

Ecology and Literature: From Fear to Hope in Stories about Social Change, the Climate Crisis and Consumption

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Advertising and popular culture portray a narrative that we can buy beauty, status, respect, and even love, and that there is no alternative to the current economic system. Fortunately, narratives can be replaced by other narratives, if they are compelling enough, making literature and fiction into powerful tools to ignite ecological understanding and meaningful change.

We live in a world of stories. From the books we read as children and the ubiquitous messaging of advertising to the articles and novels we consume as adults, we constantly navigate a dense network of narratives. However, many of these contemporary cultural narratives are not helpful to individuals or society. With the enormous resources spent by businesses on marketing, for example, and by corporations on branding and cultural messaging, we are assaulted daily by commercial narratives telling us that we can buy beauty, status, respect and even love by buying certain products or brands. Most of us have also accepted the main story peddled about our current economic system: that this is the best of all possible worlds in human history, and in any case, no other way of life is possible or even desirable. Accordingly, popular culture, which is the entertainment branch of the corporate economy, tends to address the great emergencies of our times (such as climate change, mass extinction, and severe global inequality), by either ignoring them or depicting apocalyptic and dystopian scenarios that reinforce the narrative that there is no alternative to the status quo except collapse or destruction. In all cases, we are encouraged to just keep buying things, signaling our “consumer confidence” or feeling virtuous about our “green consumption”, but we must never actually question why we tend to buy so much and what we really need to be happy. Meanwhile, most of the planet’s irreplaceable ecosystems are approaching breaking points, and the climate crisis is already upon us.¹

Only stories replace stories

For a long time, the main place where warnings about the future could be found were in books and movies. In the 1970s, after the initial warnings of *The Limits to Growth Report* of 1972, literature and popular culture began to raise alarms

¹ Rockström/Gaffney (2021).

about the destruction of the biosphere. Books such as John Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up* (1972) or films such as *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Logan's Run* (1976) depicted dystopic futures meant to serve as cautionary tales.² The stakes were raised by films like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), which showed mass death as a consequence of human impact on the climate and biosphere. While studies at the time showed that the film had an impact on people's awareness of climate change, it did not translate into long-term behavioral changes.³ Scholars like Charles Eisenstein (2018) and Scott Slovic (2015) explain this failure by arguing that fear-based motivation simply does not have the power and traction to lead to meaningful social change. In fact, apocalyptic stories, which currently saturate our cultural landscape, tend to encourage denial and defeatism and never offer perspectives on what to do differently. What is needed now are visions of a future that we desire and believe in, motivated by love and care for something – in this case, our planet and its ecosystems, as well as for a more just and fulfilling society – that we want to protect.

Fortunately, stories can be replaced by other stories. In fact, stories can *only* be replaced by other stories, which is why scientific facts have not been effective in changing the powerful social narratives of infinite growth, technological salvation, and unbridled consumerism as measure of freedom that uphold the contemporary neoliberal paradigm. This is also why literature (and independent cinema, video, theater, songs, and media) can have a real impact on people and their relationship to their environment, including their consumption practices and habits. Fictional stories can create powerful, meaningful, and attractive worlds that inspire both by their content and their narrative coherence. In other words, the best stories *show* how things can be by creating a fictional world in which they already exist. This is far more convincing than anything anyone can *tell* you, which you can accept rationally but will not necessarily move you emotionally and existentially (and behaviorally).

Immersion in Ecotopia

One such story which has touched millions of people since 1975 when it was first published is Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia*. Its author spent several years researching the science and environmental policies that he depicts in the novel, creating a world that is totally realistic and possible even if the scenario is fictional: A northwestern section of the USA secedes and creates an

2 Meadows et al. (1972).

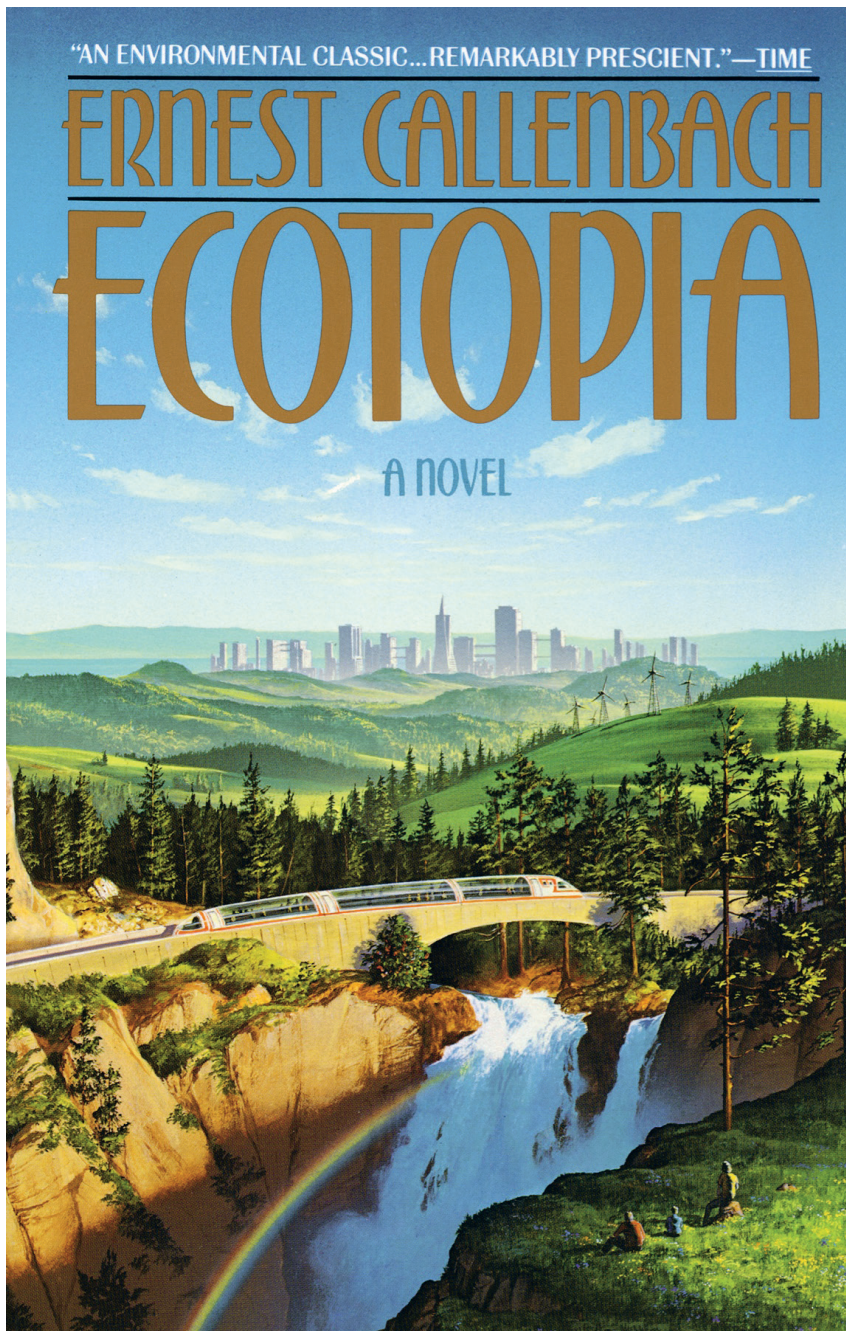
3 Leiserowitz (2004).

ecologically based republic called “Ecotopia”, to which a journalist from the USA travels for the first time since its secession 20 years later. A naïve and prejudiced observer, expecting to uncover deceit and disorder, the narrator slowly realizes that Ecotopian society not only makes rational sense but *feels* like a more interesting and satisfying place to live than the world we are used to. However, long before he changes his mind, the narrator’s biased and paranoid comments invite us to feel an ironic estrangement from his subjective point of view. These negative expectations turn us into active and critical readers, contrasting his cynical judgments with his descriptions of what appear as perfectly logical arrangements and implicitly showing us how our own cultural assumptions about what is natural and normal in society could also evolve. By the end of the novel, the USA that he comes from, which is a version of our “normal” Western society of today, has come to look absurdly dystopian compared to the much more reasonable and relational culture we discover and imaginatively inhabit as we read the novel. All of these literary devices, such as estrangement and identification, irony and perspective, as well as the temporal aspect of spending time with a character and in a fictional world, give literature the ability to influence readers in both subtle and powerful ways.

A key feature that makes *Ecotopia* particularly effective is that the world that Callenbach creates does not pretend to be “perfect” but seems nevertheless better than ours in addressing people’s real needs and desires while respecting the needs of the natural world. Far from being an impossible utopia, the ecological society of the novel is a “homeplace,” following the original Greek meaning of “eco” (“oikos”) as “the extended family unit” or “home,” a place where people can feel *at home* because human wellbeing and social relationships are prioritized along with ecological principles.

Although ethical consumption is rarely foregrounded in literature, Callenbach’s novel is also unique in its explicit attention to consumption-related issues and details: for example non-biodegradable plastics and synthetic fabrics have been phased out in favor of natural materials (though some can still be found in “antiquarian” stores), producers rather than consumers are legally liable for a negative health impact (such as sweet sodas and the cavities they cause), and companies that do not respect ecological principles find themselves on a list that conscious consumers may consult. A crucial aspect of consumption in Ecotopia is that social costs and externalities (such as disposal or recycling) are included in the price of goods, which makes the prices reflect the *actual* cost involved in the full life-cycle of a product rather than passing it on to taxpayers or later generations. Most importantly, life in Ecotopia has been rearranged to favor social

relationships and personal development (reduced work week, alternative living arrangements, minimal commutes, frequent opportunities for social contact) so that people do not need to use commodities to fill emotional and social needs.⁴



Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia* (cover art by Mark Harrison, 1990 Bantam Books edition).

© Penguin Random House

4 See Schor (1998).

“Ambitopian” literature

Thanks to its many detailed “green” policy suggestions and innovations, the novel is considered the inspiration for the first European Green Party in Germany as well as the forerunner of the contemporary movement called “solarpunk,” a genre of literary and visual art dedicated to imagining sustainable and socially just futures. Explicitly rejecting the current fascination with dystopia and pessimism, solarpunk writing positions itself at the intersection of techno-ecological innovation and social justice. It imagines futures that are inclusive, non-hierarchical, technologically innovative and sustainable, and creates visions of viable possibilities beyond collapse or the status quo. Most commonly written as short stories collected into anthologies, solarpunk is also adding novels and a wide range of visual artwork to its ranks.⁵ Like *Ecotopia*, solarpunk is not “utopian” so much as “ambitopian,” acknowledging dystopian tendencies in current society, even while making a compelling and imaginative case for ingenuity, creativity, and meaningful change.

Besides the creative optimism of solarpunk, literature has yet other tools and scenarios to offer readers at this crucial moment in history, as global capitalism is confronted to its planetary and social limits. As an artform that is very good at inciting and stimulating readers’ empathy and exploring the subjective lives of characters, literature can help readers see the people and forces behind the products that they consume. An example of a novel that has attempted such a task in recent years is Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), an experimental narrative by a Cameroonian-American writer which shows the toxic side effects of petroleum extraction on a fictional African village. The story examines the complex interplay of political self-interest, state corruption, local resistance, and the irreversible damage to landscapes, bodies, and indigenous cultures in a multigenerational narrative that manages to be both deeply moving and ethically complex. Without reducing the issues to simple moral formulas, it shows the human cost of our addiction to oil and invites us to empathize with the people on the other end of the supply chains that create our highly mechanized version of “modernity.” Having seen and felt the human costs of consuming certain products we as readers can make more principled choices. For all these reasons, literature can be a valuable tool in the multipronged effort we now need to make as a society to change our habits, our stories, and our ways of relating to the living world around us.

⁵ Wagner/Wieland (2017).

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Zusammenfassung

Der Zukunftsroman «Ökotopia» von Ernest Callenbach aus dem Jahr 1975 und das neuere Werk «How Beautiful We Were» (2021) von Imbolo Mbue veranschaulichen, wie Literatur den Menschen und sein Verhältnis zur Umwelt, einschliesslich seiner Konsumgewohnheiten, beeinflussen kann. Wissenschaftliche Fakten konnten das Narrativ vom unendlichen Wachstum und ungezügelter Konsum, das dem neoliberalen Paradigma zugrunde liegt, bisher nicht verändern. Fiktionale Geschichten hingegen *zeigen*, wie alternative Lebensstile funktionieren könnten, indem sie Welten darstellen, in denen sie bereits existieren. Dies ist weitaus überzeugender als Fakten, welche zwar rational akzeptiert werden können, aber den Leser nicht unbedingt emotional und verhaltensmässig bewegen. «Ökotopia» gilt, dank den detaillierten «grünen» Politikvorschlägen, als Inspiration für die erste europäische Grüne Partei in Deutschland und als Vorläufer der Kunstbewegung «Solarpunk», die sich der Imagination einer nachhaltigen und sozial gerechten Zukunft widmet.

Résumé

Le roman *Écotopie*, d'Ernest Callenbach, publié en 1975, et le récent ouvrage *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), d'Imbolo Mbue, illustrent la manière dont la littérature peut exercer une influence sur les individus et leur relation à l'environnement, y compris sur leurs habitudes en matière de consommation. Les faits scientifiques n'ont pas réussi à modifier les narratifs de croissance infinie et de consumérisme effréné qui sous-tendent le paradigme néolibéral. En revanche, les histoires fictives *montrent* de quoi l'avenir pourrait être fait en mettant en scène des univers dans lesquels il existe déjà. La fiction est dès lors beaucoup plus convaincante que les faits, qui peuvent être acceptés rationnellement, mais qui ne touchent pas nécessairement les lectrices et lecteurs sur le plan émotionnel et comportemental. Grâce à ses propositions concrètes de politiques «vertes», le roman *Écotopie* est considéré comme une inspiration pour le premier parti vert européen, en Allemagne, et comme précurseur du mouvement artistique «solarpunk», qui imagine un futur durable et socialement équitable.