' relationships to

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[1] Including the ambitious project of imaginative resistance of a Zambian space program led by researcher Edward Makuka Nkoloso (see Wilson 2019).

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technological futures. In this section we build upon a variety of scholarship on imagination to argue for an account that emphasizes its role as a capability that enables the generation of an open and dynamic plurality of transformative future pathways, a role that can be threatened by processes of elite capture.

Philosopher of mind Amy Kind has discussed imagination extensively, as well as edited an important volume on the philosophy of imagination (Kind 2016). This indicates that there are multiple conceptual starting points when considering imagination. For our argument, we move from Kind's work in understanding imagination as a skill that can be practiced through engaging with fiction and that produces coherent and value-laden mental images (Kind 2022). The process of imagining is a deeply social and political phenomenon, conditioned by culture, society, the availability of works of fiction and so on. According to Kind, imagination has a moral role. She argues that «fiction exposes us to a wider range of experiences than we would otherwise have an easy opportunity to connect with, and it does so in a safe context that proves especially conducive to imaginative practice» (Kind 2022, 7). Here, the primary role of imagination is the ability to become empathetic, through what Kind describes as «experiential imagination», the ability to project oneself in an imagined situation, its experiences and feelings. Additionally, «propositional» and «sensory» imagination enable us to expand one's imagination through the creation of mental images and other sensory experiences, making one's experience of fiction more vivid and present. According to Kind, «the more elaborate the descriptions encountered, the more elaborate the mental images are that readers will likely be producing, and thus the more that imagination is stretched» (Kind 2022, 14).

To rephrase Kind's proposal, one can say that if imagination is a skill that allows us to conceive of different futures, where propositional imagination, or imagination about what could be, plays an important role, then there is a need to keep imagination as open as possible to various futures. This relates to Mark Johnson's work on moral imagination (Johnson 1993), where moral imagination supports moral agents in solving an ethical problem by conceiving of a range of options. This range of options might, however, be limited by political, social and economic circumstances, in other words, power asymmetries.

In *Imagination: A Manifesto*, sociologist Ruha Benjamin writes on how imagination can be reclaimed under power asymmetries. In her chapter on imagining the future, she critically discusses these power asymmetries, arguing that «a critical approach to imagination requires us to consider that the way forward is never guaranteed to be better than the present» (Benjamin 2024, 104). This calls for a democratic approach to imagination. Benjamin, referring to indigenous children in the Marshall Islands, writes «whether we turn to children playing in the sand or tech billionaires offering us solutions while they build underground bunkers to survive the climate emergency, it matters whose imaginations get to materialize as our shared future» (Benjamin 2024, 119). In other words, the existence of power asymmetries makes it so that different groups have unequal access to the creation of imaginations products (such as movies, books, comics, shows, public talks) that can give shape to concrete social, political, and technological consequences, inequalities that raise the need for a broader access to the ability to participate in shaping collective imaginaries. This is a crucial point we will address by examining the production of solarpunk visual art later in the paper.

Summarizing our argument so far, imagination can be seen as a skill, enhanced by fiction, to envision alternative ways ahead, a multiplicity of open futures that are affected by existing power asymmetries and that can challenge or reinforce dominant imaginaries. As such, imagination is a skill of fundamental ethical and political importance for its collective implications as a force that has the power to push for systemic change, but one that is also at risk of being co-opted to reinforce already dominant imaginaries, as we will see in the next section.

First, however, the notion of skill is not yet adequate for our argument, as it denotes a characteristic defined by a single individual's ability. Given the importance of imagination for transformative processes of collective change, we propose a complementary perspective. Building on the work of Fletcher (2016), we argue that conceiving of imagination as a capability, rather than as an individual skill, could address some of the challenges that stem from the social and political role that imagination can play. Indeed, for imagination to be a capability, one is required to acknowledge the limits of one's own experiences, find points in common with others, and doing so leads to embracing plurality (Fletcher 2016, 397). This too, however, has limits as it can tend to overburden moral agents in vulnerable positions. As an individual, it is also easier to engage in exercises of transformative imagination, but it is often not in one's interest when in a position of power. Solarpunk's emergence as a radically subversive discourse around democracy, technology and sustainability implies that it is at risk of being co-opted, intentionally or otherwise, by dominant narratives on sustainable development instead of challenging them by offering alternative visions. What is needed is an understanding of the role of imagination, intended as a capability that opens up a plurality of multiple futures, that grounds this ability in the social dimension of imagination practices and products.

In other works, Robaey and Hase Ueta suggest that by nature imagination cannot be an individual capability but needs to be understood as a collective capability (Robaey and Hase Ueta 2024). This brings us to the last conceptual piece of the puzzle regarding how we understand imagination in this paper. Rosignoli (2018) explains that collective capabilities are gained when an individual lacking a capability acquires it by joining a group: «the expansion of citizens' capabilities (i.e. their access and opportunity to do things that they have reason to value) can be better pursued by enhancing collective agency» (Rosignoli 2018, 825). Joining a group to acquire collective capabilities allows the development of resistance and resilience. There is more to her account, but for the sake of our argument, it suffices to take her definitions: resistant capabilities are the «collective ability to resist to structural injustices, such as top down decisions imposed by authorities upon groups», and resilient capabilities the «collective ability to react constructively to structural injustices, including collective actions taken by groups aimed at expanding their freedoms» (Rosignoli 2018, 830). Rosignoli points out that early work on collective capabilities was done in accounting for the efforts of indigenous movements in struggling for environmental justice.

By conceptualizing imagination as a collective capability that enables groups to resist and react to structural injustices through creative acts that can inspire and guide societal transformations, we can problematize the social and political implications of the creation of mental images, social imaginaries, and other products of imagination through fiction. By focusing on imagination as a collective capability, we are now in a better position to evaluate the potential and limitations of solarpunk as an imaginative endeavor that envisions transformative change towards more just ecological futures. Before turning to our case studies, we turn to consider how imagination can fail to deliver its liberatory promises.

3. The limits of imagination: elite capture

As we have seen, imagination can offer a powerful resource to envision alternative futures. The translation of imagination into fiction and other speculative visions is essential to give focus to transformative projects that challenge existing processes and institutions considered unjust or unsustainable, and to empower communities with clearer visions of the future. As other material and immaterial resources, however, imagination is at risk of being co-opted and controlled by powerful social groups and institutions, intentionally or otherwise. Companies might engage in deceitful branding by making false, weak, or

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unverifiable claims to protect nature in order to appeal to environmentally sensitive customers, while not addressing substantial needs for reform e.g. in net emissions or exploitation of indigenous land. American philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò described similar sorts of counter-productive exercises in legitimation as «elite capture» (Táíwò 2022). It is upon this notion that we build our argument in order to reflect on the ways in which imagination can be captured and distorted, thereby stifling the radical potential of transformative imaginative projects.

The notion of elite capture originated in development studies to indicate how local elites and international aid organizations tend to intercept financial benefits meant for the broader society (Musgrave & Wong 2016; Shapland et al. 2021). Táíwò expanded the idea of elite capture to indicate «how public resources such as knowledge, attention, and values become distorted and distributed by power structures» (Táíwò 2022, 10). We argue that imagination, as a collective capability, constitutes a public resource that can be similarly exploited. According to Táíwò, elite capture is one of the main tools through which companies and institutions might resist substantial reform by enacting mere aesthetic or symbolic changes. Táíwò illustrates this process through the troubled history of «identity politics», an idea born as a community-based project of societal empowerment in the 1970s through the Black Feminist Combahee River Collective and turned into a legitimization tool for companies' diversity policy (Táíwò 2022, 6-9). The outcome of elite capture is ultimately the stalling of transformative change through performative acts of rebranding or through active repression by labeling subversive instances as contrary to the public good. «In the absence of the right kind of checks or constraints, the subgroup of people with power over and access to the resources used to describe, define, and create political realities – in other words, the elites – will capture the group's values, forcing people to coordinate on a narrower social project that disproportionately represents elite interests» (Táíwò 2022, 32). In this way, the power of transformative projects and visions is neutralized and converted into legitimacy claims by capturing elites.

Elite capture does not constitute an isolated occurrence, but a systemic phenomenon of large and complex societies, in which inclusive political projects tend to be hijacked by groups in positions of privilege. In the case of media, for example, «those atop the attention economy exert the most influence over how the critical resources of attention and engagement are distributed» (Táíwò 2022, 58), thereby heavily shaping the focus of online debates. Elite capture is thus a phenomenon larger than occasional opportunism and appropriation, as it is not limited to the scope of the agents' intentions, and it has wide ranging political and economic effects.[2]

We argue that imagination and its products are at risk of similar processes of elite capture that inhibit their transformative potential. If imagination is conceived as a collective capability, a capability which enables the envisioning of alternative states of things and guide change, it becomes clear how elite capture can interfere with the potential of imagination to foster resistance and resilience. Through the diversion of attention, appropriation of styles and motifs, misrepresentation, and the flattening of nuanced narratives, cultural elites and commercial companies may appear to promote diversity and inclusion while actually disempowering marginalized groups from envisioning and enacting their transformative futures. Imagination can thus be captured via the use, production, and distribution of products of imagination, such as fiction and visual aesthetics, with the implicit or explicit

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[2] Described in these terms, elite capture might appear similar to cultural appropriation. However, cultural appropriation is typically intended as a narrower and episodic phenomenon that concerns the inappropriate use and display of cultural elements of minority groups by part of dominant groups. Their similarity consists in being processes of expropriation of benefits, social and economic, from subaltern to dominant groups, but they concern different objects and scope.

effect of legitimizing a particular company or institution through appeals to diversity, sustainability and similarly positive values, while discouraging actual efforts for change.

Before moving to our analysis of solarpunk commercials, we need to stress that elite capture constitutes just one process in which the promises of imagination as a collective capability are negated. As elite capture can happen with different sorts of resources, financial or imaginative, material or immaterial, so imagination as a process and a product can enhance or prevent transformative change depending on who and how is wielding it. Amitav Ghosh (2016) highlights how existing imaginaries, such as the fantasy of a stable nature in the Holocene, can stifle the creation and believability of new stories, in particular concerning exceptional events such as climate change. It is telling that solarpunk is considered a subgenre of science fiction, a genre typically considered not artistically "noble", rather than, say, a form of dramatic or didactic fiction. Similarly, Ruha Benjamin (2024) spends several chapters discussing how the oppressive and eugenic imaginaries of capitalism, longtermism, and nationalism privilege the benefits of an imagined group that mostly includes the elites, instead of the real suffering of people surviving at the margins. When the imaginaries of dominant groups capture the efforts and products of imagination coming from the margins, this often results in the derision, demonization or depoliticization of those instances. Thus, solarpunk imaginaries risk ending up either ridiculed for their unfeasibility, blamed as threats to civil and economic order or co-opted as supporting high tech and capitalist eco-modernism, as we will see below.

4. Capturing the sun: two emblematic solarpunk commercials

To make the case for the possibility of elite capture of imagination, we turn to examining two cases of solarpunk-inspired commercials as illustrative examples. Solarpunk is a contemporary speculative art, science fiction, and activism movement that envisions hopeful futures of harmonious living with nature. It originated on internet blogs around the 2010s to describe a vision of the future that did not yet exist and to coalesce the efforts of artists, visionaries and activist to imagine and bring that world to reality, spurring the creation of a manifesto and numerous community initiatives around the world (The Solarpunk Community 2019; Hudson 2015). The daring gamble of solarpunk as a joint effort in speculative imagination and transformative change is to envision ways of addressing current socio-ecological injustices by actively intervening through sustainable technology and communitarian self-organization (Gillam 2023; Reina-Rozo 2021). This goal entails the radical decentralization and democratization of access, manufacture, and control of technologies such as renewable energies, bio-based materials, urban farming, and 3D-printed modular design, to name a few prominent examples (Hunting 2020). Solarpunk represents the attempt to rethink technological solutions to environmental problems by filling in the gaps left by governments and institutions through the empowerment of local communities by means of up-cycling, retrofitting, frugal innovation and other informal and convivial modes of technological development (Illich 1975). The fact that solarpunk has initially taken root in South America (Lodi-Ribeiro 2012) and among self-organized eco-villages and anarchic collectives might be emblematic of the ethos of resistance and resilient response to a sense of political, technological, and ecological abandonment, finding empowerment through collective imagination. For example, Brazilian author Jana Bianchi's short story *Vanishing Tracks in the Sand* illustrates these dynamics through the resilience of a coastal community in Brazil, caught between environmental disasters, governmental abandonment and bureaucratic encroachment through "development" projects that undermine local autonomy and threaten the existence and way of life of its people (Bianchi 2023).

The transformative potential of solarpunk as an exercise in imagination for resistance and resilience is however fragile. Solarpunk is still an evolving genre, with numerous discussions concerning its identity and subtypes. It is thus sensitive to capture by firms and institutions that may adopt solarpunk-*ish* themes and tropes such as solar panels and green buildings to promote themselves as close to nature and to the people. The risk of co-optation is compounded by the risk that solarpunk imaginaries come to be shaped in turn by these more dominant and influential actors, inhibiting the radical political message at the core of the movement and shifting its focus to imagining sustainable technofixes.

To examine how solarpunk visual aesthetics might be captured, we discuss two solarpunk-inspired commercials that have gained much attention due to their prominence. It is noteworthy that both artworks were also designed as advertisements representing the goals of private companies that strive to share their visions on the role of technology in farming in one case, and on biomanufacturing in the other case. Tellingly enough both ads are from the same year, and by the same artist – this fact was not known to the authors upon selection of these cases.

The first case is offered by one of the most popular visual representations of solarpunk, originally a commercial by dairy company Chobani, which online communities have elected as one of the best instances of a solarpunk world. Titled *Dear Alice*, it is described as «a love letter from a grandmother to a granddaughter» that offers «an optimistic vision of the future of farming» and «a nostalgic look towards a new era of agriculture» (The Line Animation Studio 2021). In the video we see an idyllic landscape, lush green and fertile, dotted by shining solar panels, floating wind turbines, and green skyscrapers in the distance, which might be more representative of ecomodernist ideas of human-nature separation (Balkan 2024). The protagonist is a woman who inherited her farm from her grandmother, using advanced technologies to care for the land and feed her multiethnic family. The smart farm of a small producer, nostalgic and romantic views of old brick ovens and family meals in the shade of orchard gardens are juxtaposed to sleek and clean looking smart fridges, agricultural robots, small-scale irrigation-through-climate-manipulation technologies. Innovation and tradition build upon each other and co-exist in a multiethnic and multi-species collective. The score was composed by Japanese composer Joe Hisaishi, long-time collaborator of Studio Ghibli. A "decommodified edition" was uploaded on YouTube in the fall of the same year, removing the company's name from the video. Since then, Ghibli aesthetics has become a powerful visual element in Solarpunk imaginaries.

A second case of visual capture of solarpunk aesthetic can be seen on the billboard pictures used by American biotechnology company Ginkgo Bioworks when the company joined the New York Stock Exchange in September 2021. The «organism company», as they call themselves, was founded by MIT scientists with the aim of enabling synthetic biology companies to "grow" any kind of product starting from basic DNA blocks and bioengineered organisms. The company announced their rating on the New York Stock Exchange through giant visual displays appearing in Times Square and on the Wall Street building. They showed forested landscapes and green glass buildings populated by people peacefully co-existing with dinosaurs, a clear hint to *Jurassic Park* fantasies of the power of genetic engineering. A green, sustainable, and exciting future became possible through the company's work. The successful visual campaign led to the creation of a solarpunk jigsaw puzzle of the same picture. As the company advertises «Daniel Clarke was commissioned to create this solarpunk imagery, where humans, nature, and technology interact peacefully, evoking a sense of wonder and awe» (Ginkgo Bioworks 2021). The same artist collaborated with the dairy company to produce the *Dear Alice* short.

These examples perfectly illustrate how the problem of elite capture is a problem of power asymmetries. When a dominant group produces imaginaries that seemingly incorporate those of marginalized groups, this dilutes their subversive and transformative goals,

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thwarting the potential of imagination as a capability of collective resistance and resilience. Here we see industrial corporations from the Global North who employ charming and idyllic visual tropes, reminiscent of tranquil agrarian landscapes, adding an eco-futuristic spin that makes them exciting visions for a high-tech green future. This combination of tradition and innovation makes them undoubtedly *feel* solarpunk, yet they clearly lack all the political motives that animate the movement. These visuals hide the contested nature of sustainable future imaginaries, exciting the public's imagination in a direction that is favorable to the commercial and technological projects of these companies. By not depicting power struggles, these images do not engage imagination as a capability for collective resilience and resistance. Rather, they portray the future as harmonious and without conflict, implicitly contributing to frame solarpunk projects of community empowerment and active resistance as degenerate and subversive, or as dreamy fantasies of unrealistic futures. This shows that the elite capture of transformative technological imaginaries may produce a future that appears peaceful and uncomplicated, more the concern of depoliticized technological solutions than of transformative political engagement.

It is important to nuance our analysis here – we take these ads as a means to reflect on the capture of imagination, which as we specified goes beyond actors' intentions. While these companies might not be aware of contributing to co-opt and deform solarpunk narratives, our analysis offers an argument to call them to responsibly communicate about potential futures, especially when borrowing tropes from politicized genres such as solarpunk. Collins (2020) argues that there is no overdemandingness of collective agents such as businesses. What this essay suggests is that fiction, as a vehicle for imagination, might best be used in representations that encapsulate imagination's goals of expanding our horizons and collective capacity for resilience and resistance.

Additionally, discussing elite capture demands honest self-reflection. As Shapland et al. clarify, this «is a fraught exercise because we are vulnerable to reaffirming symbols and entrenched power relations when we consider issues of empowerment and capture, as we tend to see them within frameworks that legitimize the existing relations of domination» (Shapland et al. 2021, 81). Our access to solarpunk resources of imagination is situated in a Western European context, where there is generally ample opportunity and resources for community initiatives, which are often spurred by a sense of possibility rather than the urgency of necessity or neglect. Our own understanding and discussion of the imaginative possibilities of solarpunk is therefore not free of potentials distortions and risks of capture in relations to contexts and people affected by different circumstances.

5. Conclusion: capturing imagination

Through the visual examples of solarpunk we aimed to illustrate the subtle shifts in narratives and power involved in the elite capture of imagination, showing that images can take on a political life of their own and which philosopher Chiara Bottici has called the «imaginal» (Bottici 2014). By understanding imagination as a collective capability, this process of capture may contribute to stalling its transformative potential in fostering resistance and resilience. When imagination is used as a vehicle to fuel radically alternative technological futures, elite capture redirects attention in support of existing institutions and current views about nature, technology, and progress. In the cases we examined, the visual focus on advanced technologies and the marvelous worlds they enable shifts the attention from political and ecological questions, central to solarpunk, to technological issues. This ambiguity, as we noted, is at the heart of the debate on sustainable development and its alternatives. Analyzing the risk of elite capture of solarpunk imagination provides a valuable angle to study the multiple narratives, visual, literary, and academic, that are at play in public

debates on the sustainability transition and climate change mitigation and adaptation. This process of capture may constitute a distorting effect in political discussions around global justice issues in just transitions and the risk of green extractivism, lending support to technocentric narratives and defusing attention around alternative socio-ecological transitions. Our analysis shows that even well-intentioned or apparently innocuous uses of forms of imagination and imaginaries can have potentially reactionary political consequences that normalize and neutralize narratives in support of radical change.

We would like to conclude by reflecting on potential suggestions to engage more critically with solarpunk-inspired sources of imagination. Our discussion has emphasized how some solarpunk artworks tend to forefront an eco-futurist sense of marvel, ignoring the messy aspects of social contexts. They might draw superficial inspiration from visionary mega-projects of green architecture such as those by architects Vincent Callebaut and Stefano Boeri. A counterpoint might be offered by an emphasis on the sense of place of a local community. Belgian artist Dustin Jacobus has illustrated solarpunk-inspired makeovers of existing urban areas with a dearth of vegetation and water, envisioning place-based projects of urban transformation. Both approaches may inspire different ways to imagine better ecological futures, but we encourage the need for critical engagement with the different dimensions, social, ecological, technological, suggested by these imaginative visions. The risks may be assuming technological solutions to be the default way forward on the one hand and romanticizing frugal innovation on the other.

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