Comparative Critical Studies 23.3 (2026): 337–355
Edinburgh University Press
DOI: 10.3366/ccs.2026.0613
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www.euppublishing.com/ccs

Post-Pandemic Imaginaries in Visual Culture: Envisioning Worlds after COVID-19

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Abstract:
This article examines how pandemic-era visual culture imagined the worlds that might follow COVID-19. It traces a dialectical movement across three widely circulating examples: the 'nature is healing' meme, Graeme MacKay's four waves cartoon, and Naomi Klein's animated short *A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair*. The first offers a comforting fantasy of automatic ecological recovery, obscuring irreversible environmental loss, unequal responsibility, and the dangers of human exceptionalism. MacKay's cartoon punctures that optimism by depicting COVID-19, recession, climate change, and biodiversity collapse as successively larger waves, but its rhetoric of overwhelming catastrophe risks producing despair and separating crises that share systemic causes. *The Years of Repair* provides a reparative alternative grounded in solidarity, care, political struggle, and ecosocialist transformation. Its speculative future history frames art as a form of anticipatory memory capable of making structural change visible and imaginable. While the film's limited reach and unrealized aspirations temper its transformative promise, this vision of repair can nevertheless sustain a horizon of collective possibility amid deepening social and ecological crisis. Across all three cases, the article shows that post-pandemic imaginaries derive their force from how they frame the crises confronting us and the forms of political agency they enable or foreclose.

Keywords: COVID-19, post-pandemic imaginaries, visual culture, ecological crisis, cultural memory, collective repair, political imagination

INTRODUCTION

In a world riven by multiple crises, understanding the narratives we tell ourselves about catastrophe, recovery, and renewal is crucial because they shape how crises are interpreted, endured, and, potentially, transformed.

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, as human activity ground to a halt, stories of nature's healing captivated the public imagination. Images of wildlife supposedly reclaiming urban spaces went viral, offering a naive yet comforting vision of an unearned utopia where the world might reset itself.[1] This hope was dashed, and a reality check provided, in a popular contemporaneous cartoon depicting COVID-19 as a towering wave threatening to crash upon a small town, while even larger waves representing the economic recession, climate change, and biodiversity collapse loom ominously in the background.[2] Within this landscape of despair, works such as Naomi Klein's video *A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair* offered a more grounded and actionable vision of utopia: one that is not given, but rather built through collective effort and systemic change.[3] This article moves from the naive optimism of the belief that nature will automatically heal itself, through the despair induced by mounting global crises, to a future in which hope is mobilized not as a cheap sentiment but as a political strategy. In doing so, it explores how post-pandemic imaginaries can either bind us to a cycle of inaction or help bring a more just and sustainable world into view – and into being.

By 'post-pandemic imaginaries', I mean mediated projections of the social, political, and ecological futures that might follow COVID-19.[4] Produced in the midst of the pandemic rather than after its conclusion, such imaginaries do not simply reflect on the crisis retrospectively. They anticipate its aftermath, whether in the form of recovery, intensification, or transformation. As cultural articulations of what might come next, they shape the horizons of possibility within which crisis is understood and political response envisioned. Focusing on a meme, a viral cartoon, and an activist short film, this article argues that pandemic-era visual culture became a crucial site for negotiating the meaning of the crisis and the futures imagined to follow it. These widely circulating cases crystallize three distinct ways of envisioning what might come after the pandemic: fantasies of automatic recovery, visions of cascading collapse, and calls for collective repair. The article contributes to emerging scholarship on COVID-19 cultural production by showing how such works function not merely as reflections of crisis but as anticipatory acts of world-making that help shape what futures become imaginable.

NATURE IS HEALING

An unexpected side-effect of COVID-19 was the renewed appreciation for nature sparked by the pandemic in large parts of the world. Although

the pandemic was experienced very unevenly across different national and social contexts, lockdowns and restrictions on movement led many people in 2020 to experience a 'silent spring', albeit of a very different kind than the one Rachel Carson foresaw in her eponymous 1962 book that launched the modern environmental movement by explaining the adverse effects of pesticides on the natural world.[5] In the spring of 2020, it was not the birds that went silent but human society, as economies ground to a halt and billions of people around the world were confined to their homes. Many people reconnected with the sights and sounds of the natural world during this 'great pause', which has also been referred to as the 'anthropause'.[6] They found solace and delight in apparent signs of the resurgence of wildlife, as animals in urban areas seemed to take over emptied streets and waterways. One of the best-known examples is the claim that dolphins had returned to deserted Venetian canals, which went viral on social media in mid-March 2020, with people celebrating this supposed evidence of nature bouncing back as a silver lining of the pandemic. It was as if the American journalist Alan Weisman's 2007 bestseller *The World without Us* had come to life.[7] The book imagines how nature would reclaim the built environment if humanity were to suddenly vanish. As *Grist* reported, during the COVID-19 pandemic the author was flooded with emails from readers and media requests asking him to talk about how his book had turned into reality.[8]

However, many of these positive, feel-good stories, including the one about dolphins swimming in the newly crystal-clear waters of Venice, turned out to be fabricated or embellished. The dolphin videos were actually filmed near Sardinia, an Italian island in the Mediterranean approximately 750 kilometres away from Venice. Experts also explained that the clarity of the water in the canals did not indicate it was cleaner; it simply reflected the fact that reduced boat traffic during the lockdown allowed the sand to settle on the canal floor, rather than being stirred up by boat motors, which usually made the water appear murky.[9] Yet the exposure of this deception did not prevent the continued circulation of media posts celebrating the idea of a purer nature that emerges when the world comes to a standstill. Some people even got angry at the fact-checkers for debunking such optimistic stories. As the psychologist Susan Clayton commented, 'I think people really want to believe in the power of nature to recover. [. . .] People hope that, no matter what we've done, nature is powerful enough to rise above it.'[10]

The American humour site *The Onion* mocked the public's gullibility, which originates in an inability or unwillingness to face up to the extent

and irreversibility of the environmental damage wrought by industrial modernity. It poked fun at the viral 'nature is healing' phenomenon with a satirical piece titled 'Thousands of Formerly Endangered White Rhinos Flood City Streets Mere Days after Humans Quarantined Indoors'.[11] The article paid quiet tribute to Eugène Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, which is set in a small French town overrun by rhinoceroses, and Terry Gilliam's film *12 Monkeys*, which features a scene in which zoo animals are released into the streets of Philadelphia.[12] 'After just a week of human isolation', *The Onion* reported, 'this once-dying species has come back with a vengeance' and is now 'multiplying exponentially' across New York City.[13] It went on to note that white rhinos would be omnipresent if it were not for 'the resurgence of Bengal tigers and polar bears', two other endangered species, with whom they were said to be competing for urban space.[14] As is often the case with *Onion* articles, the satire was lost on some readers, including one who in a Facebook comment exclaimed: 'What an amazing miracle. Nature finds a way!!!!'[15]

There is no denying that the lockdown of industry and travel brought about beneficial environmental changes in many parts of the world. For example, reduced car and plane traffic did lead to improved air quality in some major cities.[16] Moreover, birds and other wildlife did become more noticeable in urban areas, with some species appearing to reclaim urban habitat as human activity declined.[17] The restrictions on human movement also made people more aware and appreciative of the green spaces in their neighbourhoods. It has long been recognized that access to green spaces enhances health.[18] Be that as it may, the widespread celebration of nature's 'recovery', 'return', or 'healing' that we saw during the pandemic was troubling insofar as it promoted the erroneous idea that centuries of environmental degradation at the hands of humanity can easily be reversed. It is tempting but dangerous to assume that nature has an automatic capacity for renewal and will simply flourish again if humans stay indoors for a while and leave it to recover on its own. Rooted in an unwillingness or inability to acknowledge and mourn the fact of massive and irreparable environmental loss, this belief can induce complacency, inaction, and an evasion of responsibility – which are the last things the world needs in the face of the current ecological and climate emergency.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the persistence of these pandemic-era 'nature is healing' fantasies in relation to the concept of ecological mourning, understood as the process of grieving losses associated with the degradation and destruction of the natural environment.[19] Such

fantasies can be read as symptomatic of a widespread societal resistance to acknowledging the urgency and severity of the climate and ecological crisis. They also perpetuate the notion that nature exists apart from humanity – that it is something 'out there', separate from and untouched by people. This is far from a benign assumption: human exceptionalism lies at the root of our contemporary ecological predicament. Many of the counter-memes mocking the original Venice canal tweet inadvertently expose the fallacy of the nature/culture divide. Featuring Crocs shoes, Lime scooters, rubber ducks, pizzas, and other man-made artefacts humorously cast as returning to their 'natural habitat', they show that nature is inextricably entangled with human life.

Apart from reinforcing human exceptionalism, the fantasy of healing nature through the removal of human influence disregards the uneven distribution of environmental responsibility, as if all humans were equally implicated in ecological destruction, rather than recognizing that such destruction is driven disproportionately by affluent individuals, high-emitting societies, and economic systems rooted in extraction. Most disturbingly, though, it can be seen to be underpinned by ecofascist ideas, insofar as it implies that human populations, especially in densely populated or industrialized areas, are the problem and that simply reducing or eliminating certain groups of people from the face of the earth would allow nature to 'recover'.[20] This dangerous notion advocates for authoritarian measures and even population control in the name of environmental conservation, often at the expense of marginalized, non-white, non-Western communities. This was probably not at the forefront of most people's minds when they delighted in the apparent resurgence of nature in cities during the COVID-19 lockdown. Even so, these troubling echoes are worth noting, as to this day ecofascist ideas haunt the environmental movement, whose racist history has been well established and documented in recent years.[21] Think, for example, of how the creation of supposedly pristine wilderness reserves in the United States involved the dispossession and removal of Native Americans who had been living in those areas for centuries, if not millennia.[22] Far from being untouched wildernesses, treasured national parks like Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Glacier were once vibrant homelands to Indigenous communities. In other words, the belief that nature is healing may have offered some momentary respite from ongoing climate anxieties during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it uncomfortably recalled environmentalism's dark side and ultimately provided little more than fleeting solace and false hopes. In this sense, the 'nature is healing' meme

crystallizes a post-pandemic imaginary of passive recovery: a fantasy in which crisis is resolved not through political action or structural change, but through the temporary withdrawal of humans and the supposedly automatic resilience of nature.

THE FOUR WAVES CARTOON

Hope and respite from anxiety appear to be in short supply in what is probably the most widely circulated COVID-19 cartoon, which functions as a rude awakening from the comforting self-delusions fostered by early pandemic fantasies of renewal.[23] Created by the Canadian cartoonist Graeme MacKay and making the rounds on social media in the spring and summer of 2020, the image depicts a city on a tiny island surrounded by ocean, with a speech bubble rising from the skyline saying, 'Be sure to wash your hands and all will be well.' Just offshore, a massive wave labelled 'COVID-19' is on the verge of crashing over the city. Behind it loom three progressively larger and even more destructive waves labelled 'recession', 'climate change', and 'biodiversity collapse', each threatening to inundate everything in its path.

In fact, in the initial version of the cartoon, published in a local Canadian newspaper as early as 11 March 2020, the same day the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a global pandemic, there were only two waves: one called 'COVID-19' and another called 'recession'. 'Climate change' and 'biodiversity collapse' were added later by other artists from around the world; MacKay subsequently authorized these modifications by incorporating them into his original drawing one by one. The full evolution of this viral cartoon is documented on the artist's website, which records 1680 posts of all these variations across the internet on various social media platforms and websites by the autumn of 2020.[24] I will focus here on the latest and best-known version of the cartoon, the one featuring four waves, which appears to have started circulating in June 2020.

The four waves cartoon contains multiple layers of dramatic irony, where the audience grasps what the cartoon's characters do not, allowing them to mock and indict the widespread governmental lack of preparedness for, and woefully inadequate response to, the looming health crisis. In the cartoon, political leaders – who remain invisible, either because they are hiding out of sight or because they are insignificant in the face of the crisis – try to reassure their citizens by saying, 'Be sure to wash your hands and all will be well.' This statement

seems absurd given the magnitude of COVID-19, and even more so given the even larger and more devastating waves lurking behind it, forces that remain completely indifferent to handwashing efforts. The cartoon exposes society's vulnerability and indicts the inadequacy of a response to the coronavirus that is limited to such minimal measures. At the same time, it calls attention to three even more daunting crises that follow hot on the heels of the first, but are obscured by the urgency of the initial crisis, and exhorts those in power to heed these slightly more distant threats, rather than focusing solely on managing COVID-19.

One may wonder whether MacKay's cartoon might not risk sapping people's morale or weakening their resolve to address the numerous challenges they are shown to be facing. The waves are so large compared to the puny city that even the first and smallest wave appears powerful enough to crush it. The second wave threatens to sweep the shattered debris into the ocean, and the third and fourth will bury it completely, leaving the city to be forgotten like Atlantis. The cartoon displays little faith in people's ingenuity and resilience. Realistically speaking, four major tsunamis, striking one after another in rapid succession, would be impossible for the Lilliputian city dwellers to survive. As one commentator put it, while the cartoon may well have been intended as a spur to action, it was more likely to be received as 'a portrait of despair'.[25]

The four waves cartoon does not appear to allow for the possibility that humanity might learn any meaningful lessons from either the pandemic or the recession regarding how to confront future crises or how to improve strategies of collective response. It seems to suggest that we are condemned to repeat the same disheartening outcome – defeat – over and over again. To its credit, the image punctures the illusion underlying the 'nature is healing' narratives, which implied that modest behavioural adjustments such as handwashing or self-isolation could somehow remedy large-scale problems like climate change and mass extinction. Its stark visual rhetoric exposes the denial and hubris embedded in such thinking. Yet in doing so, it moves too abruptly, in my view, from misguided optimism to outright despair. It articulates a post-pandemic imaginary not of renewal but of escalation, in which COVID-19 appears as merely the first in a sequence of converging crises. Its force lies in refusing consolation; its limit lies in offering little sense of political agency or transformative possibility.

MacKay's 2024 update of the cartoon deepened its pessimistic logic by adding a fifth 'zombie apocalypse' wave, which, as he explained in a 2025 retrospective, was meant to capture 'the growing sense of apathy

and inaction' in the face of mounting crises.[26] As he notes, the zombies represent those who 'passively watch as calamity unfolds, relinquishing their agency'.[27] The addition is telling: even as the revised image identifies passivity as part of the problem, it still offers no convincing picture of how such passivity might be overcome.

Another problematic feature of the four waves cartoon is its ranking of crises, which suggests a hierarchy and competition among them. The image presents biodiversity collapse as a graver problem than climate change, which in turn is portrayed as more catastrophic than economic recession. The recession, for its part, is seen as more dangerous than COVID-19. Whether such a zero-sum framing – pitting different issues against one another and implying that one matters more than another – is a productive way forward is questionable. It risks fuelling strife and discord, as different communities vie for attention and resources for their particular causes. The cartoon implicitly casts activism in adversarial terms, with different groups being less concerned with collaboration than with asserting the primacy of their own cause. This kind of competitive environment fosters division and conflict rather than stimulating the cooperation and solidarity needed to address the multiple, interlinked emergencies the cartoon evokes.

A similar logic of competition between crises can be found in another widely circulated COVID-19 cartoon by KAL (Kevin Kallaugher), published in *The Economist* in April 2020, which depicts the world engaged in a boxing match against the coronavirus, only to reveal a far more formidable opponent – climate change – waiting in the next round.[28] Both KAL's image and MacKay's cartoon stage the pandemic and the climate crisis as rival threats, reinforcing a zero-sum logic of attention and concern. The rhetorical force of both images lies in their juxtaposition of one crisis with another and in their suggestion that an already serious threat is being overtaken by an even greater one. Yet this very structure may hinder a more integrated understanding of the relations between these crises. What initially appeared to be an effective means of maintaining awareness of climate change during the pandemic thus also exemplifies the pitfalls of representing global challenges as discrete and competing phenomena.

Indeed, a major shortcoming of both examples is that they elide or misconstrue the interconnections between the various crises they portray. The crises the cartoons present as separate are, in fact, deeply entangled. COVID-19 emerged in a context of intensifying human encroachment on nonhuman habitats, while the same extractivist

logics that drive climate change also fuel biodiversity collapse and deepen economic inequality. These are not simply successive disasters, but interconnected expressions of a shared socio-ecological order that produces environmental degradation, public-health vulnerability, and unevenly distributed precarity. The two cartoons rely on visual separation to clarify their message, yet in doing so they preclude a more integrated or systemic understanding of how such crises interact. In MacKay's cartoon, the four tsunamis, colour-coded and separately labelled, appear to exist in isolation and to be self-generating. While the COVID-19 wave and the recession wave are presented in the correct chronological order, the implied causality is misleading: unlike ocean waves, the recession did not drive the pandemic forward; it resulted from it. The cartoon discourages viewers from seeking any deeper connections between the health, economic, and environmental crises it depicts.

What actually connects these apparently distinct crises is their rootedness in a common logic of extraction, disposability, and unequal vulnerability. COVID-19, climate breakdown, biodiversity collapse, racial injustice, and economic precarity are co-produced by forms of social organization that sever sustaining relations among humans and between human and more-than-human worlds. Yet despite the visual separation, the image's overall composition – its separate waves united within a single vast and turbulent ocean – gestures towards the systemic entanglement of these crises. The shared body of water still suggests, however faintly, that the forces driving public health emergencies, economic instability, and ecological collapse are interrelated, and that their effects cannot be contained within the neat boundaries of separate waves. Though underdeveloped in the cartoon itself, this compositional suggestion anticipates more explicit attempts to imagine crises as interconnected and transformation as both necessary and possible.

THE YEARS OF REPAIR

One influential early formulation of such a possibility came from the Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy, who famously described the pandemic as a portal to a profoundly transformed new world. In an opinion piece published in *The Financial Times* on 3 April 2020, Roy wrote that the rupture caused by the COVID-19 outbreak 'offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves'.[29] Observing that pandemics have historically forced humans to 'break with

the past and imagine their world anew', she claims that COVID-19 is no different:

> It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.
>
> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.[30]

It is clear where Roy herself stands: the former option is a no-go for her, as 'Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.'[31] Indeed, calls to 'return to normal', common across news media, political messaging, and social media at the time, overlook the many ways in which 'normal' had not been working prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 laid bare and deepened the entrenched realities of white supremacy, economic inequality, and ecological devastation that have long been woven into the fabric of society. All of these societal ills are succinctly and eloquently invoked in Roy's passage, which, it is worth noting, predates the police killing of George Floyd by almost two months. For Roy, the upheaval caused by the pandemic and the process of moving beyond it presented an opportunity to remake social, political, and ecological relations around solidarity, justice, and sustainability.

The same spirit animates *A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair*, a short animated film produced by the Canadian climate activist and writer Naomi Klein and released by *The Intercept* on 1 October 2020. The film imagines collective action as the only viable path through these troubled waters. If the 'nature is healing' meme offers a fantasy of passive restoration and Graeme MacKay's four waves cartoon a vision of cascading collapse, *The Years of Repair* offers a reparative imaginary grounded in solidarity, care, and systemic transformation. Dark yet ultimately hopeful in tone, the film envisages a post-pandemic world in which damaged social and ecological relations are repaired through collective action and solidarity. It imagines a future that is at once socially just and ecologically sustainable. As Klein explains in an accompanying article on *The Intercept*'s website, *The Years of Repair*

> dares to dream of a future in which 2020 is a historic turning point, where the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic and global uprisings against racism drive us to build back a better society in which no one is sacrificed and everyone is essential.[32]

The film is a sequel to *A Message from the Future*, an animated short released one year earlier – before the onset of the pandemic – narrated by the progressive US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.[33] Both

works address the present retrospectively, speaking from an imagined greener, decolonized, and more democratic future. They exemplify climate fiction of the future history variety, or what I have elsewhere called 'the art of anticipatory memory'.[34] The Canadian filmmaker Avi Lewis, a co-writer of both films, characterizes this approach as 'documentary futurism': the use of documentary aesthetics to view the present from a speculative future in ways that make its injustices and alternatives newly legible. For Lewis, this mode holds the power to unlock our political imagination. 'It helps us see how we get to a better place from where we are now', he explains, by allowing audiences to envisage social and ecological transformation as attainable and grounded in collective action.[35]

The earlier film looks back, from the vantage point of the middle of the 21st century, at a successfully implemented Green New Deal. At the time of the film's production, Ocasio-Cortez was championing this massive US government programme aimed at addressing climate change and economic inequality. If this film, which was viewed by millions and nominated for an Emmy award, focuses on the American context and stars a politician, its sequel adopts a more global and grassroots perspective to imagine the 'years of repair' that could potentially follow the COVID-19 pandemic. It features a cast of narrators from around the world, including the Black Lives Matter co-founder Opal Tometi (who co-wrote the film with Lewis), the British actress Emma Thompson, the Nigerian poet and activist Nnimmo Bassey, and the Mexican actor and filmmaker Gael García Bernal. Moreover, the sequel shows 'more fight' and does not have a single protagonist but follows 'rank-and-file organizers and activists' from an array of different groups, such as 'organized labor, Black liberation, climate, Indigenous, feminist, disabled, migrant, queer, unhoused, worker cooperatives, and more'.[36]

While it emphasizes the critical role of social movements in bringing about transformative change, the film also suggests that imagining a different world is an artist's job. Like its predecessor, *The Years of Repair* is illustrated by the American artist Molly Crabapple. A notable feature of both films is their medial reflexivity. Composed of animated watercolour illustrations, they repeatedly draw attention to their own making by revealing the artist's hands, brushstrokes, sheets of paper, and desk within the frame. The viewer thus sees not only a sequence of painted images but also the process by which those images are produced. *The Years of Repair* suggests that art has a crucial role to play in political

struggle, not as a substitute for activism, but as a means of rendering alternative futures visible and tangible.

What stands out about *The Years of Repair*, in contrast to the other post-pandemic imaginaries considered here, is its grounding in a solid political analysis and its embrace of a clear and elaborate strategy for achieving social change. As Klein explains in her *Intercept* article, the film's creators pictured COVID-19 as 'a tough teacher instructing humanity in a series of lessons that should have been obvious long ago'.[37] The most important lesson the pandemic taught us, in their view, is that human beings are fundamentally entangled with the earth and with each other. This notion resonates with Judith Butler's argument in *What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology*. COVID-19 and the other crises plaguing the world – including climate change, racial injustice, and economic inequality – can be seen as symptoms of the same underlying cause: the severance of these sustaining relationships. 'If the pandemic gives us one rather large social and ethical lesson to learn', Butler notes,

> [it is that] what makes a life livable is a question that implicitly shows us that the life we live is never exclusively our own, that the conditions for a livable life have to be secured, and not just for me but for lives and living processes more generally.[38]

The profound brokenness of essential intra-human and human-nonhuman relations calls for urgent repair. In Klein's words, repair is the film's 'unifying principle': 'a framework expansive enough to connect the interlocking crises in our social, economic, political, informational, and ecological spheres'.[39] Here and elsewhere, she identifies an extractive mindset as the root of the problem and advocates for 'a shift in worldview, a transformation from "gig and dig" to an ethos of care and repair'.[40] Klein likens the gig economy, where people are used for profit and then discarded, to the dig economy, where extractive industries similarly disregard and deplete the earth. Instead of viewing the natural world and most of its inhabitants as resources to be exploited and then thrown away, we need to move to a 'care and repair' society founded on workers' rights, environmental action, and reparations for racial injustice. Klein responds to the pandemic with a hopeful, ecosocialist, and intersectional vision of the future that aims to fundamentally change the system responsible for the overlapping crises that MacKay's cartoon treats as separate and intractable issues.

The Years of Repair insists that these problems are solvable but not in isolation from one another; they must be addressed simultaneously

through the joint efforts of various groups of engaged citizens and responsive governments. Better days are ahead, but not immediately: the film imagines climate disasters and another pandemic hitting in 2023, which lay three years in the future at the time of the film's release, as well as a police killing of a young strike leader sparking worldwide protests, as did the death of George Floyd in May 2020. As Klein notes, it will take uprisings, rent and workers' strikes, and 'an unprecedented convergence and collaboration of disparate and often divided political strains' for governments to finally relent and start working towards the utopian future envisaged in the film.[41] The day *The Intercept* released *The Years of Repair*, it was also shared on the social media platforms of several other progressive organizations, such as the Movement for Black Lives, the Sunrise Movement, and Public Services International (a union coalition). This simultaneous launch prefigured 'the movement of movements' that the film seeks to galvanize.[42]

The future it imagines centres on just economic relationships, which require massive public investment in health care, education, and housing, as well as a concerted effort to repair the vast damage done to the natural world. Furthermore, it involves building a digital commons to protect society against disinformation, dismantling the fossil fuel industry and using its profits towards environmental restoration, and reckoning with painful histories of enslavement and genocide through a Truth and Reparations Commission and an Indigenous Land Back programme.

Despite its broad scope, the film avoids being abstract or superficial through its recurring visual focus on images of hands. One striking example is a painting depicting various hands during the pandemic, accompanied by the narrator's commentary:

> The hands that packed the box, that picked the tomato, that planted the seed, the hands that stroked the brow, that said goodbye. The hands were us, all of us. That web of hand-to-hand, breath-to-breath relationships was a reminder: we are entangled, making each other sick, keeping each other alive.[43]

That radical interdependency is a key lesson of COVID-19. Hands are foregrounded in the film from its very first images and lines. 'Looking back', the narrator begins, 'it's hard to believe that we've rebuilt our community from the ground up with our own hands'.[44] Hands also feature prominently in a painting midway through the film, when the narrator announces that society is pulling together for a common cause. As the narrator states, 'We joined hands and pushed further, launching

the years of repair.'[45] And, of course, the viewer is constantly made aware of the presence of the artist's hands as well.

All of this conspicuous hand imagery, which encapsulates the film's major themes of interconnectedness, coalition-building, and collaboration, is reminiscent of Michael Rosen's celebrated poem 'These Are the Hands', a tribute to the National Health Service (NHS) written in 2008 that became an unofficial anthem for health workers coping with the first wave of the pandemic in the UK.[46] The poem was also pinned above the beloved children's author's own hospital bed after he himself fell seriously ill with COVID-19 in March 2020.[47]

By the end of the film, the narrator announces that the concerted efforts to care for both the planet and one another during the 'years of repair' have borne fruit. 'Within just a few years', she reports, 'we could see the bottom of the river again, and it was safe to drink and fish in its waters'.[48] Humanity is not, however, entirely beyond peril: viruses will continue to mutate and the planet will continue to warm. Yet the robust 'systems of care and repair' established in the wake of the pandemic are shown to equip society to face whatever 'new storms' lie ahead.[49] The film closes with the slogan: 'No one is sacrificed. Everyone is essential'.[50] Particularly striking in this concluding sequence is the image of a crystal-clear river, celebrated as an emblem of the newly founded 'care and repair' society. While the film culminates in a rousing vision of ecological renewal, this restoration differs markedly from the 'nature is healing' fantasies that circulated in the early months of the pandemic. In *The Years of Repair*, the resurgence of nature is not an unintended side-effect of emergency measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus but the outcome of sustained collective effort. It represents a hard-won achievement – an image of recovery grounded in long-term organizing, deliberate restoration, and enduring care, rather than in the temporary cessation of human activity or an accidental reprieve.

CONCLUSION

This article has traced a dialectical trajectory from the thesis of 'nature is healing', through the antithesis represented by Graeme MacKay's four waves cartoon, to the synthesis embodied in *The Years of Repair*. While the post-pandemic imaginary envisaged by Naomi Klein and her collaborators offers a compelling and timely counterpoint to the preceding case studies, its potential reach and long-term effectiveness merit critical consideration.

In a 2021 review published in *Environmental History*, Robert Wilson questions the capacity of *The Years of Repair* and its predecessor featuring Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to unite audiences in what he describes as 'an era of strife and deep partisan division'.[51] Green New Deal advocate Ocasio-Cortez is deeply disliked by Donald Trump, his supporters, and Republicans in general. Opal Tometi, who co-wrote and co-narrates the second film, is a co-founder of Black Lives Matter, a movement equally despised by these same groups. As Wilson notes, the films promote a cultural, economic, and environmental vision fundamentally at odds with the values of Trumpism: one in which political power has shifted towards communities of colour, wealth has been redistributed, and the fossil-fuel economy has been dismantled. He suggests that the films may even risk unintentionally reinforcing reactionary sentiments – assuming, that is, that Trump supporters even bother to watch them, which Wilson does not consider very likely. After all, through the influence of social media, Americans have divided themselves into opposing camps that struggle to understand one another and remain suspicious of those with different political beliefs. As a result, algorithms are likely to funnel the *Message from the Future* films towards audiences that already agree with their perspectives – a classic example of the filter bubble and echo chamber effect.

While Wilson's concerns are legitimate, it is worth noting that *The Years of Repair* is not addressed exclusively to an American audience. Moreover, preaching to the choir, as he suspects the film of doing, is often undervalued. In electoral politics, galvanizing one's base is as crucial as reaching undecided voters or persuading the opposition. In the context of the intertwined crises depicted in the film, fortifying a committed base is not merely a tactic but a foundational step in the larger project of systemic change. Rallying a dedicated and passionate minority can drive broader social movements, influence policy, and eventually shift mainstream discourse. *The Years of Repair* may not overcome the profound divisions of the present, but it performs another essential function: it transforms hope from a passive sentiment into an active, strategic resource. By modelling solidarity, care, and persistence, the film encourages audiences to imagine not only the possibility of rebuilding society along more just and sustainable lines, but also the practical labour such transformation demands.

Viewed from the mid-2020s, *The Years of Repair* also invites a more sobering reflection. The near future it imagined now lies partly behind us, yet the solidaristic transformation it called for has remained largely

unrealized. Instead, the years since the pandemic have been marked by growing political polarization, democratic backsliding, deepening social and economic inequalities, accelerating ecological deterioration, and proliferating wars and mass atrocities. From this perspective, the film's value lies less in its predictive accuracy than in its effort to keep open a horizon of collective possibility at a moment when such possibility was already under severe pressure. If its utopian aspirations now appear even more fragile than they did in 2020, that fragility only underscores the continuing need for the political imagination it sought to sustain.

Taken together, the case studies considered in this article reveal three competing post-pandemic imaginaries: one of automatic ecological recovery, one of cascading and overwhelming crises, and one of collective repair. What is at stake in their mediation is not only how the pandemic is remembered, but how possible futures are made thinkable. Emerging at a moment of deep uncertainty, these imaginaries offered different ways of narrating crisis and possibility. From the soothing 'nature is healing' meme to the apocalyptic imagery of MacKay's four waves and the mobilizing optimism of *The Years of Repair*, they show how cultural memory can be forged in real time – not merely as retrospective reflection but as political struggle. Stories that anticipated the pandemic's afterlives, whether foreclosing or gesturing towards transformation, helped articulate the futures people could imagine and claim. Paying attention to these early narrative templates for imagining the post-pandemic world and the pathways towards it matters not because they dictate what comes next, but because they condition what can be envisaged and demanded in social, political, and ecological terms. Cultural narratives are not mirrors of existing reality but instruments of world-making – resources for rethinking how we respond to crisis, how we practise care, and how we pursue change. If the pandemic briefly suspended the familiar order of things, these narratives show how that disruption could become generative – an opening through which new ways of imagining collective futures begin to take shape.

NOTES

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