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Sustainability and Narrative

Is Equilibrium Tellable?

This essay wants to look at the strategies through which sustainability has been and can be narrativized. When thinking about the future today, sustainability is certainly one of the most prominent new concepts and one that is becoming more ubiquitous every day. But from a narratological perspective, there seems to be an interesting paradox: While narrative is essentially and fundamentally about change (events as building blocks of narrative are, after all, usually defined as state changes), about a disturbance of balance and ‘things falling apart,’ sustainability is equally fundamentally about persistent equilibrium, the absence of linear change (such as growth at the cost of depletion or degeneration). Where the ideal of narrative is progression, the ideal of sustainability is a higher form of stasis. An abstract look at the concept of sustainability on the one side, and the properties and affordances of narrative and narrativity on the other, will investigate whether the two agree or create some kind of friction, and if so, in how far emerging narrative genres adhere to such theoretical limitations.

“And they lived happily ever after...”

1. The Future through the Lens of Sustainability

Our thinking about the future is currently undergoing a paradigm shift. The fundamental perspective through which Western civilization has envisioned futurity had for a very long time been the notion of ‘progression,’ usually understood as a line of consecutive steps, each of which builds on the preceding, leading to a gradual accumulation. This is a perspective that contained utopian ideals of Enlightenment perfectability, biological evolution, and economic growth, but also, through its reversal, dystopian notions of decadence, degeneration, as well as postapocalyptic visions of scarcity. But more recently, a different idea of possible futurity has gained prominence, the idea of sustainability (cf. Keiner 2006, 1), and this is one that seems to fundamentally resist, or at least complicate, the prioritization of linear progress. Where progression understands the future through change, as something that is fundamentally different from the present, sustainability understands the future through equilibrium, as something that is, at least in some important respects, identical to the present. This, I want to argue in the following, must also have wide-reaching consequences for our attempts at narrating the future, because, as David Herman (2009, 2) has argued, narrative “is a basic human strategy for

coming to terms with time, process, and change.” In order to better understand these potential consequences, I will first take an abstract look at the concept of sustainability on the one hand, and the properties and affordances of narrative and narrativity on the other, to see whether the two agree or create some kind of friction. Does sustainability resist, on an abstract level, being narrated, being cast in the form of narrative? What kinds of temporality are implied, in how far is the sustainable also the tellable? Then, as a counterweight to the rather theoretical claim of incompatibility, I will look at some strategies through which sustainability has been and can be narrativized, both in a general and a more concrete way, after which I will finally cast a cold eye on the emerging genre of solarpunk fiction.

2. The Narrative Dilemma of Sustainability

From a narratological perspective, there seems to exist an interesting paradox when it comes to narrativizing the future through the perspective of sustainability: While narrative is understood to be essentially and fundamentally about change (events as building blocks of narrative are, after all, usually defined as state changes), about a disturbance of balance and ‘things falling apart,’ sustainability is equally fundamentally about persistent equilibrium, the absence of linear and irreversible change (such as growth at the cost of depletion or degeneration), about things continuing to hold together.

Having become a ubiquitous buzzword as well as the concept that feeds a paradigm shift in mankind’s thinking about its relation to the environment and the future, sustainability has been defined countless times and to vastly differing effects, but what remains stable to all definitions is the aspect of a future-oriented stability, as in the Brundtland Report’s idea of a “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987, 8). A related concept from biology is that of homeostasis, the state of steady internal physical and chemical conditions maintained by living systems. Hence, while sustainability is not about complete stasis, it has at its core at least one element that remains unalterably stable.

Where the ideal of narrative is progression, the ideal of sustainability could thus be said to be a higher form of stasis. One might therefore ask, somewhat provocatively, whether sustainability is narratable at all, or whether it does not resist narration? Or, to put it more positively, how can sustainability be evoked through the affordances of narrative forms? Is narrating the future possible, if the point of the envisioned future is that it is in important respects identical to the present? To begin answering these questions, a very general look at both narrative and time is necessary. The purpose of this is less to understand the relation of narrative and time in a philosophical sense, but rather to look at the

way that concepts of time and concepts or structures of narrative have interrelated in human practice.

Within human cultural practice, from seasonal myths to the limits of growth, there are two major ways of conceiving and narrativizing time, one that is predominantly linear and one that is cyclical. Throughout human development from pre-historic societies to today, arguably, linear concepts have increased in dominance. This has happened most prominently at times of medial and technological innovation, such as the development of writing systems or the invention of the mechanical clock (between 1280 and 1320 in Europe), but also through the scientific concepts of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The latter particularly have enshrined the notion of irreversible progress, of constantly building on everything that precedes us, and therefore of history as some form of teleological process with a start and an end point that are vastly distinct from each other.

Shifting from a cyclical to a linear concept of time also meant a shift in emphasis away from (pure) nature / environment towards man-within-the-environment. In pure cyclicity, the cycles of mankind (from birth to death and from one generation to the next) are just an aspect of the larger natural cycles. Then, gradually, notions of human change are being developed – individual change from Shakespearean self-fashioning to the Bildungsroman all the way into psychological realism; collective change first through a genealogically based idea of historical succession and later through technologically induced progress. But while human nature is increasingly understood to change over time, nature continues to be regarded as fundamentally unchanging, setting the two onto different trajectories.

As mankind separates itself from an animistic embedding within nature, abstracting notions of transcendence into the idea of God(s), the act of impacting nature is also no longer a direct conflict with the transcendent. Man and nature become dichotomous, and there is a clear hierarchy implied in the cultural mandate that can be found most prominently in Genesis 1:28 but that also forms the theological underpinning of the early modern scientific revolution. For scientists in the wake of Galileo and Bacon, nature becomes a science task set by God, who has handed us the ‘book of nature’ to decipher. Thus, nature becomes a resource for a new kind of progression, the growth of the stock of human knowledge. But what originally served as a means of better appreciating the grandeur of God as nature’s creator, becomes an end in itself around the turn of the nineteenth century, at the same time that mankind enters a new phase in its exploitation of the earth’s resources. The Industrial Revolution epitomizes the idea of growth (economic, scientific, technological), and it establishes a new experience of progress: an ever-accelerating technological progress that can be experienced within the span of a human lifetime. The shift towards a linear understanding of time is complete. While this understanding for the longest time is based on a conviction in the abundance of exploitable

resources, around the middle of the twentieth century, this conviction is starting to come under questioning, as the ‘limits to growth’ come into focus.

Such cultural concepts of time find their expression most importantly through narrative, or, as Paul Ricœur (1984 [1983], vol. 1, 52) puts it, “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.” Out of the vast array of topics that narratology has discussed concerning time in narrative, we will here merely focus on the question of its relation to progressive change and to repeated or cyclical events.

To start with the latter, as Genette (1980 [1972], 113-114) noted, both events and the narrative representation of events can repeat themselves. Narrative can perform this repetition, becoming itself repetitive, although language makes a non-mimetic reference to repetition possible: I can say that something occurred *n* times without having to narrate it *n* times. But this also means that usually the repetition is de-emphasized. There is a huge difference between saying that something happened *n* times, and actually narrating the same thing *n* times in its full extent (cf. Beckett’s *Watt* for a rare and notorious case of performing repetition). Indeed, narrative’s focus on the extraordinary means that the repeated (which through its repetition becomes more common) is pushed to the margins. “When it represents iteration,” Wolf Schmid (2003, 29) writes, “narration approaches the mode of description.”

Cyclicity is a special case of narrative repetition, but it also potentially disrupts predominant notions of narrative progression. Cyclicity implies that the end state of a (narrative) progression is identical to the starting state. Of course, cyclicity is rarely ‘pure,’ in the sense that one cycle is truly identical to each other cycle. Such pure cycles can mostly be found in philosophical or religious speculation. Genette (1980 [1972], 113) has reminded us that even in the much more limited case of narrative repetition, what we are dealing with is more of an abstraction than an actual (identical) repetition, a “mental construction, which eliminates from each occurrence everything belonging to it that is peculiar to itself, in order to preserve only what it shares with all the others of the same class.”

Narrative can *reference* cyclicity through its subject matter, for example through myths that are based on the seasonal cycles, such as the stories of the death and rebirth of a God-like figure (e.g. Persephone, Osiris, Dionysus, Quetzacoatl, Jesus). Narrative can *perform* cyclicity, for example by ending with words that tie directly back to the beginning, such as in James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*. It can *imply* cyclicity through different forms of repetition, such as the repetition of plot elements in episodic or serialized narratives. And, finally, it can itself be performed repetitively. Stories can be and are told and re-told, read and re-read, often countless times, sometimes ritualistically across the generations and the ages.

Because writing fixes text, it fundamentally changes the perception and performance of iterative narrative in two different ways. As the text gains its own

independent existence, it can now be performed again and again, even independently of its creator. Parents can instantly become expert storytellers (“Please tell me the story of Cinderella again!”) and ritualized readings of religious texts can be performed by a large number of priests and help to establish churches as transnational institutions. But at the same time, writing also makes the unvarying nature of repetition painfully obvious. In an oral storytelling context, stories are always iterated with variation, since no two performances are identical, which keeps them entertaining (provided the storyteller is skilled enough). In this mode, the repetitive nature of the story rather emphasises its communal importance, not the storyteller’s lack of inventiveness, or the story’s lack of incident that is not already known to the audience. As Neil Norrick notes, “[a]pparently the tellability of familiar stories hinges not on their content, but on the dynamics of the narrative event itself” (2000, 84, cf. also 106). Writing and print are in this sense part of the linearization of narrative, a development that goes along with a devaluation of repetition. The event that is narrated becomes scrutinized not only for its uncommonness, but also its newness.

Narratologists are notoriously divided over many terminological issues, but until recently, one thing they could usually agree on was the centrality of the notion of ‘event’ or ‘action’ for the core definition of what narrative is. One can find this notion in most standard works on the subject of narrative: “Simply put, narrative is the representation of an event or a series of events” (Abbott 2002, 13), or “One will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or of a sequence of events” (Genette 1982, 127), or “The most widely accepted claim about the nature of narrative is that it represents a chronologically ordered sequence of states and events” (Ryan 1991, 124). The event, in turn, is usually described as a state change: “*event*. a change of state manifested in discourse by a process statement in the mode of *Do or Happen*.” (Prince 2003, 28) Without such change, one remains in the territory of description, of argument maybe, but not – at least according to classical narratology – of narrative, since “the description of a state [...] is not sufficient for narrative, which requires the development of an action, i.e., change, difference” (Todorov 1971, 39).

In the way that events are usually understood to be organized into the larger units that we call formal narratives, the aspect of change gets emphasized even further, through the notion of beginning, middle, and ending as well as the insistence that the change be significant, which usually means irreversible. Narratology distinguishes between two types of events, type I and type II, the first being any kind of state change, and the second one that meets certain conditions, such as being a decisive turning point (Aristotle) or an “unheard-of occurrence” (Goethe; for the distinction, cf. Hühn 2013). It seems that a problematization of narrative beginnings also goes hand in hand with a de-emphasis of narrative linearity, something that can be found already in *Tristram Shandy*’s digressive a-chronology, but that emerges more fully at the onset of modern-

ism. In the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, Henry James (1972, 171) writes: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.” Brian Richardson (2008, 8) calls this passage “the first articulation [in] modern thinking about the difficulty of establishing compelling and convincing beginnings,” and it seems significant that James in this context evokes the idea of a circle. The point at which no more relevant changes are to be expected is also usually the end of the narrative: “And they lived happily ever after. . .”. In a paper recently given at a conference in Leipzig, Caroline Levine (2019, n.p.) called happy endings “thresholds to sustainability.”

As state change, events tie narrative inextricably to processuality, a connection that only increases in significance once one takes into account the different kinds of event that a narrative could consist of. Type I events are mainly covered by linguists, whereas narratologists that focus on literary texts have delved extensively into the intricacies (and ambiguities) of type II events, and while there is hardly any agreement on what exactly constitutes such an event, or how it is called, all accounts emphasise its disruptive nature:

[S]tories place an accent on unexpected or noncanonical events – events that disrupt the normal order of things for human or human-like agents engaged in goal-directed activities and projects within a given world, and that are experienced as such by those agents (Herman 2009, 133).

In a similar vein, Schmid declares that

an event is a special occurrence, something which is not part of everyday routine. We shall highlight the importance of exceptionality in our strict interpretation of the event concept: every event is a change of state, but not every change of state constitutes an event. The event, therefore, has to be defined as a change of state that fulfills certain conditions. (Schmid 2003, 24)

The extraordinary and disruptive nature of type II events is directly connected to their tellability, which is defined by Herman (2009, 135) as “that which makes an event or configuration of events (relevantly) reportable – that is, tellable or narratable – in a given communicative situation.” As Jerome Bruner (1991, 11) writes, “to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated, or deviated from in a manner to do violence to [its] ‘legitimacy.’”

One aspect for both tellability and eventfulness that is important in our context is that of consequence, impact, or a combination of what Schmidt discusses as ‘persistence’ and ‘irreversibility.’ Herman (2009, 134) emphasizes narrative’s “focus on taking the measure of time, process, change – on recording and evaluating how a storyworld is no longer the same in the aftermath of events that have a consequential, life-changing impact on agents living and acting within that world.” An event is noteworthy for the effects it has on the storyworld (both in term of depth and of breadth), or in other words how much it changes the storyworld; but those effects can never have the same impact if they are simply reversible (one of the fundamental conundrums of serialized fantastic fiction – it is always about world-changing events that are

always completely reversible). This in turn cannot but emphasize the importance of both uni-linearity and process / change for narrative. Again, sustainability cannot but resist such an emphasis.

Thus, we can summarize the ways that the principle of sustainability seems to be incongruent with fundamental notions of narrativity. Assuming that sustainability is opposed to disruption and committed to equilibrium, it is either outside that which constitutes narrative at all, or it concerns events of low tellability and low narrativity, being about the presence of something that is not extraordinary.

3. Narrativizing Sustainability

Of course, narratology is at best a descriptive, and not a prescriptive method. Storytellers are notoriously prone to disrupt not just their storyworlds, but also the neat categories of narratologists. The claim that narrative resists the representation of sustainability is no different, and it was never meant as an absolute in the first place, but rather as a way to point to some of the potential challenges in narrativizing sustainability. Whereas the preceding section has looked at the claim that sustainability is incompatible with, or at least resistant to, narrative, the following by way of contrast wants to look at some strategies through which sustainability already has been and can be narrativized.

In any case, sustainability is ‘in,’ it is part of the way we envision our ideals about how the future will or should be. Futurity is inherent in the very concept of sustainability, since it regards a present practice (such as consumption of natural resources) with a focus on its future impact. Seen through the lens of sustainability, any evaluation of a present act is inextricably tied to its extrapolation into the future, acting like a temporal categorical imperative. In addition, today sustainability already regularly becomes part of a ‘narrative,’ especially of storytelling efforts by collective entities such as institutions (universities, government agencies) and companies. Marketing strategies and public relations people talk about “Why You Need a Sustainability Narrative” (Kaufman 2014) or “Sustainability Storytelling: Creating a Narrative that Matters” (Schwartz 2013). Marco Keiner (2006, 3) laments such commodification as rather diluting our understanding of sustainability:

Today, private enterprises try to occupy the term ‘sustainable development’ because of its mainstream attractivity, posing an opportunity that shouldn’t be missed. ‘Sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ are popularly used to describe a wide variety of activities which are generally ecologically laudable but which may not necessarily be sustainable in the longterm.

But besides such recent and largely marketing-driven attempts, some much older narrative genres such as pastoral and apocalypse have contributed to our thinking about man-within-nature, natural plenty and scarcity. Since antiquity, the pastoral has existed as a counter-concept to the increasing complexity of culture and society, a retreat that usually signified some form of simplification.

It has also been the origin of our understanding of the differences between country and city. While it has its literary starting point as a formal genre in the idylls of Theocritus (316-260 BC), its sources can be found in mythological descriptions of a cycle of ages (golden, silver, iron) as well as in religious concepts of a prelapsarian earthly paradise, such as the garden of Eden.

For most of its history, the pastoral desire for simplification is related primarily to social structures, with the opposition of court intrigues to the care-free life of idealized shepherds. It is only through the combined influence of Romanticism and the Industrial Revolution in the early nineteenth century that the city is conceived of as being unhealthy for both mind *and* body, an environmental as well as a moral hazard. This is also the time from which the pastoral is offered less as a nostalgic account of lost innocence, but as a potentially utopian vision, particularly in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, Or Life in the Woods* (1854), one of the founding documents of ecological consciousness. Thoreau turned away radically from the puritan / American / capitalist work ethos of growing prosperity as a sign of God's favour, and instead proposed a reduction to that which was truly necessary. At this point in time, the reduction is suggested not yet because of the external consequences of growth, but because it is a means to return to the essential. But Thoreau is a link that connects the pastoral tradition with more recent nature writing, since "the environmental movement is producing a revival of interest in the writing of new pastoral literature in this general sense" (Gifford 1999, 4).

If pastoral is about the inevitably lost natural simplicity from which we all came, apocalypse is about the equally inevitable hell that we will eventually return to. As part of eschatology, apocalypse is the narrative of last things, a visionary glimpse at a final state of being that is usually one of absolute reduction, the endpoint of an ultimate catastrophe. It features in most human mythologies, hardly less frequently than creation stories, although it carries its own narratological conundrums, particularly that of its mediability: how can one narrate from a point behind the end of all that is being narrated?¹

Both genres share with sustainability the paradox of being ultimately about states that are by definition unchangeable, either in a positive or a negative way. Narrativization therefore usually looks to the thresholds. In the case of the pastoral, that could be the expulsion from the Edenic garden (there is a reason we remember *Paradise Lost* better than *Paradise Regained*), in the case of the apocalypse it is rather the way into the ultimate catastrophe that is focused on than its completion. In its contemporary form, it is more often than not the immediate aftermath of an apocalyptic event that is narrated. Indeed, post-apocalypse has become one of the dominant narrative modes of our time – the Wikipedia category for post-apocalyptic movies has 396 entries.² And it is in this mode that most attempts to narrate sustainability can be found, albeit *ex negativo*, by speculating about future consequences of an absence of sustainability (as in the rising genre of cli-fi)³ or by envisioning a world of extreme scarcity and absence.

This narrative strategy is hardly surprising, since sustainability is related negatively to tellability in another respect. The mere existence of something that is taken for granted (like trees, rivers, or fish in the rivers) is much less tellable than the irreversible absence of that thing. With *The Road* (2006), Cormac McCarthy wrote a whole novel of a man and a boy's journey through a dying grey world without any sun and therefore without any vegetative growth, a text and a textual world that is stripped bare of every colour and every hope, but the full scale of the catastrophe only emerges in the final paragraph, a coda seemingly unrelated to the preceding story:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (McCarthy 2006, 286)

The absence of the trout can only be evoked by its presence, and it can only be truly felt after suffering through two hundred plus pages of emptiness. The paragraph could hardly have the same effect at the beginning of the book, where its pointing to the ordinary would hardly raise a single eyebrow.

Post-apocalyptic fiction frequently evokes a dwindling of resources and an economy of scarcity. Scenarios have been developed for a wide variety of resources whose depletion affects humanity, usually in catastrophic ways. Narratives in the tradition of the *Mad Max* movies (1979-2015) comment on a lack of oil, ironically through an emphasis on elaborate car chases. But oil scarcity as a cause for social disruption can also be found in the *Fallout* series of video games, or in the 1979 novel *Down to a Sunless Sea* by David Graham, leading in both cases to a nuclear war.

They had enormous reserves of oil, right under their feet – and used it, down to the last drop. It wasn't enough. [...] They had one gorgeous lifetime of the biggest cars, brightest lights and hottest central heating in Christendom. And then the oil ran out. [...] The lack of forward planning, the persistent refusal to implement a conservation policy made the final result certain. Most Americans believed it could never happen, and when it did happen, it was the sheer velocity of collapse that was so appalling. (Graham 1981, 18)

A much more impressive, because much less straightforward, variation of this topic is Werner Herzog's semi-documentary film essay *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), which consists for the most part of largely uncommented footage of burning oil fields in the aftermath of the first Iraq war and which manages through aestheticization a simultaneous effect of estrangement (the film consciously appropriates the genre of science fiction) and immediacy.

Another highly likely scenario evoked in post-apocalyptic fiction is water scarcity, something that already exists on a local level in countless places today, though to imagine it on a global level usually necessitates some speculative elements. In the *Tank Girl* series of comics as well as the movie, this element is the impact of a comet:

Listen up, cause I'm only telling you this once. I'm not bedtime-story-lady, so pay attention. It's 2033. The world is *screwed* now. You see, a while ago this

humongous comet came crashing into the earth. Bam, total devastation. End of the world as we know it. No celebrities, no cable TV, no water. It hasn't rained in 11 years. Now 20 people gotta squeeze inside the same bathtub – so it ain't all bad. (Talalay 1995, 0:02:44-0:03:11)

In *Cat's Cradle* (1963) Kurt Vonnegut invents the substance “ice-nine” which affects the relation of water's temperature and its physical state, meaning that water suddenly will turn to ice at room temperatures. And in J. G. Ballard's *The Burning World* (1964), industrial waste has led to the formation of “a thin but resilient mono-molecular film formed from a complex of saturated long-chain polymers,” a “tough, oxygen-permeable membrane that lay on the air-water interface and prevented almost all evaporation of surface water into the air space above” (29). The effect could probably best be described in the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”: “Water, water, everywhere, / Nor any drop to drink” (2012, 718), words that are also applicable to the scenario of the movie *Waterworld* (1995), in which rising ocean levels have swallowed all the land, and the last survivors of humanity have to live permanently in ships.

In all of these cases, the absence or scarcity of something that we take for granted under normal circumstances creates a tellable scenario that is able to provoke reflections on sustainability, albeit only at one remove, only once we contrast the extremeness of the (often highly speculative) scenario with our own reality. The effectiveness of this strategy largely depends on the disruptiveness of the scenario, of how utterly it falls outside of the spectrum of the known. It is therefore still firmly aligned with narrative's bias towards change / disruption / process. But is it possible to challenge even this bias?

4. A Higher Equilibrium?

One of the initial hypotheses has been that narrative is essentially about changes, that it is almost congruent with change: when things stop changing (in a meaningful way), so does the narrative. This also went along with most concepts of narrative events and plot development, both of which stress disruption, transgression, rise and fall etc., and consequently understand the ‘meat’ of the narrative to be during a state of disequilibrium. Everything before this state (the initial equilibrium that is to be disrupted by the narrative's events) approaches description, everything after this state (the reassertion of some form of equilibrium) is an – often perfunctory – gesture beyond narrative, into the “happily ever after” that is barely worth mentioning. There is a reason why most students tend to forget about Fortinbras in *Hamlet*. But what such an understanding of narrative does not account for, is the force that propels us through narrative, that motivates us not only to pay attention in the first place, but to keep our attention focused. If that motivation derived exclusively from disruption, narratives could remain interesting indefinitely (instead of becom-

ing frustrating) by merely adding further disruptions without any (re)solutions, and could become infinitely interesting by increasing the level of disruption. Instead, what we rather crave is the negotiation between the presentation of disruption (something has happened) and the promise of resolution. In this sense, one might turn the original hypothesis on its head and claim that while disequilibrium might be narrative's *being*, its *raison d'être* is equilibrium. Without disequilibrium, narrative could not exist, but without the knowledge of equilibrium and the desire for it, there would be no purpose to it.

And the equilibrium that is gained at the end of a narrative is rarely identical to that which reigned at its beginning: something is lost, as in tragedy, something is gained, as in comedy, or both, as in the journey of the hero, who usually returns "a sadder and a wiser man" (Coleridge). In the context of our investigation of genres, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives certainly represent the 'new equilibrium in which something is lost' variation, frequently extremely bleak visions of a stasis in scarcity or even nothingness, entropic endgames as in *The Road* or Byron's poem "Darkness" that seem to go beyond the didactic functionality of being a warning.

But is it also possible to create a narrative that begins from a similar environmentally problematic starting point but arrives at a new equilibrium in which something is gained, and not lost? Most recently, a number of writers and artists have indeed made efforts to consciously create a new genre that is neither pastoral (in the sense of a nostalgic retreat, an irretrievable utopia) nor apocalyptic (in the sense of imagining only the worst outcome for present disruptions). The name given to this new genre is "solarpunk," an obvious nod to other recent speculative genres like cyberpunk and steampunk.

One attempt to formalize the new movement can be found on the "Regenerative Design" homepage as "A Solarpunk Manifesto."⁴ According to this, "Solarpunk is a movement in speculative fiction, art, fashion, and activism that seeks to answer and embody the question 'what does a sustainable civilization look like, and how can we get there?'" (Ibid., n.p.) Here, the authors also make clear the relation to the other -punk genres: "Our futurism is not nihilistic like cyberpunk and it avoids steampunk's potentially quasi-reactionary tendencies: it is about ingenuity, generativity, independence, and community." (Ibid., n.p.) The idea behind solarpunk is that it merges the thinking in consequences of the better apocalyptic fiction (consequences not of highly speculative events, but of scientifically probable scenarios) with socially utopian elements and the technological speculation common to hard science fiction: "Solarpunk is at once a vision of the future, a thoughtful provocation, a way of living and a set of achievable proposals to get there." (Ibid., n.p.) Sustainability is of course front and centre to this "way of living," symbolized by the 'solar' in the genre's name: "At its core, Solarpunk is a vision of a future that embodies the best of what humanity can achieve: a post-scarcity, post-hierarchy, post-capitalistic world where humanity sees itself as part of nature and clean energy replaces fossil fuels." (Ibid., n.p.)

Solarpunk is not yet a broad cultural force, but it has already created some literary manifestations, both online and in the form of book publications. The novel *2312* (2012) by Kim Stanley Robinson has been cited as being in the spirit, if not the name, of solarpunk, but most important to date is the anthology *Sunnvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation* (2017), edited by Phoebe Wagner and Brontë Christopher Wieland. Whether this genre can develop to fundamentally challenge the narrative biases that have been sketched in the preceding remains to be seen, but one thing that it already points towards is an underlying shift in emphases that have so far worked against the tellability of sustainability.

As we noted with Genette (1980 [1972], 113), repetition is a “mental construction, which eliminates from each occurrence everything belonging to it that is peculiar to itself, in order to preserve only what it shares with all the others of the same class.” We also noted that this usually de-emphasizes narrativity: eliminating that which changes is an evaluative statement; it means that we are ascribing a lack of relevance to those elements. Narratives usually do this to point to the routine, unchanging, boring sameness of common existence. If a character gets up each morning at the same time to go to the same office and do the same job, we are supposed to understand that everything that is different from day to day is meaningless and insignificant – usually until the big disruption comes that starts the narrative proper. So, in this case, what is tellable (if anything) is the sameness, whereas the difference is beneath notice.

The dilemma seems to be that while there can be stories within a sustainable cycle, focusing on them means that the aspect of sustainability is usually de-emphasized or even ignored by becoming a non-issue (this is not what the story is “about”). Yet when the cyclicity itself is emphasized, it is done at the loss of narrativity. But this might just be an effect of our long-grown cultural bias against repetition / sameness and the representation of repetition / sameness as less tellable than change and progress. One important aspect for both tellability and eventfulness that we have not discussed yet is relevance. As Schmid (2003, 26) writes, “[t]he first condition of eventfulness is that the change of state must be relevant. Eventfulness increases in conjunction with the degree to which the change of state is felt to be an essential part of the narrative world in which it occurs.” One should note here that the relevance of an event is a subjective evaluation by a recipient, it is “felt,” not a given.

We have also noted that sustainability is not about complete stasis or identical repetition, but rather a development within which at least one element remains fundamentally stable into the future (such as the balance between the use and replenishment of resources). Making that stability tellable is one of the major challenges of using narrative in representing sustainability, but one possible solution lies exactly in the growing relevance that we as a society ascribe to sustainability. Solarpunk is one step in this direction, in that its generic setup encodes sustainability as inherently desirable, therefore heightening its tellability. Two stories in the *Sunnvault* collection exemplify how this often entails a

readjustment of perspectives, and how this is inherently tied to temporal conceptions, or questions of tellability in light of presence and absence as we have discussed them earlier. “Last Chance” by Tyler Young seemingly evokes a familiar dystopian scenario: humanity has destroyed earth’s environment, moved to a new planet, and then managed to destroy this planet as well. Now all children are living a desperate life underground in hermetically sealed vaults, while their parents toil on the inhospitable surface for their survival – only, this is all a lie. The second planet never was destroyed, but because people were on the way towards a second environmental catastrophe, they devised a system in which kids would be brought up in the illusion of a complete loss, with the purpose of making them appreciate that which they otherwise would have taken for granted. It is like living in McCarthy’s *The Road* for 16 years, and then being told that the brook trout still exist, after all.

The story “The Reset” by Jamymee Goh, on the other hand, evokes an actual temporal cycle, one in which things are both lost and won. In an attempt to roll back pollution, the destruction of the environment, and global heating, a scientist develops a machine that sets the whole world 30 years back, with the twist that everyone who was already alive back then remembers everything that happened until the point of the reset. Through this speculative conceit, notions of progress / process and cyclicity clash, since the world not only gets a fresh start, but one that is informed by a knowledge of all the mistakes that were previously made. That this is not simply a way to a utopian ideal is evoked by the fact that the story is narrated by the scientist’s undergrad lab assistant, who experienced the reset in a containment chamber and therefore did not reset bodily. This makes her highly a-synchronous with the world around her, and provides her account with a disillusioned scepticism that complicates any hopes for a simple solution. And this might be, after all, the most important message for future attempts at narrating the future: the most important change to record might not be in the events, in the ‘what happened,’ but in the underlying priorities of what matters, and why.

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¹ This is also known as the 'last-man-problem,' after Mary Shelley's novel of global pandemic, and like Shelley's, the solution is usually through a prophetic vision (the original meaning of the word apocalypse is, after all, revelation).

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Post-apocalyptic_films (07.05.2020).

³ Cf. e.g. Veland et al. (2018), or David Wallace-Wells's 2017 essay "The Uninhabitable World" (later turned into a book), which presents "a portrait of our best understanding of where the planet is heading absent aggressive action" (n.p.).

⁴ Cf. <http://www.re-des.org/a-solarpunk-manifesto/> (07.05.2020).