



# Juxtaposing Hauntology in Solar-punk ideals of Bucky Chamber's *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*

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**Abstract**— Hauntology is a term coined by Jacques Derrida which refers to cultural elements of past haunting the present. Its association with dystopian fiction seems more organic. However, this paper argues that utopian and optimistic themes of solar-punk fiction often hint at a connection to the past. This paper attempts a hauntological reading of Bucky Chamber's *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*. It juxtaposes the theoretical term referring to a cultural concept into a work of fiction. It also analyses how such juxtaposition can be a fulfilling way of reading a solar-punk text.

**Keywords**— Solarpunk, Hauntology, Science fiction, Utopia, Post-apocalypse



## Introduction

Time is often depicted as linear in fiction and other literary and cultural texts. They have some understanding of past, present and future which adds to its value. These depiction of past, present and future may or may not be relevant to the reader's past, present and future. Thus, fictional time works as per the need of narrative. Todorov argues that description and narrative both presupposes temporality. (28, 1990) However, if reader's temporal place is to be considered, some texts can be categorised for some definitive genres on the basis of it. Narrative on past becomes historical fiction and on future may become types of futuristic genres. (dystopian and utopian fiction). Some genres are tied to time from perception of a reader's present. In speculative fiction past and future are distinct categories used for fantasy and science fiction. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* becomes 'past' (Franco, 2009), similarly time period in *Mortal Engines Quartet* is often seen as a Victorian future. (Petr, 2021)

Hauntology is about effect of time. It refers to past affecting present, often in a haunting way, making a presence of absence in Derridean terms. As Fisher argues it shows 'confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of future.' (Fisher, 16) It is an imperative that hauntology talks about bad past or its bad effect on present. As Donald Brackett explains hauntology seeks to "transform normative

narratives by channelling the disruptive force of the specter as a trend." (2025) The narrative norms found in speculative fiction tend to branch out, in larger terms, to post-apocalyptic fiction and solarpunk fiction. Though, both are not binary opposites, functional contraries can be found in both. As solarpunk manifesto declares its position in contrast to despair and denial. Therefore, optimism is the central key to the solarpunk fiction.

As spectral realism doesn't spread the belief in supernatural, it aims to present natural world as a haunted place. Instead of ghosts it refigures past as a haunting element. It turns certainty into uncertainty or uncanny. Solarpunk manifesto seems to defer here. Therefore, this paper pursues with objectives that may enable the unfolding of connections between solarpunk and hauntology.

## Objectives of the study

Firstly, this paper aims to study solarpunk as a genre. It understands its history as a cultural movement, but it aims to position it as a subgenre of science fiction and interplay between culture and genre. Similarly, it aims to understand hauntology. Furthermore, it aims to study the cross-section of hauntology and solarpunk in the text. It juxtaposes the capitalist idea of haunted industrial past against optimist solarpunk ideals.

### Hauntology as a literary-cultural category

Derrida's concept of hauntology is a critical concept. It tries to examine ways in which present is shaped by residues of past. It is paradoxical as it talks about both presence and absence of something. Functionality of it includes disrupting temporality and rejecting its sequential nature as generally perceived. It rather sees it as overlapping of past, present and future in mind. In art and literature, hauntology is used to examine how narratives, images and cultural forms are informed by what has been lost and suppressed.

Hauntology in literature is used both as a thematic as well as structural device. In thematic instance it establishes stories where the past is present in undistinguished form in the present. It is presented through memory, trauma, nostalgia and effects of historical events. Structuralised, it can be traced in non-linear timelines, fragmented storytelling, and recurring motifs that resists closure. It is reflected by Mark Fisher as 'the failure of future' where modernity is forestalled but never realised fully. As mentioned above, hauntology is also an element of postmodern storytelling, in form of spectral residues rooted in environments, technologies, or social structures. In dystopian science fiction remnants of past industrial buildings, or abandoned sites denotes a sense of future that never came to be.

This aligns with Donald Brackett's (2025) observation that hauntology can transform "normative narratives" by introducing disruptive, unresolved elements that resist assimilation into a stable present. In cultural studies, hauntology also serves as a framework for understanding how societies negotiate the relationship between history and imagination. It can be applied to the analysis of genres such as Gothic fiction, magical realism, and certain strains of science fiction that merge the real and the spectral. By destabilising the notion of a secure present, hauntology opens space for alternative readings of history and alternative visions of the future, making it a versatile and provocative literary-cultural category.

### Solar-punk

Solarpunk is a recent literary and cultural movement that imagines hopeful, sustainable futures. It sees a future built on renewable energy, ecological balance, and social justice. Emerging in the 2010s as a counterpoint to dystopian genres like cyberpunk, it counterattacks thematic concept or story elements of environmental destruction, excessive capitalism, and technological pessimism.

Solarpunk blends science fiction with activism and envisions decentralised energy systems, and community-led governance, with aesthetics uniting nature and human-scale technology. Its stories and art pieces focus on cooperation and maintaining harmony rather than depicting inevitable

collapse. Rooted in real-world environmental movements, climate science, and indigenous knowledge, it serves as "prefigurative fiction"—modelling futures worth creating. While it can include conflict, it centres on challenges to sustainability, aiming to replace apocalyptic visions with narratives of resilience, adaptability, and collective agency.

### Haunting of Panga's Past

The imagined world of Panga in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* is defined by its sensible separation from a technological and industrial past. Humanity has chosen to abandon extractive practices, centralised industry, and unchecked automation, rebuilding society on principles of ecological harmony and decentralised living. Yet, despite this seeming break, the past continues to haunt the present. The very foundation of Panga's solarpunk ethos is a response to what once was—its rejection of industrial excess is inseparable from the memory of that excess.

This haunting is not expressed through ruins or apocalyptic decay, as is common in dystopian or post-apocalyptic fiction, but through cultural memory and ethical consciousness. The people of Panga live with the knowledge that their society is shaped by a deliberate historical choice: to allow the robots to leave and to embrace sustainability over expansion. The industrial era is absent in physical form, but its Specter lingers in stories, technologies no longer in use, and in the figure of Mosscap, whose return reactivates that memory. Derrida's notion of the "presence of absence" becomes evident here—what is missing physically continues to employ influence symbolically. Moreover, the haunting of Panga's past functions as a cautionary framework. The society's optimism is strengthened by the awareness that it has been acquired through rupture. This is consistent with Fisher's observation that hauntology confronts cultural impasses: in Panga's case, the impasse was the unsustainable trajectory of industrial modernity. By remembering this path, even in absence, the people of Panga maintain vigilance against repeating it. The past thus serves as both Specter and guide—haunting not with fear, but with responsibility.

In this sense, Panga shows how solarpunk futures are never entirely free from hauntological residues. Even as the society thrives in sustainable equilibrium, its identity is defined through dialogue with what it has left behind. The haunting of Panga's past ensures that the present remains self-reflective, and that the community's optimism is rooted not in naïveté but in historical awareness.

### Mosscap as Hauntological Figure

Within *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, Mosscap operates as a distinctly hauntological presence. He is first robot to come in contact with humans after centuries of absence. Mosscap embodies the spectral return of a past that humanity has

consciously abandoned. He serves as a living reminder of an industrial age defined by automation and extractive practices—a past now absent in material form but still wielding influence as cultural memory. In Derrida's terms, Mosscap can be seen as the Specter that represents absence present, unsettling the apparent stability of Panga's solarpunk present.

The robot's role is not confined to technological curiosity; it has been given the role of carrier of historical consciousness. It describes its purpose as to find '*what do humans need?*' (59, Chambers) As it is evident humans in Panga have chosen ecological sustainability and harmonious living. Mosscap recalls a different temporality in which machines were once bound to serve human industry. Its very presence destabilises the idea of a complete rupture with the past, reminding the community that their present is continuously haunted by choices made and paths not taken. When Mosscap describes to Dex how it is rebuilt from his predecessors, it says, '*I have some impressions. Single images. Feelings I know aren't mine.*' (93, Chambers)

This reflects Fisher's formulation of hauntology as the persistence of unrealised or abandoned futures: Mosscap embodies the industrial trajectory that might have continued, had humanity not chosen otherwise. Although, Mosscap's haunting differs from the unsettling or traumatic hauntings often found in literature. Here, instead of returning as a figure of guilt, dread, or unresolved trauma, Mosscap presents a dialogue and reflection. It is refreshing, aligning with hopeful themes of solarpunk. It does not mourn the industrial order nor seek to restore it; rather, it engages humans with questions of purpose, meaning, and coexistence. Hence, Mosscap transforms the haunting into a productive encounter, one that reinforces the community's commitment to its solarpunk ethos by requiring them to express why their chosen path matters.

Mosscap thus occupies a liminal space between two narrative modes: it is a Specter of technological pasts, but also a catalyst for solarpunk futures. It refigures the haunting as an opportunity for inquiry, escaping from dystopian cultural paralysis. Chambers positions Mosscap as a hauntological figure that bridges memory and possibility. The robot makes visible the spectral traces of history within the utopian optimism of Panga, showing that futures are never free of their pasts, but that such haunting can be a generative, sustaining force.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* through the thematic and theoretical frameworks of solarpunk and hauntology, showing how Chambers unites ecological

optimism with the lingering memory of an industrial past. Panga, as a utopian society, establishes that sustainable futures remain haunted by historical choosing, with the past playing less as a burden than as a guide.

Mosscap symbolizes this dynamic as a hauntological figure—recalling abandoned trajectories while enabling reflection and dialogue. Rather than arousing fear or paralysis, its presence reinforces solarpunk ideals by prompting transformed awareness of purpose and coexistence. The novel thus illustrates that speculative fiction gains depth when utopian and hauntological impulses intersect, suggesting that futures cannot be imagined apart from their pasts. In Chambers' vision, haunting becomes not an obstacle but a sustaining force for hope.

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