

 **Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet**

 **Christian Arnsperger**

University of Lausanne

“Did You See Last Night’s Episode of *Ecotopia*?”: How a TV Series Could Help Move Climate Action Forward *A Conversation with Elizabeth Watson*

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet & Christian Arnsperger: You initially started to work on this screenplay as a Master’s student in the English Department at the University of Lausanne. Can you say something about the original impetus for this project and why you thought *Ecotopia* would make a good TV series?

Elizabeth Watson: My original impetus came in response to a question that was posed during a class I took on “Climate Crisis and Societal Change”—the question of “Why are there so few utopian representations of the future?” As a fan of dystopian books, films and TV shows, it struck me that I had never been exposed to, nor engaged by, a utopian story. In the same class, I was introduced to Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*, and I immediately wondered if it had already been made into a film or TV series. I found the society described in *Ecotopia* to be inspiring and well thought out, but it also seemed to be one that could act as a flexible setting in which to explore the implications of systemic change. How would changing the societal and economic system of a place look not only on the institutional level, but straight down to the interpersonal, familial and personal spheres? Could systemic change go as far as modifying our own relationship to our inner world and emotions? Could healing our relationship to nature completely change our relationship to ourselves and others?

It seemed to me that Callenbach was exploring this question along with others in his novel. His Ecotopian characters have a different way

of socializing compared to modern North Americans, and they live in a different climate when it comes to expressing emotions. In *Ecotopia*, rather than masking or “civilizing” emotions in public spaces, the characters accept and express them as part of nature. The man-made artifice of polite society which has thus far been closely related to a suppression of our “baser” instincts and emotions is no longer present in the citizens of *Ecotopia*. While at first glance, this could seem a regression, Callenbach saw it as a coming home, a coming home to ourselves. It’s expressed in the characters’ comfort with their bodies, their ease in expressing their emotions and in communicating openly. The environmental principles on which *Ecotopian* life is founded seem to be reflected in the characters and their behavior.

336

If the novel were adapted into a TV series, there would be ample opportunities to show viewers what living sustainably or ecologically could mean beyond the mere “eco-gestures” that we hear so much about nowadays. Yes, society needs to fundamentally change in order to adapt to the demands of our changing climate, but what does that look like in terms of our day-to-day lives? Without an image of how people would live in this changed version of our future, it’s difficult for people to project themselves into that future. *Ecotopia* offers an inspiring image in which to project ourselves.

ASM & CA: *Ecotopia* is sometimes called a “utopian novel,” on the model of Samuel Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), but the word “utopian” inevitably has a pejorative connotation and gets associated with something either impossible to achieve or stifling and boringly static if it is achieved. But it appears that *Ecotopia* is not really a utopia at all, in that all of its solutions would be possible to implement if there were a will to do so, and that it is not trying to repress human nature to create a perfect society. Do you agree?

EW: On the one hand, *Ecotopia*’s utopian qualities are part of the appeal of adapting it. The book came out of a desire to offer different visions of our future outside of the apocalyptic and the dystopian. However, often utopias are suspect. We don’t believe in them since as members of an imperfect society, we don’t trust stories in which things are going too well. That’s why *Ecotopia* is compelling. The only utopian aspect of the society is the relationship to the environment. What Weston (the journalist who visits *Ecotopia* from the United States) witnesses—and the reader through him—is a society in development and one which, as John Michael Greer points out (in the dialogue in this issue of *Text Matters*), is very much a product of Callenbach’s own experiences and aspirations in the late 1960s. The way women are portrayed in the novel, the way race is dealt with, and other issues are very much a reflection of the author’s

background and context when writing *Ecotopia*. By the same token, these are also areas which could be updated to reflect the issues and questions that we are working on in the public sphere today.

In *Ecotopia*, after having reformed the new country around a new principle of environmental sustainability and a stable-state economy, the people are still working out what their society will be and how exactly it will operate. And it’s this aspect, this working out, that lends credibility, believability and interest to the novel. Readers or viewers don’t want to see a static end product, one of false perfection, because first of all, that would be boring. And secondly, it would be highly artificial. There is no society—whether utopian or not—for which there is an end product. Throughout human history there hasn’t been, nor will there ever be, stasis. Change is the only universal constant and we inherently know this, and thus are distrustful of any representations of a perfect “fixed” ideal. This inherent distrust of utopias is something that in my adaptation would be a central tension to play with. For example, in the first episode, Weston and the other American characters speak about the inhabitants of Ecotopia, formerly the residents of the Pacific Northwest, with distrust and even disgust. These characters’ fears reflect the fears of the viewer and build the anti-utopian tension before Weston even enters Ecotopia in the second episode. As he explores Ecotopia, the viewers share his reluctance to fully adapt to the local ways, and they will be constantly on their toes waiting for the other shoe to drop. In the second episode, I play on this paranoia by inserting surveillance scenes without it being clear who is doing the surveillance and why.

Callenbach also plays on the anti-utopian sentiments of his reader in his novel, especially with the inclusion of the War Games, as well as Weston’s possible kidnapping and possible brainwashing. In addition to adding conflict and drama, invoking this knee-jerk reflex when it comes to utopian stories provides an opportunity for people to question their reactions and their inherent distrust towards this kind of society.

ASM & CA: The film *Don’t Look Up* came out in 2021 to great acclaim, and although it accurately depicts the failures of the political class and the media to take planetary danger seriously, it is just one more addition to the countless apocalyptic films and scenarios that we have seen in recent years. Why have such end-of-the-world type warnings not helped us take meaningful steps towards reducing fossil fuel dependency and pivoting towards a more sustainable system?

EW: As the title of the film suggests, people don’t want to look too closely at the truth. I think that end-of-the-world warnings only provoke fear. Sure enough, some people’s response to fear is to fight but many

others' response is flight. Still others respond by freezing. Fear can elicit reactions but, especially when it is overwhelming, it can lead to a reaction of immobilization. It can make us feel powerless. Fear on its own can make our efforts feel futile.

Indeed there is evidence to suggest that fear causes immobilization. In his book *Don't Even Think About It*, George Marshall interviews George Loewenstein, a professor of psychology who studies fearful anticipation. While Loewenstein has found that signal events such as a major natural disaster can heighten concern about future climate events among those affected, he emphasizes that the primary response to threats like these and like climate change will always be to "mitigate the dread" the event causes, even if it means ignoring it (Marshall 113). There is a "narrow boundary between not believing that the problem is happening at all and being so afraid that you are immobilized" (113). Navigating this boundary is one of the reasons it's so difficult for climate action to garner enough support to make lasting change. We know about the problem, but we are overwhelmed by our dread.

I think the time for warnings has passed. We have been sufficiently warned. If you're paying attention to the world and world events, you know that we are in rather deep trouble. Pointing this out merely increases feelings of futility, rebelliousness and despair, none of which generate long-lasting motivation. The kind of sustained motivation we need for positive change, the kind we need in order to be able to make sacrifices, to withstand the discomfort of the unknown, the agony of change, the fear of loss, and to find the audacity to create a world completely different from the one of recent history and one which no one has ever seen or lived in before—that kind of sustained motivation can only come from hope and inspiration. It's hard to hope with only darkness as inspiration; light, even if only a glimpse of it, is required.

The other part of hope is faith. This is an ability that modernity has chipped away at. The insistence has grown in the modern mind that belief is the antithesis of rationality, but it doesn't have to be. Now more than ever, we need the ability to hold two conflicting things to be true at the same time: to rationally acknowledge our reality and at the same time believe that we can change it for the better. We need to be capable of seeing the system in which we live and all the ills it creates in a clear-eyed way, and yet still believe that as part of that system we can do better and create something different.

In her book *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein talks about how, in order to hope for a better and sustainable future, we need to believe new things about ourselves. The stories we tell about ourselves now are those of selfishness, greed and corruption. From television to neoclassical economics, these are the narratives which dominate our collective

consciousness (Klein 703). Klein argues that this image of humankind is partly what causes our climate inaction. We are overwhelmed by the problem of climate change and we see humankind as inherently incapable of solving it. She suggests we reframe the way we view the cause of our collective inaction (704): What if our inaction was not caused by carelessness and selfishness, but rather by caring too much? What if we cannot face climate action because we have not properly dealt with the fear of ecocide? Without a space and opportunity for us to talk about our fears and our pain, and to grieve the damage we have already done to the world, it feels impossible to act in time to avert the serious consequences to come (704). Klein acknowledges that we need a space to dialogue, to process and to heal. Through this we can hope to change the way we see ourselves and our place in the natural world (704). I think she’s right; we must acknowledge that the past has brought us to this point, but even though that is so, we can choose where to go next. We need to believe that we are capable of change—no matter how irrational that belief may seem to us today.

ASM & CA: One key theme of this special issue of *Text Matters* is the relationship between modernity and ecology. One of the things that has struck us over and over again is the automatic assumption many of us have that living more ecologically necessarily represents a regression into the past, a “giving up” of modern comforts and of modernity itself, which feels to many people like an impossible sacrifice because we are taught all our lives that modernity—defined as the context of progress, technology and late capitalism—is the culmination of human history. There are many deep ideological assumptions at play here that we cannot even go into. But if one contemplates *Ecotopia* and the society Callenbach depicts in this breakaway republic—a country committed to living sustainably, within steady-state food and economic systems, with competitive worker cooperatives, dense carless cities connected by magnetic high-speed trains, interactive televisions and a twenty-hour work week—does this feel to you like a going backward or a going forward?

EW: It definitely feels to me like a going forward. I think we have often associated technology with man-made objects or machines. For us, progress frequently lies in this domain of inventing more things that make our lives easier, or rather make us into more efficient workers. However, throughout human history there have been all kinds of inventions that have nothing to do with building something. The concept of a library is one. The idea of human rights and our obligation to protect them is another. These kinds of social progress are happening all the time. Parental leave, equal rights, equal pay, labor laws . . . we could actually view these as

technological breakthroughs since they make our lives easier, but for some reason we don't.

Furthermore, since the Industrial Revolution, we don't have any representations of technology in any other societal or economic system besides the one in which we are now. This is simply because technological innovation looked different in those earlier times. We have never seen technology and the modern conveniences that we currently enjoy in any other context besides that of late capitalism and exploitation. I think this leads people to think that our modern lives are intrinsically dependent on our current economic system. Without images and narratives of how technology could be incorporated in such a way that it serves our needs, desires and pleasures, it's difficult for people to imagine modern living in any other setting.

I think it could also have to do with our conception of time as linear rather than cyclical. We assume that as time progresses things necessarily get better, in a perpetual forward momentum. This means that the previous version of something is outdated and thus no longer relevant. Take the iPhone. Many people will throw away their iPhone when a newer version comes out because they see the older version as obsolete, and of course the Apple corporation capitalizes on that. However, this logic seems to be applied to all kinds of things, not just technological innovations. Often an older way of doing something is written off as too simple, too outdated or too inefficient, when in actuality it merely got replaced with something flashier and sexier. I think what a work like *Ecotopia* can show us is that we do not have to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Just because there is a faster or flashier way of doing things, doesn't mean it is better. Perhaps there are things in the past that are worth revisiting and could be improved upon with the knowledge and technology of the present.

ASM & CA: As a woman in her early thirties, how do you see the future in general, and the future of the United States and/or of Europe (where you live now, after having grown up in Texas) in particular?

EW: When I started my Master's thesis in my late twenties, learning and reading about climate change and climate denial sent me into a long depression. It felt like I was walking around with this crazy knowledge and was able to do nothing about it. It made everything feel pointless. It's from knowing that feeling of futility that I understand that we can't just tell people the facts as they are, but that we also must encourage them to hope anyway. When you feel like there is nothing you can do, then you grieve, you mourn, you fritter away, you distract yourself, but you don't act. It can be paralyzing. It certainly paralyzed me. For some, like Greta Thunberg and a few others, eco-anxiety led to a righteous indignation

which combined with her unnerving courage, led her to protest, and since it struck at a particularly good time in the larger news cycle, we paid attention. But that is the role of just a few: we can’t count on large numbers of people to pull themselves out of the darkness of dread and, without even a glimmer of hope, stand against a system that they don’t quite understand themselves.

So what is my vision of the future? It depends on the day. Sometimes the dread and despair return. It’s sometimes hard to hold on to hope in today’s news cycles. But when I can be hopeful, I hope to see more young people taking up the responsibility of political power—thanks to leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the United States. I would like to see people of my generation and younger get rid of the fossils who hold sway over us now and reshape the political world in line with their values while at the same time, non-politicians feel empowered as citizens. I hope people can remember that citizenship is not a passive state but an active and powerful one, and they can use that power to make positive changes. I also hope that our planet can hold on long enough for the ebbs and flows of human procrastination to move in the direction of healing rather than hurting. I hope to see a reckoning—ideally not a violent one, but a moment when people say, “Enough is enough” and then get to work deciding what it is they want to change.

It’s not my desire to have the future look exactly like the society in *Ecotopia*—though I wouldn’t hate it. It’s more about finding innovative and tailor-made solutions for each part of the globe. *Ecotopia* is not THE answer, it’s an answer. It’s a fictional world that has the possibility to inspire creation and change in our world. Just as *Star Trek* inspired real-world technological inventions, *Ecotopia* could inspire real-world social and ecological progress.

ASM & CA: How did you adapt and change Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*? In particular, how did you add more material to depict the current United States in an increasingly dystopian near-future world of climate degradation and growing economic disparities?

EW: It is important for the viewer to have two visions of North America: one that is painfully familiar and probable, and one that is completely different yet strangely familiar. In the narrative, both *Ecotopia* and the remaining United States are populated by relatable characters who are navigating similar problems. The juxtaposition of both societies—dystopian US and utopian *Ecotopia*—poses the question to the viewer: which future would you choose? The juxtaposition could act as a way of encouraging the viewers to put themselves in the shoes of the characters. In order for this to work, both settings need to be located in our near future. If the worlds seem to be

in the distant future, it can be easy for viewers to dismiss them as fantasy or science fiction. The key to using the juxtaposition as a narrative device to enhance empathy is to make the two worlds relatable enough that the viewer will necessarily imagine themselves living in either of them.

In addition, the two opposing settings allow each set of characters to articulate their hopes and fears about their futures in a way that could mirror our own hopes and fears. The settings provide a sounding board for our own worries and for our collective grief about the irrevocable changes we have already made to our planet.

ASM & CA: Another contemporary author who writes intensively about our “de-industrial” future, John Michael Greer, was also inspired by *Ecotopia* to imagine his own version of a sustainable breakaway republic in a novel titled *Retrotopia* (2016). In it, Greer also sets his world several decades in the future and uses the device of a skeptical visitor from the outside who learns about this low-tech and deindustrialized (to different degrees) future world. As a Callenbach adapter and fellow writer, what are your thoughts about *Retrotopia*?

EW: Greer really uses the technique of the skeptical visitor to good effect. The main character’s interaction with the deindustrialized region of a splintered United States has us questioning even our simple day-to-day transactions, like in the scene where he purchases shoes that aren’t mass produced. This questioning of the mundane is a strength of speculative utopias as a genre, and of Greer’s and Callenbach’s in particular. It’s almost as if you can get the reader to question their shoes—it’s a gateway to questioning the economy, politics, progress.

Another aspect of Greer’s work that many readers must connect to is the pure pleasure of doing things the “old-fashioned” way. Carr, the journalist who visits the breakaway republic, continually finds himself surprised by how enjoyable doing things by hand can be. For example, when he cannot access the news on their equivalent of the internet, Carr has to purchase a newspaper. Once having bought it, he finds himself spending an enjoyable moment at a café with a coffee, reading the news. Greer’s description of this experience is both familiar and uncommon to today’s reader. It almost provokes a longing for the way things used to be, at least for those who experienced them that way to begin with. This longing is a sentiment that many people have felt themselves, and in particular during the first Covid lockdown in 2020. Suddenly, we found ourselves with an abundance of time, and many people were able to reconnect with simpler pleasures such as making bread by hand or gardening. The slower pace had a heavy psychological toll for many, but many others remarked on how wonderful it felt to not have to rush around so much.

We tend to believe that when technology replaces something, that “something” must be obsolete—but Greer’s work has us reexamining that assumption. We, along with Carr, are asked to reassess how we define an assumed shared value such as efficiency. A question that is often posed in *Retrotopia* is by what output do you measure efficiency? Throughout the story, the reader is not only told the answer to this question, but more powerfully, Greer shows them through Carr’s thorough exploration of the new society. This is what I find so powerful about storytelling and in particular about utopian narratives. The reader is given access to another way of living, and this access includes not only details of the society but also the vision of what those details look like in the actions and interactions of the characters.

ASM & CA: Temporality is crucial in the design and manufacturing of a TV series. Do you think the specific vehicle of a series—as opposed to a one-shot film—makes it possible for viewers to be shown different aspects of ecological transition and slow-moving cultural and societal change, aspects that would be more difficult or even impossible to make visible through a movie? To put it differently, what aspects linked to the passage of narrative time led you to the intuition that making Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* into a series (with all the specific constraints involved) would be more adequate than trying to make it into a feature film?

EW: To me, TV series have a bigger impact than movies. When a TV series is popular, we wait for new episodes and new seasons to come out, we speculate about what will happen next. If released weekly, the series can be in our minds and conversations for months or even years. When I was working on my thesis, *Game of Thrones* was just about to enter the highly anticipated (and ultimately disappointing) final season. Everyone was talking about it, and every week after the newest episode was released, people were analyzing, debating and critiquing the episode. Even in Switzerland, a country which doesn’t cherish chit-chat, *Game of Thrones* was one of the most widely accepted and eagerly participated-in topics for small talk. I know if that was the case here, then it was doubly or triply the case in the much chattier United States. I thought, aside from sports, TV series are what people talk about around the watercooler. If that’s the case, why not get them talking about the environment and about climate action as easily and frequently through having these themes central to a series like *Ecotopia*?

If a TV series is successful, its characters can develop over time. Different plotlines and problems can be introduced and explored—giving series a responsiveness and adaptability that films lack. Since the pandemic, we saw shows that have included storylines about Covid-19 and how it affected lives. Many other series have incorporated current events into their

plots and either reflected the struggles the viewers themselves were going through or imagined different ways of living through the same experience. Series do not only respond to the moment; they can also have an effect on the moment. HBO's recent critical and popular success *Euphoria* has started just as many conversations about mental health and teen drug use as it has influenced fashion and makeup trends.

I think series can have a wider cultural impact than movies. A successful series on an accessible platform can reach a large and diverse range of demographics. There are many examples we could highlight, such as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, or *The Office*. These shows are a touchstone for their generation, and they remain as part of our shared references.

344

WORKS CITED

- Callenbach, Ernest. *Ecotopia*. Banyan Tree, 1975.
- Don't Look Up*. Directed by Adam MacKay, Paramount Pictures, 2021.
- Euphoria*. Created and written by Sam Levinson, HBO, 2019–22.
- Friends*. Created by David Crane and Martha Kauffman, NBC, 1994–2004.
- Game of Thrones*. Created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, HBO, 2011–19.
- Greer, John Michael. *Retrotopia*. Founders, 2016.
- Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Versus the Climate*. Penguin, 2014.
- Marshall, George. *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Seinfeld*. Created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, NBC, 1989–98.
- The Office*. Written by Greg Daniels, NBC, 2005–13.

Elizabeth Watson (b. 1992) is a writer and high school English teacher. Born and raised in Texas, she holds a BA in psychology from Boston University and an MA in English from the University of Lausanne. She is interested in the power of storytelling to affect environmental change and to reconnect people to nature. Having discovered Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia* (1975) while studying at the University of Lausanne, she began adapting it for screen as part of her Master's thesis, which also examined the psychological mechanisms linked to climate change denial and fatalism. Since graduating, Watson has continued to work on the project and has written more episodes for the first season. As a child of the 1980s, she realized that in the twenty-first century a successful television series could reach a much larger audience than a novel, and that a fully fleshed-out and vividly imagined portrait of a sustainable near-future world could help people act more effectively towards creating such a world.