



Post-apocalyptic Narratives for Climate Change Education

Chang Hasheminezhad-Li, University of Padova, Padova, Italy

Abstract

This article examines the challenges of incorporating post-apocalyptic narratives into Climate Change Education (CCE). Drawing on current critiques, I identify the three major concerns: the potential to induce learner disempowerment and fatalism, the risk of narrative simplification that weakens critical impact, and the cultural specificity of predominantly Western works. Using Simon Stålenhag's graphic novel *The Electric State* (2018) as a case study, this article demonstrates how carefully selected post-apocalyptic texts can address these challenges.

Keywords

Post-apocalyptic narratives, Climate Change Education, hope education, agency, retro-futurism

Introduction

Post-apocalyptic narratives have become valuable tools for ecological education. By describing worlds, survival, and adaptation following social, environmental or technological collapse, they can help learners grapple with the complexities of climate crisis and their own role in responding to it (Peters & Besley, 2023; D'Orto & Tasquier, 2025). In Climate Change Education (CCE), such narratives have been used in diverse formats and media, from picturebooks that foster tactile and collaborative engagement (Campagnaro & Goga, 2022), to drama-based approaches (Gallagher & Balt, 2024) and participatory scenarios or sensory experiments (Doyle, 2020), all aiming to combine emotional resonance with critical thinking.

However, post-apocalyptic narratives also face critiques. Two concerns are especially relevant for teachers: first, that these stories advance fatalism and a loss of learners' sense of agency; second, that they sacrifice emotional complexity to a simplistic emotional framing of despair or hope. Addressing these critiques, this article examines Simon Stålenhag's *The Electric State* to show how this work 1) presents agency as a daily, concrete practice, 2) resists the emotional binary between hopelessness and optimism, and 3) offers strategies to make cultural specificity a productive subject of classroom discussion.

Post-apocalyptic Narratives in CCE

Critiques of using post-apocalyptic narratives in CCE focus on two main concerns: first, that they foster climate fatalism; second, that they simplify actual challenges and solutions. The first concern is that urgent emotional tones and catastrophic imagery can amplify despair and diminish learners' perceived ability to take meaningful environmental action. As Hulme observes, "The counterintuitive outcome of such language is that it frequently leads to disempowerment, apathy and skepticism among its audience" (2009, p. 348). Without supportive spaces to process these emotions (Houghton et al., 2024), learners risk developing climate fatalism (Flannery, 2024), adopting a mindset that "whatever we do, we're doomed."

The second concern is that, within current CCE trends emphasizing hope, resilience, and optimism (Mochizuki & Bryan, 2024), apocalyptic narratives may be reshaped into overly positive stories, often with unrealistic endings or a focus on exceptional individuals, which obscures the complexity of the climate crisis. A further concern focuses on cultural universality. For many communities, collapse is an ongoing reality rather than a speculative future (Swyngedouw, 2013). Texts rooted in Western contexts may carry assumptions that limit their applicability as global tools for climate education. In short, the challenge is to balance emotional intensity with supportive processing and to retain narrative complexity without reducing stories to simplified emotional binaries or unrealistic optimism.

The Electric State: Agency in Daily Action and Emotional Complexity

Stålenhag's graphic novel *The Electric State* offers a good case study to help students understand agency through daily action and engage with complex ecological emotions. Set in the American West in 1997, after the collapse of technological civilization, the story follows a teenager, Michelle, and her robot companion, Skip, as they travel along an abandoned highway in search of her missing brother. Their journey uncovers a picture of societal disintegration caused by an out-of-control neural network system.

The novel's visual style blends retro-futurism with post-apocalyptic imagery, juxtaposing 1990s American landscapes with advanced technological structures, and interweaving first-person memory fragments from Michelle. Past memories, present journeys, and future ruins coexist, producing a sense of temporal dislocation. *The Electric State* also presents a complex web of interactions among humans, technology, and nature: humans, robots, techno-human hybrids, and natural elements meet, conflict, and cooperate. In today's world, where environmental experiences are often mediated by technology, such depictions offer opportunities to reflect on technology's role in shaping ecological perception and action (Park, 2022).

The Electric State combines strong visual appeal with conceptual depth, making it a valuable resource for educators seeking to connect literary engagement with climate action practice. Its narrative world provides concrete situations for discussing agency in daily action and for guiding students to experience ecological emotions beyond simple despair or uncritical optimism.

To understand how *The Electric State* situates these forms of agency within a broader symbolic framework, it is also necessary to consider the significance of its title. Throughout the book, visual motifs of electricity—power lines stretching across empty skies, glowing circuits, and dimly flickering machines—form a connective structure between human and technological worlds. Electricity operates both as a literal energy source and as a metaphor for interdependence, memory, and control. In the context of post-fossil-fuel ecologies, it represents a paradoxical condition: a technological force that sustains life while revealing the environmental costs of that sustenance. Rather than depicting electricity as external to ecology, Stålenhag visualizes it as part of the same energetic continuum that binds organic and artificial systems. Recognizing this symbolic dimension allows educators to frame discussions of energy dependence and ecological responsibility as intertwined and mutually constitutive processes.

This pedagogical potential becomes clearer when we examine two core elements of this novel: agency as a daily, concrete practice and understanding that resists emotional simplification.

Reconstructing Agency

The Electric State creates space for reader agency on three levels: everyday practices, continuous forward movement, and relational action.

Everyday details, central to characters' agency, are abundant. While Stålenhag's images depict the silence and emptiness of post-apocalyptic wastelands, the actual plot concentrates on Michelle's daily activities. Scenes such as stopping to rest under a pale sky (pp. 20-21), packing her belongings on the roadside (pp. 52-55), bathing and restocking at a dimly-lit gas station (pp. 22-25) draw attention to the rhythms of ordinary life in extraordinary conditions. These small, mundane actions maintain order and humanity in a highly uncertain environment.

At one point Michelle and Skip pause beneath an overpass beside the colossal remains of a collapsed robot. Against the desert horizon glowing beyond, the narrator reflects: "*I managed to get a lot of things done in Mojave. I washed my clothes, bought food, put gas in the car and washed it, and even managed to find some comic books and Kid Kosmo action figures for Skip*" (p. 23). In this juxtaposition of domestic routine and monumental ruin, the act of washing, buying, and refueling becomes a form of quiet endurance. These gestures perform continuity and care in a world that has otherwise disintegrated, exemplifying how *The Electric State* translates agency into the persistence of ordinary maintenance.

These everyday behaviors provide an agency mode that learners can understand. I define agency here as the ability to maintain autonomy and purpose through ordinary, everyday actions in the face of uncertainty. This aligns closely with the concept of "incremental climate action" (Wise et al., 2014), which emphasizes that climate responses exist in daily decisions rather than being limited to major policies or technological breakthroughs. In the classroom, such scenes could be used to invite students to discuss how small, sustained efforts contribute to environmental resilience.

The story likewise emphasizes a forward-moving dynamism. Stålenhag constructs an anti-climactic narrative that avoids dramatic turning points or heroic victories common in traditional disaster stories, replacing them with the protagonist's persistent forward movement. The journey is an open-ended road trip, where sequences of driving dominate the visual field: roads stretch endlessly toward the horizon, perspectives shift between the view from inside the vehicle and a trailing third-person vantage, and the blurred treatment of distance creates a tangible sense of the unknown future.

This dynamic of motion unfolds across several sequences where the car appears repeatedly in transition between deserted towns and monumental ruins (pp. 25–70).

The reader alternates between seeing the road ahead from inside the car and viewing the vehicle as a small, solitary point within vast landscapes. In one such scene, the narration begins with the restrained line, “We had left the town behind and traveled out into the desert” (p. 30). The combination of this minimal statement and the panoramic stillness turns movement itself into a meditative act. The alternation of interior and exterior viewpoints also shifts the reader’s position, sometimes aligning it with Michelle’s vision and sometimes withdrawing it into reflective distance. In this rhythm, *The Electric State* reframes progress as the endurance of orientation toward an uncertain future. In fact, through this dynamic of continuous forward movement, *The Electric State* suggests that action itself, regardless of immediate results, has meaning. These scenes can be used to prompt students to reflect on how perseverance, even without guaranteed outcomes, can counter climate fatalism and reinforce the value of sustained engagement.

The third way in which the novel supports the reader’s agency is through presenting a relational action mode. The robot Skip is not merely a tool; it plays multiple roles: guarding Michelle’s safety while she sleeps (p. 21), standing sentinel in dangerous moments (p. 118), and sharing the burden of luggage and supplies (pp. 22-23). Their bond is conveyed almost entirely without dialogue, through parallel postures, coordinated movements, and the shared occupation of space. Images often depict the two side by side in the frame, as if visually affirming their interdependence. This quiet partnership transcends human-nonhuman boundaries, presenting a model of cooperation with “the other,” whether technological, biological, or environmental.

Across the book’s recurring paired compositions, Michelle and Skip are consistently positioned on the same horizontal plane. Whether walking, resting, or entering new spaces, they move parallel to each other rather than hierarchically. The visual rhythm alternates between wide shots that place them together against expansive landscapes and closer views where their gestures subtly mirror one another. Even in moments of tension, such as the scene with the deer inside the abandoned house (p. 119), this spatial symmetry remains intact. This recurring balance invites a reflection on how equality, care, and interdependence are expressed through posture and framing, linking visual structure to ethical relation.

The visual relationship between Michelle and Skip also illustrates how relational agency is enacted through coordination and mutual attention. Their companionship models cooperation across human and nonhuman boundaries, emphasizing that agency emerges from interdependence rather than individual assertion. Within Climate Change Education, this perspective supports collaborative classroom practices that foreground collective responsibility and shared maintenance as central to ecological

understanding, embedding ecological action in networks that include humans, nonhumans, technology, and environment.

Through these three dimensions—everyday practices, continuous forward movement, and relational action—*The Electric State* demonstrates that post-apocalyptic narratives can be instructional and empowering. By presenting multidimensional, concrete forms of action, such stories can provide educators with a framework for helping students imagine their own roles in climate response.

Resisting Simplification

Stålenhag's novel is likewise a good example of how post-apocalyptic works can avoid simplistic emotional arcs. The novel's image-text structure, in particular, its carefully varied visual-textual rhythm, are primary means by which the book maintains narrative criticality and depth. Page layouts shift between symmetrical image-text pairings, full-spread images with embedded prose, and stretches of image-only sequences. This produces a rhythm that mirrors the non-linear narrative. Within that rhythm, when content alternates between tender, nostalgic memories, unsettling portrayals of technological addiction, and moments of fear toward the unknown, readers are required to navigate multiple emotional registers.

One striking example is the sharp contrast between pages 12-13 and 14-15: the bright yet desolate dust storm scene gives way to a low-saturation nighttime flashback, producing a rupture in tone and time. This abrupt shift forces readers to reconcile conflicting emotions, beyond a simple trajectory toward either despair or hope. Similarly, the silent, image-only sequence on pages 95-100 stretches time, creating space for readers to fill in narrative and emotional gaps. These sequences can be used to invite students to articulate their emotional responses and strengthen their capacity to engage with complex climate emotions.

By combining these visual-textual strategies with its multi-dimensional portrayal of agency, *The Electric State* offers educators a resource that resists simplification while supporting nuanced, emotionally engaged learning about climate crisis.

Conclusion

The reading of *The Electric State* proposed in this shows that post-apocalyptic narratives can be useful in Climate Change Education. By combining a layered visual and textual structure with multidimensional portrayals of agency, post-apocalyptic storytelling can help learners see agency as a concrete, ongoing practice, engage with climate emotions in nuanced ways, and critically interrogate the cultural positioning of climate narratives. Future work could explore alternative texts or adaptations that

reflect a wider range of climate experiences worldwide and further refine strategies for integrating post-apocalyptic storytelling into Climate Change Education.

References

- Campagnaro, M., & Goga, N. (2022). Material green entanglements: Research on student teachers' aesthetic and ecocritical engagement with picturebooks of their own choice. *International Research in Children's Literature*, 15(3), 308-322. <https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2022.0469>
- D'Orto, E., & Tasquier, G. (2025). Narrativity and climate change education: Design of an operative approach. *Sustainability*, 17(4), 1587. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17041587>
- Doyle, J. (2020). Creative communication approaches to youth climate engagement: Using speculative fiction and participatory play to facilitate young people's multidimensional engagement with climate change. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 24. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/14003/3093>
- Flannery, F. (2024). Why we must stop saying "climate apocalypse": Symbols, religious social memory, and effective climate action. *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 59(1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/zygon.11610>
- Gallagher, K., & Balt, C. (2024). *Global climate education and its discontents: Using drama to forge a new way*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032615714>
- Houghton, S., Garvey, J., Conor, L., Wilmsen, B., Dehm, J., Gamble, R., Habib, B., Holmes, K., Millner, J., & Strickland, K. M. (2024). Towards an interdisciplinary agenda for teaching in the climate crisis: Reflections from the humanities and social sciences. *Environmental Education Research*, 30(11), 2007–2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2023.2273791>
- Hulme, M. (2009). *Why we disagree about climate change: Understanding controversy, inaction and opportunity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mochizuki, Y., & Bryan, A. (2024). Victims or vanguards? The discursive construction of the Anthropocene generation and climate change education's hopeful, resilient, post-political subject. In J. Wyn, H. Cahill, & H. Cuervo (Eds.), *Handbook of children and youth studies* (pp. 1129–1144). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-8606-4_130
- Park, E. J. (2022). For technological literacy education: Comparing the asymmetrical view of Heidegger and symmetrical view of Latour on technology. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 41(5), 551–565. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-022-09841-9>

- Peters, M. A., & Besley, T. (Eds.). (2023). *Educational philosophy and post-apocalyptic survival* (Vol. XIV). Routledge.
- Stålenhag, S. (2018). *The Electric State*. Skybound Books.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2013). Apocalypse now! Fear and doomsday pleasures. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 24(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2012.759252>
- Wise, R. M., Fazey, I., Stafford Smith, M., Park, S. E., Eakin, H. C., Archer Van Garderen, E. R. M., & Campbell, B. (2014). Reconceptualising adaptation to climate change as part of pathways of change and response. *Global Environmental Change*, 28, 325–336. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.12.002>