

THINKING SUSTAINABILITY RESEARCH



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Translation in English

Hunger Games, the third instalment in the blockbuster series, District 13: Gale and Katniss are allowed to leave the bunker to go hunting (it's what they did when they were kids, and it brings them together). In a forest, with the sounds of birds and a river. Katniss points a gun at a deer but doesn't shoot it, because it's not afraid of her and it wouldn't be 'fair' to kill it. *Hunger Games*, the fourth and final instalment in the blockbuster series: The capitol is defeated, the people are liberated, and several years have passed. The last scene of the last of the four features: a meadow is in bloom, there is the sound of birdsong. Peeta is playing in the grass with a young child, Katniss is sitting on the ground next to a tablecloth with a baby in her arms – a symbol of serenity finally found. These two scenes, only one or two minutes long, are two revealing examples of the representations of nature in many popular cultural works: a stereotypical postcard nature, frozen and unchanging, presented not for its own sake but as a symbol of the states of mind of the human protagonists. Generally speaking, the nature of our collective imagination is indeed made up of fixed, unchanging and stereotyped images of spaces that we do not frequent on a daily basis, but which we model in our thoughts in relation to what we, humans, are¹.

Yet many of us still have memories of playing outside, alone or with others, digging up earthworms, catching frogs, picking wild flowers to give as a present, climbing the tree in our grandparents' garden... In these memories, 'nature' is plural, varied, unpredictable, free, neither nasty nor nice, full of the unknown and possible discoveries. We've been in contact with it, we've even immersed ourselves in it on many occasions. We know deep down that it is this nature and these links with living things that we need to preserve, in all their diversity and dynamism, and not a meagre collection of photographs yellowed by time. But we don't talk about it, we prefer postcard images, nature seen from afar. In Western societies, we have collectively built what S. Moscovici called an 'unnatural society'², our collective imaginations have gradually separated our 'humanity' from the rest of the living world; or rather, we mobilise this living world, this nature, only when it suits us – one type of human behaviour is not 'natural', while another is – depending on the situation and the issues at stake. We have progressively and collectively denied that we humans are biologically alive and in close relationship with the rest of the living world. Yet we eat living things (plants or animals), live in symbiosis with certain micro-organisms (microbiota) and fight others (certain bacteria or viruses). We recover energy from living species past (sources of coal or oil) or present (wood), the quality of our water and air depends on the proper functioning of biological cycles... The international platform for biodiversity and ecosystem services (IPBES) formalised the importance of these

inter-relationships in its 2019 report, summarising that a good quality of life for humans is directly dependent on the proper functioning of nature³. The nature we as children glimpsed during our games: a diverse group of beings in constant interaction with each other, highly dynamic and variable in space and time, which does not need humans to exist and of which we are a part. Un 'vivant écologique'. Overcoming stereotypical images of nature and renewing our individual and collective links with living ecology is one of the necessary conditions for overcoming the current crises in our human societies. Far from being simple and 'sweet', this proposal calls for a major shake-up of our dominant ways of thinking, and is wildly ambitious! But this is what IPBES and the IPCC are calling for: a profound change in the economic, political, social and technological operating models of Western societies, including our belief systems, values and paradigms.

A little knowledge is of course necessary, a general understanding of what living things are and how they work, including the human species. But if we are to integrate these living things into what makes sense for us collectively, we also need to pay attention to them on a daily basis, in our individual lives and in our social commitments. Give new meaning to the relationship values⁴ we attach to them: living things are important to who we are and are part of us, and taking care of them is part of our quality of life. We also need to tell the story of this ecological life and the diversity of the relationships we have with it. Societies only exist through the narratives they are made of, from their founding myths to the fictions that provide us with so many possible worlds in which to project ourselves⁵.

So how do we go about it? All ideas are welcome to help us get out of the disastrous situation we have collectively built. A diversity of ideas is needed, which will respond to the diversity of natural elements, human collectives and individuals. A diversity of ideas, produced by a diversity of people and cultural and social backgrounds. Artistic creativity is one of the ways of opening up these new avenues, towards a better relationship with ecological life and towards other relationships with people.

As in *Hunger Games*, today's most popular cultural works depict nature without breaking out of the dominant frame of thought: sparsely present, poor in species and diversity, highly controlled by humans⁶... Of course, works of art are contingent on the social norms and conditions of the places and times in which they were created. But art is also a place for transgression and the imagination of new worlds; a place for sharing emotions, attentions and relationships; a place for discovering otherness. Artistic creations can shake people up, increasing their capacity for empathy, relating to other human beings and understanding the world⁷. Under certain conditions, art can also open people up to radical otherness, which concerns not only people but the rest of the living world. So, instead of continuing to run straight towards the wall of social and ecological unsustainability, let's try, each in our own way, to discover nature, this living world that is so rich, so different and yet so close to us. Let's talk about it, each in our own way, sharing our discoveries and memories, inventing new ways of relating to others and working together to imagine new paths towards a sustainable future! Our moral, social and biological survival depends on it.

1: See also Prévot A.C. 2021. *La nature à l'oeil nu*. CNRS publications

2: Moscovici S. 1972. *La société contre nature*. Union générale d'éditions, Paris.

3: Diaz, S., J. Settele, E. Brondizio, et al. 2019 *Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. Advanced unedited version. IPBES, 2019.

4: Chan, K. M. A., et al. 2016 Why protect nature? Rethinking values and the environment. *Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences of USA* 113: 146265.

5: See for example Huston N. 2008. *L'espèce fabulatrice*. Actes Sud

6: See for example: Prévot-Julliard, A. C., R. Julliard, and S. Clayton 2015 Historical evidence for nature disconnection in a 70-year time series of Disney animated films. *Public Understanding of Science* 24: 67280 / Kesebir, S., and P. Kesebir. 2017 A growing disconnection from nature is evident in cultural products. *Perspectives in Psychological Science* 12: 25869 / Babb, Y.M., J. McBurnie, and K.K. Miller. 2018 Tracking the environment in Australian children's literature: the Children's book council of Australian picture book of the year awards 1955-2014. » *Environmental Education Research* 24: 71630.

7: Green, M.C. and T.C. Brock. 2000. The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79: 70121 / Bal, P.M., O.S. Butterman, and A.B. Bakker 2011. The influence of fictional narrative experience on work outcomes: a conceptual analysis and research model. *Review of General Psychology* 15: 36170 / Kidd, D.C. and E. Castano. 2013. Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind. *Science* 342: 37780. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1239918>.