

Article

The Role of Dystopian Art in the Climate Crisis

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By Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen

Can a diet of gloomy tales help us to confront the climate crisis? The Norwegian climate psychologist Per Espen Stoknes thinks not, arguing that we should dwell instead on positive stories to avoid becoming paralyzed by fear. But no, it is too late for just that. Now we need to enlist anxiety to compel action and foster hope. As a scholar of theatre, I see today a hopeful reality drama playing itself out, led by such activist movements as FridaysForFuture and Extinction Rebellion. In it, we all have roles to play, as best we can and at every level.

There are three dystopian works of art that are currently feeding my fears and compelling me to act against climate collapse. The stories belong to so-called science fiction art.

The first can be found on David Bowie's album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), which contests "We've got five years, what a surprise." The first time I heard this song I visualized the impending disaster as a sudden and fatal comet strike like the one that drove the dinosaurs into extinction. Today, Bowie's "Five Years" reminds me of how little time we have left to act globally if we are not to exceed the critical 1.5 C degree limit of the final Paris Agreement. That fear has become an incentive for me to act—by writing this essay but also engaging in political activist-driven campaigns and demonstrations.

The second work is Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's video installation *The Great Silence* (2014), which recently appeared in Bonniers Art Hall in Stockholm as part of an exhibition entitled *Cosmological Arrows*. The spectator faces three large screens on which are projected images of (1) a forest preserve of an endangered parrot species in Puerto Rico, (2) images of the nearby radio telescope of the Arecibo Observatory, and (3) on the middle screen, text from Ted Chiang's short story after which the installation is named. The story is in the voice of one of the parrots, who reveals that the species has a highly developed culture. We humans have not come to know it, along with the culture of other species, but instead point our telescopes outwardly, into space, which paradoxically remains silent. The parrot says, "Alas, our myths are being lost as my species dies out. I doubt the humans will have deciphered our language before we're gone." It is sci-fi, of course, but it underscores what we are losing as countless animal species become extinct.

Third is Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja's 2018 Swedish film version of Nobel laureate Harry Martinson's epic sci-fi poem *Aniara*, which was published in full in 1956. This dystopian poem was Martinson's response to the sinking of the Titanic, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the nuclear threat of the Cold War—but also to the increasing environmental degradation of the earth. In the beginning of this poem, radiation has rendered large portions of the earth uninhabitable. By means of the luxurious space ship *Aniara*, an evacuation is underway to a colony on Mars. Soon, however, the gigantic craft with its 8,000 souls loses its power and becomes lost in interstellar space. In the film's frightening scenographic rendition, *Aniara*'s interiors become a sealed shopping mall where consumers continue their escapes from reality. The ship's artificial intelligence, Miman, has been turned into a virtual reality system like a yoga-style wellness center where passengers relive the now-dead nature on earth until Miman no longer stands by it and takes his own life. From this point on, the small community on board collapses, slowly and painfully, until the last survivor slips into the

great stillness of space. *Aniara*, which was also rendered as a hugely successful opera at the Royal Opera in Stockholm (1959-1968), drives my fear that the many different communities here on earth will remain committed to global capitalism and consumption, perhaps in attenuated, slightly greener forms but still not sufficient to avert a climate disaster.

Dystopian works are often viewed as entirely negative, creations that simply pull us down and render us helpless. But in fact they can also propel us into action—in this case, addressing the climate crisis, especially at the moment when action is most needed. Among many other activists, young and old, Greta Thunberg exemplifies the determination and dedication that can result. Reflecting on dystopias, Swedish author Joni Hyvönen writes: “As a negative world view, dystopia—literally, a “bad place”—is rather pessimistic. But as a counter-image to the present, it constitutes a nightmare that hopes for change. Thus, dystopias are also subtly optimistic.” As Greta Thunberg has said, however, action, not hope, is what is really important. Still, I do find hope in the global youth movement she has started. Likewise, the various positive stories of Stoknes, such as “The Green Growth,” help to give form to hope. More tangible still is Elon Musk’s Tesla company and its subsidiary SolarCities, which, with their electric cars and solar panels, are opening more doors to sustainable energy.

We individually must turn this hope into action by making adjustments and sacrifices in the way we live—relying on public transportation when we can, for example, and choosing trains over airplanes; minimizing meat consumption if not adhering to a vegan diet; divesting from fossil-fuel companies; recycling and buying less. But more is required of us. The climate threat is a systemic problem that none of us can address alone. Rather, informed by climate science, we must work to solve it together at the political and global levels. We must advocate for an abandonment of GDP in favor of an economy based on sustainability and the wellbeing of citizens, following the exceptional example of the New Zealand government.

In the reality drama of climate threat, we are all actors whether we realize it or not—for good or ill. And as I have shown, the arts might play a role as a driving force in our response. Those of us who live in democracies must press our representatives to take the foreboding climate collapse seriously and address it aggressively. But there are many ways to join with others in moving beyond paralyzing fear to effective action and enduring hope. How this drama culminates is up to all of us.

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