

George Monbiot

The Art of Life

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Why is life treated as less valuable than the depiction of life?

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 19th October 2022

What does it take? How far must we go to alert other people to the scale of the crisis we face? Only one answer is clear: further than we have yet gone. We are hurtling towards planetary tipping points: the critical thresholds beyond which Earth systems collapse. The consequences are unimaginable. None of the horrors humanity has suffered, great as they are, even hints at the scale of what we now face.

Everywhere I see claims that the “extreme” tactics of environmental campaigners will prompt people to “stop listening”. But how could we listen any less to the warnings of scientists and campaigners and eminent committees? How could we pay any less attention to polite objections by “respectable” protesters to the destruction of the habitable planet? Something must shake us out of our stupor.

The response by the media and government to the two Just Stop Oil activists who [threw soup](#) at Vincent van Gogh’s Sunflowers in the National Gallery in London speaks volumes. Decorating the glass protecting the painting with tomato soup (the painting itself was, as the [protesters calculated](#), undamaged) appears to horrify some people more than the collapse of our planet, which these campaigners are seeking to prevent.

[Writing for the Mail on Sunday](#), the home secretary, Suella Braverman, claimed: “There is widespread agreement that we need to protect our environment, but democracies reach decisions in a civilised manner.” Oh yes? So what are the democratic means of contesting the government’s decision to award more than [100 new licences](#) to drill for oil and gas in the North Sea? Who gave the energy secretary, Jacob Rees-Mogg, a democratic mandate to break the government’s legal commitments under the Climate Change Act by instructing his officials to extract “[every cubic inch of gas](#)”?

Who voted for the [investment zones](#) that the prime minister, Liz Truss, has decreed, which will rip down planning laws and trash protected landscapes? Or any of the major policies she has sought to impose on us, after being elected by 81,000 Conservative members – 0.12% of the UK population? By what means is the “widespread agreement” about the need for environmental protection translated into action? What is “civilised” about placing the profits of fossil fuel companies above the survival of life on Earth?

In 2018, Theresa May’s government endorsed the erection of a [statue of Millicent Fawcett](#) in Parliament Square, which holds a banner saying “Courage calls to courage everywhere”, because a century is a safe distance from which to celebrate radical action. Since then, the Conservatives have introduced viciously repressive laws to stifle the voice of courage. Between the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act that the former home secretary Priti Patel [rushed through parliament](#), and the Public Order Bill over which Cruella Braverman presides, the government is carefully criminalising every effective means of protest in England and Wales, leaving us with nothing but authorised processions conducted in near silence and letters to our MPs, which are universally ignored by both media and legislators.

The [Public Order Bill](#) is the kind of legislation you might expect to see in Russia, Iran or Egypt. Illegal protest is defined by the bill as acts causing “serious disruption to two or more individuals, or to an organisation”. Given that the Police Act redefined “serious disruption” to [include noise](#), this means, in effect, all meaningful protest.

For locking or glueing yourself to another protester, or to the railings or any other object, you can be sentenced to 51 weeks in prison – in other words, [twice the maximum sentence](#) for common assault. Sitting in the road, or obstructing fracking machinery, pipelines and other oil and gas infrastructure, airports or printing presses (Rupert says thanks) can get you a year. For digging a tunnel as part of a protest, you can be sent down for three years.

Even more sinister are the “serious disruption prevention orders” in the bill. Anyone who has taken part in a protest in England or Wales in the previous five years, whether or not they have been convicted of an offence, can be served with a two-year order forbidding them from attending further protests. Like prisoners on probation, they may be required to report to “a particular person at a particular place at ... particular times on particular days”, “to remain at a particular place for particular periods” and to submit to wearing an electronic tag. They may not associate “with particular persons”, enter “particular areas” or use the internet to encourage other people to protest. If you break these terms, you face up to 51 weeks in prison. So much for “civilised” and “democratic”.

Who are the criminals here? Those seeking to prevent the vandalism of the living planet, or those facilitating it?

Whenever I visit the National Gallery, I can't help but wonder how many of the places in its treasured landscape paintings have been destroyed by development or agriculture. Such destruction, which Truss, Braverman and the rest of the government now plan to accelerate, even in [our national parks](#), is commonly justified as “the price of progress”. But if someone were to burn or slash the paintings themselves, it would be an abhorrent act of brutality. How do we explain these double standards? Why is life less valuable than the depiction of life?

Sometimes the tension is explicit. John Constable's idylls of rural peace were painted at a time of tremendous conflict and destruction, as communities and landscapes were torn apart by [landlords' enclosures](#). He bemoaned not the erasure of the “changeless” places he painted, but the reaction to it, [lamenting the riots](#) and rick burning that ensured there was “never a night without seeing fires near, or at a distance”. Constable's response to the destruction, in his later years, was to paint [remembered landscapes](#): those, in other words, that had already been obliterated. Like the current government, he celebrated past glories while attacking measures, such as the Reform Act, to improve life in the present.

In raising these issues, I don't seek to deny the value of art or the necessity of protecting it. On the contrary: I want the same crucial protections extended to planet Earth, without which there is no art, no culture and no life. Yet while cultural philistinism is abhorred, ecological philistinism is defended with a forcefield of oppressive law.

The soup-throwing and similar outrageous-but-harmless actions generate such fury partly because they force us not to stop listening, but to start. Why, we can't help asking ourselves, would young people jeopardise their freedom and their future prospects in this way? The answer, we can't help hearing, is that they seek to avert a much greater threat to both.

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