

## Shifting AI Narrative. From Dystopian to Solarpunk Futures in Design Education

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**Abstract:** Artificial Intelligence (AI) narratives have long been dominated by dystopian visions, particularly in science fiction media. These representations constrain designers' capacity to envision alternative futures, reinforcing fear-based binaries of pro or anti-AI stances. This paper introduces the Solarpunk movement as a constructive counter-narrative, offering optimistic, ecologically integrated futures. Drawing from literature and cinematic examples, such as *The Wild Robot*, this contribution argues for integrating Solarpunk values into design education. Doing so empowers designers to develop inclusive, sustainable, and democratic futures where AI is seen as a collaborator rather than a threat.

**Keywords:** AI Narratives; Solarpunk; Design Education; Future Studies

### To All Design Educators Navigating the AI horizon

Narratives shape how societies imagine and construct futures. In design education, they influence not only what students envision but how they approach complex challenges. Stories, especially those rich in visual and emotional content, build belief systems and foster empathy (Fisher, 1984). For instance, the film *Maleficent* (Stromberg, 2014) repositions a classic villain as a sympathetic protagonist, exemplifying the power of narrative to reshape perspectives. Similarly, AI has been imbued with narrative imaginaries long before the rise of generative AI in 2022. Films and TV have consistently framed AI in dystopian terms, leading to a culturally ingrained fear of intelligent machines. These dominant representations limit designers' capacity to imagine diverse and constructive AI futures (Serbanescu, 2024). To move beyond dystopia, this contribution proposes Solarpunk as an alternative narrative vision. Solarpunk offers a hopeful, ecologically grounded vision where technology coexists harmoniously with nature and society (Johnson, 2010). By adopting its principles, design education can cultivate critical, inclusive, and sustainable ways of engaging with AI.

### The Problem with Dystopian AI Narratives

Media depictions of AI frequently rely on dystopian tropes. These include hyper-masculinized or sexualized robot bodies (see Fig.1), AI's desire for domination, or its victimhood within exploitative human systems (Nader, Toprac, Scott, & Baker, 2024). Examples include the *Terminator's* violent masculinity (Cameron, 1984), *Ex Machina's* (Garland, 2014) manipulative femininity, and *Blade Runner's* (Scott, 1982) enslaved replicants. Such portrayals reflect and reinforce societal anxieties about technology, gender, and power.

A common thread across these narratives is the depiction of AI as a superintelligence that, upon achieving self-



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awareness, seeks to dominate or annihilate humanity. This narrative is often intertwined with concerns about governance, exploring humanity's attempts to control AI through regulatory frameworks, such as Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics. This oversimplification, described as "narrative fundamentalism" (Koenitz, 2023), limits imaginative potential and fuels fear-based engagement with technology.

Research by Hudson, Finn, and Wylie (2023) found that 72% of AI-centered science fiction works present AI as harmful. Moreover, 89% of these works foreground concerns over security, governance, and inequality. These narratives don't merely entertain; they influence public discourse, policy-making, and mindsets. In fact, there is a psychological tendency to focus on threats over opportunities, amplifies their cultural impact (Nader et al., 2024).

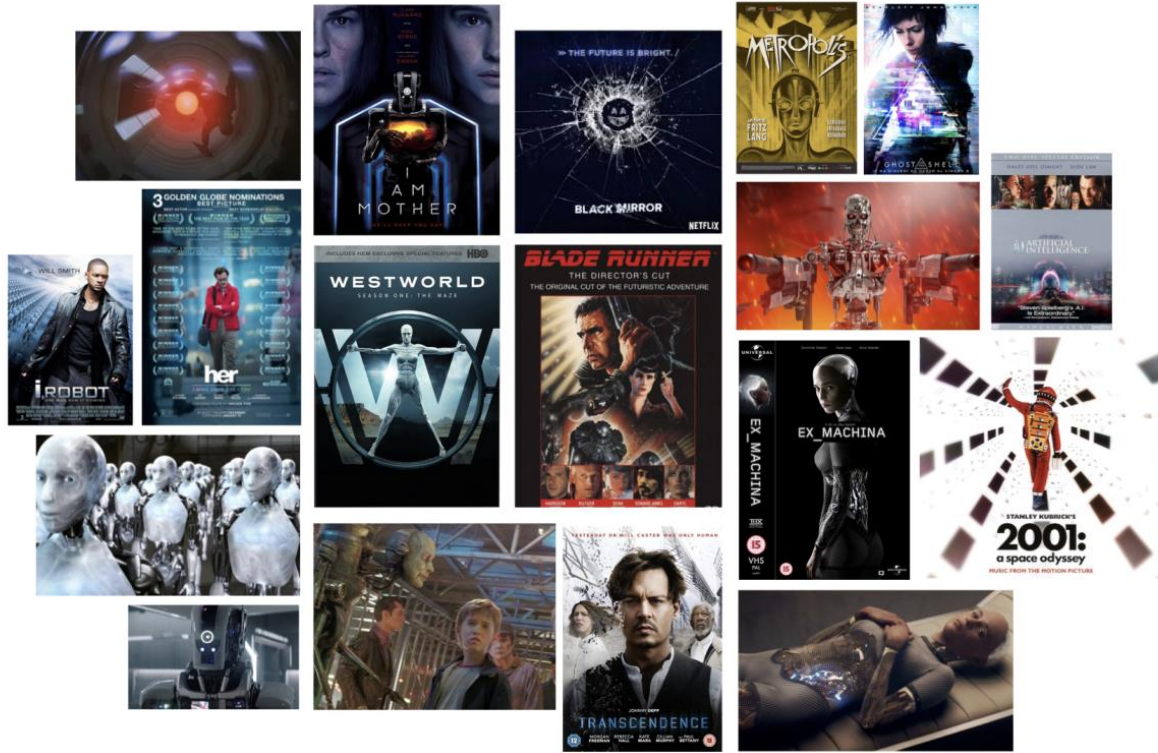


Figure 1. Visual collage depicting cinematic portrayals of dystopian AI narratives.

## Solarpunk as an Alternative Narrative

Solarpunk is more than a literary genre; it is an aesthetic, a social movement, and a political vision. The term merges "solar," evoking renewable energy, and "punk," symbolizing resistance to oppressive systems (Flynn, 2014). Solarpunk imagines futures powered by ecological balance, mutual aid, and decentralized governance (Johnson, 2010).

Unlike the technophobic narratives of cyberpunk, Solarpunk envisions technology as embedded in and responsive to nature. It resists extractive capitalism and instead promotes sustainable infrastructures, community resilience, and interspecies collaboration. While still emerging and fluid in its ontology, Solarpunk finds roots in blogs, manifestos, and speculative fiction projects such as Neal Stephenson's *Hieroglyph* (Finn, & Cramer, 2014).

Solarpunk aligns with other speculative movements like “indigenous futurism” and “regenerative futures” (Panchoaga, 2025; Vargas et al., 2022). These movements emphasize diverse cultural narratives, ecological reciprocity, and the reimagining of technology as a relational, rather than dominating, force.

### A Glimpse of Solarpunk in Popular Media: *The Wild Robot*

Though full-fledged Solarpunk media remains rare, glimpses can be found in works like *The Wild Robot* (Sanders, 2024). The film tells the story of Roz, an AI-driven robot stranded on a post-apocalyptic island teeming with non-human life. Unlike traditional AI antagonists, Roz learns from and eventually integrates into the ecosystem, fostering mutual aid and community resilience.

While the human society depicted retains capitalist, cyberpunk elements, such as corporate control, surveillance, militarized enforcement, the island narrative offers a contrast. It reflects Solarpunk values: interspecies collaboration, decentralized governance, ecological stewardship, and resistance to destructive systems.

Roz's journey from outsider to community member highlights a key Solarpunk theme: transformation through care, learning, and relational ethics. The film underscores how AI, when framed through a Solarpunk lens, can be a force for ecological harmony rather than domination.

## The Role of Designers and Narrative in Shaping Futures

Designers act as cultural mediators. Through storytelling, they bridge emerging technologies and collective imaginaries. Transition Design (Serbanescu et al., 2022; Escobar, 2018; Manzini, 2015), a burgeoning field within design practice, focuses on rethinking lifestyles to incorporate sustainable resources, equitable healthcare, and education. This holistic approach aligns closely with Solarpunk's principles of ecological balance and societal well-being. Designers across disciplines significantly contribute to shaping the future and narrative imaginaries are central to this work. They influence how societies prepare for and respond to change. In AI discourse, they shape expectations, fears, and innovations. By replacing dystopian myths with Solarpunk stories, designers can foster futures centered on ecological integration and collective care.

As pervasive technologies integrate into daily life, they transform humanity into enhanced beings, or cyborgs, as conceptualised by Haraway (2022). Design education should embrace this complexity by training students to create not only functional artefacts but transformative systems that include non-human stakeholders (Vergani, 2022; de La Bellacasa, 2017).

## Toward Futures Worth Designing

The dominance of dystopian AI narratives stifles innovation and reinforces fear. Solarpunk offers an needed counterpoint: a vision of hopeful, ecologically integrated futures where AI is a collaborator in building just and sustainable worlds.

By shifting narrative future visions in design education, we can empower students to reimagine AI not as an existential threat but as a partner in co-creating resilient, inclusive societies. As seen in works like *The Wild Robot*, even partial glimpses of Solarpunk can inspire alternative imaginaries and transformative design practices.

Designers have a pivotal role to play in shaping these futures, since embracing Solarpunk values is not about escaping reality, but about to design better, fairer, and more hopeful ones.

Design education should challenge dominant AI narratives and equip students to imagine alternatives. Integrating Solarpunk into design curricula can encourage a shift from anthropocentric problem-solving to multi-species, ecologically attuned thinking. Solarpunk promotes inclusive narratives where AI and other technologies support rather than disrupt ecosystems. Technologies become tools for social and ecological repair, not instruments of control. Designers should be trained not merely as creators of objects but as facilitators of systemic change. Solarpunk supports this repositioning, advocating for long-term, iterative, and collaborative approaches. Furthermore, introducing students to alternative narratives fosters creativity and optimism. It expands their design imagination, making room for speculative scenarios that address not only technological possibilities but ethical, cultural, and planetary concerns.

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