



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

# **Contesting *AI Hype* Through Solarpunk Imagination and Practice**

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As soon as the ears get used to the hum of the processors, the heat becomes the strongest sensation. A dry heat that comes from the machines stacked in dozens of hallways.

**Busy in who knows what calculations, processing who knows what data.**

**And the closer you get the more this heat becomes a metallic breath** capable of drying your throat, drying your eyes. Bologna. Via Stalingrado. Northern suburbs, just a few kilometers from the center. In the Tecnopolo spaces, until a few decades ago, were stacks of tobacco leaves hanging to dry, machinery to process them, shred them, roll them up. 120 thousand square meters of the Ex Manifattura Tabacchi became today the cradle for one of the **most futuristic projects in the entire panorama of Italian innovation. Those processors in action are the heart of Italian supercomputing. (...)**



With Cineca's new supercomputers, Italy will be the second country in the world in terms of computing power. It is currently third, behind the U.S. and Japan. A European record. In a Europe seeking its own way to become a producer of AI-based services. **It is not an impossible chase.** In 2022, ChatGpt went public. The competitive advantage of the U.S. seemed unbeatable. Then other companies came along: American, like Anthropic; European, like Mistral; Chinese, like DeepSeek. Competing is possible. **To do so will require all the buzz possible from Leonardo's boards.** **All the heat of the supercomputers to come.** But above all, a model that works.



## ***Italian Strategy for Artificial Intelligence 2024-2026:***

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**“Artificial intelligence (AI) is in a phase of extraordinary development**, in which it is being characterized as a catalyst for change in the way we live, work and interact with the world around us. This development is propelled by the driving force of intense research activity, which has led to numerous advances in the definition of AI architectures and models, and **which has been supported by enormous investment, particularly from private companies and leaders in the field.”**

**“The advent of generative AI systems has**, in the past year, **made the innovative and transformative power of AI even more evident**, enabling the development of **automation processes marked by unparalleled ease of use**. Driven by large international investments that are unprecedented in the history of computing, this **revolution** has rapidly transcended academia and research centers, **taking on the connotation of a true social phenomenon.”**

**“It is essential to know how to grasp the need for innovation**, reading and analyzing the changed context conditions, and valuing the acquired awareness (i) of the **strategic importance** of increasing our ability to implement and promote the use of AI solutions in the productive, entrepreneurial, educational and social fabric, as well as in the Public Administration, and (ii) that **the promotion of our country's distinctive traits will increasingly pass through the codification and availability of AI data and models** capable of representing and enhancing its specificities.”



# Semantic dimensions of AI Hype

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**HYPE**

- **URGENCY**
- **LOCK-IN, NECESSITY (ARMS RACE)**
- **REVELATION/APOCALYPSE**
- **FUTURITY**
- **TERROR/FASCINATION**
- **SUBLIMATION/MAGIC**

**Does not prescribe to categories of true or false – Mythical - Apolitical**

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**“Maybe the baddies don’t have an agenda, maybe  
they’re just trying to make money”**

**!!!**

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**~~“Maybe the baddies don’t have an agenda,~~ maybe  
they’re just trying to make money”**

**!!!**

AI Hype de-politicizes AI futures by hiding/naturalizing the anarcho-capitalist political agenda of the TechBroTopia

**Let's talk alternatives**

***Or, how are dominant AI narratives being contested?***



# Introduction



# Methodology

## Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020)

- **Participant Observation**
- **8 Interviews with key actors**
- **Documents**



### **Codes**

- Desirable futures
- Undesirable future/present
- AI Practices



### **Sub-themes**

- Patterns among codes



### **Themes (Imaginaries)**

- Patterns among sub-themes



## Results

Imaginary	Description	Sub-themes
<b><i>AI Utopia</i></b>	AI is a <b>revolutionary technology</b> <b>affording positive change.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emancipatory AI</li> <li>• AI improving health</li> <li>• AI freeing from work</li> <li>• AI represents epochal change</li> </ul>
<b><i>Solarpunk AI</i></b>	AI is a field of <b>contention</b> , the outcomes of which will determine if its place in the future will be desirable or undesirable; AI is <b>not revolutionary per se.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AI simplifying work</li> <li>• AI worsening work</li> <li>• AI as a contention tool</li> <li>• AI hurting human rights</li> <li>• AI helping individual activities</li> <li>• AI is an exploitative capitalist model</li> <li>• Advocacy over AI regulation</li> <li>• AI worsening information</li> <li>• Grassroots organizing around AI</li> <li>• Technological practices to improve AI</li> <li>• Social practices to improve AI</li> <li>• Using AI only as a tool</li> <li>• AI hype is unjustified</li> <li>• AI has environmental impact</li> </ul>
<b><i>AI Dystopia</i></b>	AI is a <b>revolutionary technology</b> <b>affording negative change.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bad individual approaches to AI</li> <li>• AI is a black box</li> <li>• AI is a destructive technology</li> <li>• Boycotting AI</li> <li>• AI represents epochal change</li> </ul>



## Results – AI Utopia and Dystopia

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### AI UTOPIA

**The idea that, *through* the AI revolution, positive social and/or political change is possible**

*Full automation and universal basic income, universal free healthcare, socialist digital utopia*

### AI DYSTOPIA

**The idea that, *through* the AI revolution, negative social and/or political change is inevitable**

*Permanent post-truth, out-of-control general AI, climate destruction*

## Results – AI Utopia and Dystopia

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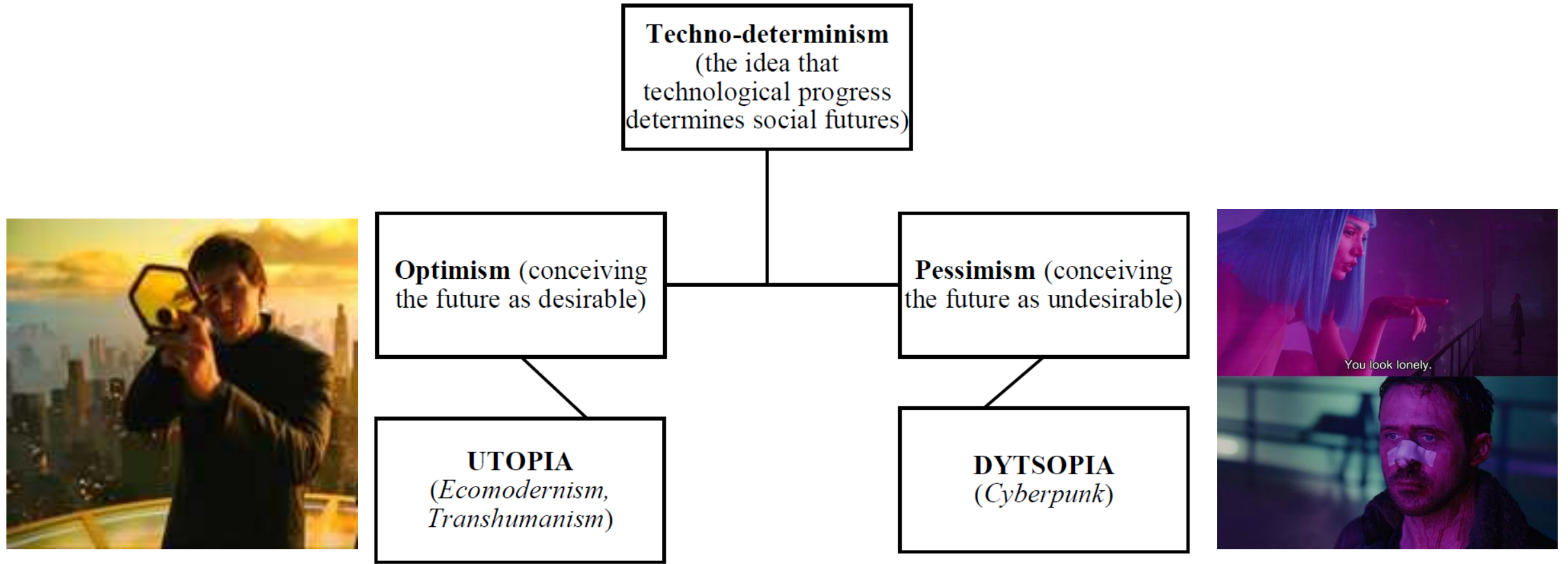
### AI UTOPIA

*“In the 70s movements talked of revolution, of full automation. We should be talking about it again. These things are now possible with AI.” (I7)*

### AI DYSTOPIA

*“People will not differentiate what is said by a bot and what is said by a human. There will be no difference between real facts and made-up ones.” (I6)*





# the Solarpunk imaginary

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“If I had to answer you with one word, I would say a **Solarpunk imaginary**. The world I would like is a world that **makes use of technology**.

I'm not a primitivist. Certainly, it's **a world where the relationship with nature and the planet, with the environment, is completely different**.

So, it's **not extractive**. It's a world where you...**a world without work, without salary**. Yes, it's a world that is **as less violent as possible**.” (I5)



- **ENGAGING WITH TECH**
- **DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE AND THE PLANET**
- **NOT EXTRACTIVE**
- **FREE FROM WORK AND SALARY**
- **NOT VIOLENT**



**IMAGINARY OF RADICAL CHANGE**

## Results – the Solarpunk imaginary

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*Solarpunk* is different than *Cyberpunk* (techno-determinist dystopia) because it challenges the notion of AI as a technology affording a perfect system of social reproduction without agency (black-box AI, GenAI uprising, Sentient AI...)

*Solarpunk* is different than *Ecomodernism* (techno-determinist utopia) because it stresses the need for social and political radicality (refusal of AI to “fix the system” and “fix the environment”, refusal of “decoupling” imaginaries).

**So, what is it?**



## **Solarpunk as a contentious imaginary** (Gerola and Robaey, 2024)

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**“An emerging speculative movement in fiction, art and activism, that offers hopeful alternatives of habitable futures in the midst of environmental collapse and climate chaos (Reina-Rozo 2021).**

**Solarpunk attempts to reinject the future with hope by emphasizing radical decentralization, community empowerment through bottom-up innovation and the extensive use of renewable energies and sustainable technologies (Hunting 2020).**

***Premised on anarchic, ecological, and socially just futures* (Gillam 2023)”**

# Solarpunk as a **contentious** imaginary

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- **Unveiling the political project of the TechBroTopia, re-politicizing tech**
- **Radically imagining new futures starting from political goals and *\*not\** from tech**
- **Addressing one's use of tech starting by political goals**

# The Solarpunk imaginary and AI Hype

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- **URGENCY**
- **ARMS RACE (LOCK-IN, NECESSITY)**
- **REVELATION/APOCALYPSE**
- **FUTURITY**
- **TERROR/FASCINATION**
- **SUBLIMATION/MAGIC**
- **SLOWER TIME**
- **CARE**
- **GROUNDENESS**
- **FOCUS ON THE PRESENT**
- **TINKERING/HACKING**
- **ATTENTION TO MATERIALITY**

**Addressing \*existing\* AIs, unveiling its materiality, economic model,  
value for human society, potential (not)use for radical change**

## Solarpunk imaginary worked into practice?

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### **Discursive mechanism 1: diagnosis of undesirable AI present**

- **Labor**
- **Information**
- **Human Rights ( + AI and war)**
- **Environment**

**→ What AI actually is and how it is affecting the world \*right now\***

# Practices of Prefiguration

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- **Discursive mechanism 2: prefiguration of desirable AI future**
- **Radical re-imagination:** Although AI originated as a technology from data and surveillance capitalism, its affordances are re-imagined in transformative contexts: *how can AI serve social and political struggle? Feminist AI, Activist AI*
- **Experimentation:** Reclaiming, tinkering, hacking. Labs and workshops with grassroots tech projects to build alternative models of AI: *free software, open, decentralized, federated, small*
- **Protest:** Political pressure on policymakers and industry actors to steer AI innovation towards desirable outcomes: *G7 counter-summits, protesting in Bruxelles*
- **→ DEALING WITH AI IN SLOW, GROUNDED AND EXPERIMENTAL PRACTICE**

# Results – Practices of Prefiguration

## Radical re-imagination

*“Our project works towards imagining and designing a different kind of AI, one that is made of many small federated models. In this way, not only user privacy and control over data is ensured, but also the environmental impact is reduced”. (I6)*

## Experimentation

*“I tried to realize an AI that tells the truth by feeding an open-source model only with data “biased” in the movement direction, with archive movement material. (...) I noticed that open-source models hosted locally were performing even better than big ones”. (I8)*

## Protest

*“We organized this assembly in the main square, open to the public, at the same time as the official G7 summit, so to express that we are open and transparent while they are just a few people closed in one room.” (R1)*

## Conclusions – The *Solarpunk* AI Discursive Mechanism

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### Diagnosing an undesirable AI present

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#### Discussing AI Errors

- *Labor*
- *Information*
- *Human Rights*
- *Environment*



### Prefiguring a desirable AI future

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#### Imagination, Experimentation and Protest

- *Radically re-imagining affordances*
- *Experimenting alternatives*
- *Protesting over regulation*

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## ***Solarpunk* as concrete utopia:**

***Prefigurative tech activism*** → activism that, starting from a critique of data, surveillance and anarcho-capitalist logics embedded in commercial tech, attempts to realize alternatives to it in the present



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## ***Solarpunk* as concrete utopia:**

***It doesn't need to be revolutionary*** → *small scale, local, incremental*

***It doesn't need to be perfect*** → *experimentation, tinkering, hacking*

***It doesn't work if it's not collective***

# Elite Capture of Imagination

(Gerola and Robaey, 2024)

Has solarpunk already been coopted as an aesthetic for commercial ecomodernist bullshit?

Yes.

**Does it matter?**





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