

Art in Climate Argumentation

Matt Morely

We live in an era that is in itself truly fascinating, but is at the same time completely and utterly terrifying. We are in the midst of an unprecedented environmental crisis that is perhaps one the greatest threats to human life that has ever existed. But despite the overwhelming evidence that tells us just how much danger we are in, people don't feel compelled to act. In fact, many don't even believe that we are actually in a crisis despite the shocking corroborations of the changing world around us. This emergency has transcended the constant regurgitation of scientific facts and statistics. One no longer has any need for science in order to recognize that our world is in fact changing. Extreme temperatures force residents to remain in their homes, forest fires wreak havoc all over the world, severe storms and hurricanes devastate our towns and cities, and yet many still refuse to believe that our human activities have anything to do with these catastrophes. The evidence before us is incontrovertible. Our world is changing, and whether we choose to believe it or not, our human activities are responsible for many of these changes. And so the question has to be asked: How did we get here, and what, if anything, is going to get people to understand that this is a real emergency? I believe that the answers to these questions lie within the arts. Art has always been the medium through which we make sense of the world around us. It has the ability to compel beyond what science and facts are capable of by invoking powerful emotions within its audience. I believe that if we are to prevail during these uncertain times, then we need more artists who are willing to take creative risks in service of conveying their message. As writer and environmentalist Paul Kingsnorth emphasizes in *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*, "Artists are needed... We believe that art must look over the edge, face the world that is coming with a steady eye, and rise to the challenge of ecocide with a

challenge of its own: an artistic response to the crumbling of the empires of the mind.” (Kingsnorth & Hine 2019). In this essay, I am going to discuss why I believe that art needs to become a fundamental piece of the environmental crisis, but first, we need to look at environmentalism from a sociological perspective.

Much of the current environmental crisis pertains to sociology, as the concept of the “environment” is itself a social construction. The very fabric of the environment and the way that we perceive it is rooted in what we call framing. This is a term that is used to describe the ways that we perceive different entities as well as the relationships between those entities. A frame is an unconscious system of interconnected words and ideas that can be triggered even if only one of them is explicitly referenced. For example, the frame for the word “school” might include words such as “teacher,” “student,” “classroom,” and so on. When a frame is activated, it can trigger certain emotional responses within a person or group of people. We see this utilized particularly in politics and media, but it can also be applied to environmental rhetoric. An example of this concept at play can be seen in the terminological shift from “global warming” to “climate change.” Beginning in the mid 1970s, “global warming” was the term most commonly used to describe the fluctuating temperature and weather patterns that were being recorded around the world. However, around the early 2000s, there was a push from politicians and communication consultants to use “climate change” as an alternative, believing that it sounded more positive and less scary than its predecessor. “The idea was that ‘climate’ had a nice connotation—more swaying palm trees and less flooded out coastal cities. ‘Change’ left out any human cause of the change. Climate just changed. No one to blame.” (Lakoff 2010). This lexical shift highlights one of the biggest flaws with regards to current environmental

framing. Our society seems to think of nature and the environment as abstract ideas that exist outside of human civilization. This is due to the historical framing of nature as a place where people are not present. “The very fact that we have a word for ‘nature’ is evidence that we do not regard ourselves as part of it.” (Kingsnorth & Hine 2019). The danger of this perception is that it allows us to believe that many of these environmental disasters occur in places that most people will never see. “The effects of climate change occur ‘out there’, in abstract ‘nature’—distanced from people’s everyday experience.” (Palmer 2013). We don’t necessarily need to hold ourselves accountable for the environmental damage that we may be causing when we fall into this mindset, as it leads to a distancing effect between people and the environment. We hear about the effects of climate change every day, but we have become so detached from nature that we aren’t necessarily forced to confront these issues.

The other fundamental problem with environmental rhetoric is that it fails to properly carry the message to its intended audience. Much of environmental science seems to have become the simple reporting of facts and statistics, but as we are seeing, this is not always an effective method of communication. There is rarely any sort of emotional response to facts and statistics because they don’t always carry any significant meaning to non-scientists. However, when you can take these facts and turn them into a story with a compelling narrative, people tend to be much more receptive. This idea is highlighted by Randy Olson in his book, *Houston, We Have a Narrative*, wherein he emphasizes the need for science to incorporate narrative and storytelling into its arguments. “Scientists must realize that science is a narrative process, that narrative is story, therefore science needs story.” (Olson 2015). Over the past several years, one thing has become abundantly clear about environmental activism: People will never be motivated by facts

alone, we need something more. It's not about conveying different information, it's about conveying the same information, but in a different way. Environmental scientists very much understand the seriousness of the situation that we are in, but if they cannot find a way to effectively communicate that situation to the general public, then we will continue to make no progress. We need to figure out a way to get everybody on the same page, both scientists and non-scientists alike, and this is where the arts come into play. In order to see true change, we need artists who are willing to challenge the current narrative of environmentalism, and what better place to start than within the world of music.

In order to compare some of the different stylistic approaches to environmentalism in the arts, I look no further than Australian prog-psych rockers King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard. Despite their ridiculous sounding name, King Gizzard have proven themselves to be one of the most versatile and musically proficient rock acts of the past ten years. Since 2012, the band has released 23 studio albums, covering everything from smooth indie jazz to hair raising thrash metal. They have also been very outspoken about environmental issues, and much of their discography is heavily tied into issues such as climate change, resource exhaustion, and the exploitation of animal food sources. In 2019, the band released two separate studio albums that were both rooted in environmentalism, *Fishing for Fishies* and *Infest the Rats' Nest*. While both of these albums were produced with the goal of tackling various different environmental issues, each one saw the band take an extremely different stylistic approach. The first album, *Fishing for Fishies*, was a fun, light-hearted endeavor into the world of boogie rock. Boogie rock is a musical subgenre that developed out of the blues rock movement in the late 1960s. It is typically characterized by swung, laid back grooves and blues undertones. King Gizzard employs these

stylistic techniques on the album's title track, "Fishing for Fishies." The song starts off with a swinging, almost New Orleans jazz style drum beat, which is moments later joined by a finger-picked guitar melody, a walking bassline, and soft calls of the harmonica. The song feels very intentionally cheesy and overly jovial, but it still carries a serious message. On the hook of the song, Stu Mackenzie sings "Fishing for fishies don't make them feel happy or me neither, I feel so sorry for fishies." Here the band calls into question the morality of fishing for recreational or competitive purposes. Mackenzie's lyrics suggest that fishing for any purpose other than feeding one's self is cruel and wrong. This is further implied by lyrics such as "It seems like cruelty to me, you ain't hungry, leave them be." This song isn't just about overfishing and the damage that it brings to the world's oceans, but it's also more broadly about humanity's treatment towards animals. The band is highlighting how human beings seem to perceive themselves as superior to nature and all creatures living within it, while also calling out the hypocrisy of this viewpoint. The song "Plastic Boogie" also contains heavy environmental themes, specifically regarding the overuse of plastic and the damage that it can bring to all kinds of wildlife. Unlike the mellow grooves of "Fishing for Fishies," this song is a bit heavier and more upbeat, which suggests the dire nature of the situation. This is also accentuated by lyrics such as "Oh, the way we wrap it is wrong... it's like a vendetta against our mother nature." Despite the somewhat dark and gloomy undertones of this track, it still feels like a fun and driving experience, which is true of most songs on this album.

Reception to *Fishing for Fishies* was mostly positive, but the album did receive a notorious 4.8 out of 10 from the popular music website *Pitchfork*. Music critic Sophie Kemp published a somewhat unforgiving review of the album, calling it "soulless" and "downright boring." She

went on to say that the album was “vaguely about the environment, but mostly about goofing off with expensive equipment in service to the concept of ‘boogie oogie oogie.’” (Kemp 2019).

It’s true that a lot of the environmental themes on *Fishing for Fishies* can be easily overlooked by unobservant listeners, but the band would fix this problem with their next project. Not four months after the release of *Fishing for Fishies*, *Infest the Rats’ Nest* was released, which saw the band trying their hand at thrash metal. Thrash metal is a subgenre of metal music that is characterized by driving tempo, complex instrumentals and an overall aggressive sound. *Infest the Rats’ Nest*, aside from being the band’s first endeavor into thrash metal, also contains a heavy environmental and sociopolitical narrative. The story follows a post-apocalyptic version of the Earth in which all resources have been depleted, causing the rich and powerful to flee the planet and colonize Mars. We see glimpses of this world on the album's opening track, “Planet B,” where Mackenzie sings of browning fields, rusting tractors, and a harsh nuclear winter. On the hook of the song, Mackenzie sings “there is no planet B, open your eyes and see.” With this song, the band is essentially saying that if we ruin the planet Earth, we don’t have anywhere else to go. Many people believe that humanity might one day possess the knowledge and technology in order to terraform and colonize the planet Mars, but the band pokes holes in this philosophy on the song “Mars for the Rich,” on which they suggest that even if the colonization of Mars was a possibility at some point in the future, it would most likely only be an option for the wealthy and powerful due to the costs and risks associated with space travel. The band gives commentary on the horrors of factory farming and genetic engineering on the song “Organ Farmer,” which features some of the most manic instrumentals on the entire album. The song “Superbug” is about the rise of diseases and illnesses due to antibiotic resistance. Unlike most of the other songs on the album, “Superbug” is very slow and sludgy, almost resembling the

soundtrack for a zombie-apocalypse thriller. The lyrics portray a world that's being ravaged by the "superbug," an unstoppable plague that is extremely transmissible and has the potential to wipe out all of humanity. The main theme of this song is emphasized by the lyric "unnecessary anti-Bs likely killed humanity." This line alludes to the overuse of antibiotics, which has led to a drastic rise in many modern diseases. After this song, the second half of the album takes much more of a cli-fi turn which sees the survivors of the plague attempting to colonize Venus, but their attempt fails as Venus's atmosphere is toxic, making it an uninhabitable planet. This could be a metaphor for the ongoing toxification of the Earth's atmosphere due to greenhouse gas and chemical emissions.

The release of *Infest the Rats' Nest* was also accompanied by 3 bizarre music videos for the songs "Planet B," "Organ Farmer," and "Self-Immolate," each one packed with symbolism and easter eggs. The first video, "Planet B," showcases the band frolicking around a field in orange jumpsuits before a woman with a gun shows up and starts killing them one by one. As she picks each band member off, the others continue to frolic around, not even really attempting to get away. One runs straight into the gun, one starts jumping up and down in place, one even simply lays down on the ground and waits to be killed. I believe that this video is a metaphor for humanity's response (or lack of a response) to the environmental catastrophes that we are seeing. We are in the midst of one of the most significant threats to human life that has ever existed, and yet the majority of people aren't doing anything about it. It's as if somebody is holding a gun to our heads, and instead of doing anything, we're just simply waiting for them to pull the trigger. It's also worth noting that the band members are wearing orange jumpsuits that appear to resemble prison uniforms, which may represent humanity's inability to escape from

planet Earth. From here, the videos only become more and more unhinged. In the “Organ Farmer” video we see the band demolish a car inside of what appears to be a human factory farm. At the end of the video, the masses of people inside of the building are sprayed with some kind of gas, which could represent the use of chemicals in the food of factory-farmed animals. The “Self-Immolate” video, which is quite possibly the most disturbing video of the bunch, sees the band members drinking gasoline and setting themselves on fire while running around the field from the “Planet B” video. When asked about the album and the music videos that accompanied its release, Mackenzie said “thinking about things that are going on on planet Earth right now is really scary, and it’s way scarier to me than any horror movie... the interesting thing about humans is that we are kind’ve going down laughing at the moment, and we’re having a good time as we go down, and I think that was the main general theme of all of the videos.” (Mackenzie 2019).

Reception to *Infest the Rats’ Nest* was much more consistent than that of *Fishing for Fishies*. It quickly became a fan favorite, and most critics agreed that while the album wasn’t perfect, it was still an adventure that was worth having. Stuart Berman of *Pitchfork* referred to this album as “a raging response to a world where even the most despairing UN climate reports barely make a blip.” (Berman 2019). Unlike *Fishing for Fishies*, the environmental themes on this album were indisputable, and even casual listeners were able to pick up on the largely environmentalist inspired messages. It’s worth reiterating the fact that this is the album that marks the band’s first crack at the metal genre. Metal is an inherently belligerent musical genre, and it was a conscious decision on behalf of the band to make music that sounded like this. The band is painting the hellscape of what the Earth will look like if we fail to act, and the frenzied

thrash metal sound compliments this sentiment very nicely. There is also a very noticeable level of anger and rage that can be heard on this album. The band is clearly frustrated with the lack of a response to the climate crisis from global leaders and politicians, and that frustration carries all throughout the tracklist. Berman puts it particularly well in his review of the record, saying that it “embraces the contentious stance that metal isn’t necessarily a way of life, but a passing mood we all feel from time to time.” (Berman 2019). Metal is by no means the most popular genre of music, nor is it the most accessible. The band could’ve easily made something that would’ve resonated with a larger audience, but instead they chose to make something that is an honest portrayal of the situation as they see it.

I bring up this band specifically because I truly believe that this is the kind of content that we need to see more of if we want to see more results. Environmental science fails to spark interest because it doesn’t know how to portray scientific information to a non-scientist audience. This leads to scientists communicating only with other scientists rather than non-scientists.

“Academics find themselves talking to even smaller and narrower academic audiences, using a language that educated readers do not understand, publishing in journals they don’t read, and asking questions they don’t care about.” (Hoffman 2015). In other words, the environmental catastrophe that we are seeing is the result of a disconnect between the scientific community and the non-scientific community. It all comes down to a simple matter of communication. We need scientists to research and investigate what is going on around our planet, but the vast majority of human beings are not scientists, and at the end of the day, it’s the non-scientists who need to be convinced that a change is necessary. There needs to be a middle-man between these two groups, someone who is not necessarily a scientist, but can still act as a translator and a mediator

between the scientists and the non-scientists. We need someone who can take the information that the scientists are bringing to the table and break it down to the general public in a way that is digestible and easy to interpret. This, I believe, is why art must become a fundamental part of environmentalism. When considering some of the most influential people of the past ten years, the names of accomplished climate-scientists are not the ones who come to mind, rather it's people such as Taylor Swift, Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé. These are the people who are truly influential: The artists, the trend-setters, the people who, through their art, can influence people to change their habits and can truly drive people towards a more eco-friendly lifestyle. These are the people who can inspire others to speak out against corrupt companies and politicians who continue to exploit the environment for their own gain. These people are the last piece of the puzzle that's missing within the environmental crisis. We need artists, we need influencers, we need to make it fashionable to care about the environment. We need to stumble upon some kind of middle ground between science and the arts. As stated by author Ellen Dissanayake in her 1988 book, *What is Art For?*, "There seems to be something about art—it's indefinability, its multiformity, its intimations of transcendence—that makes the scientist feel that his methods and tools are inadequate for understanding it, just as there is something about science—its rigor, its tendency to mechanical reductionism—that makes the artist or lover of the arts suspicious of its pronouncements concerning anything in the realm of the 'spirit.'" (Dissanayake 1988). If we want to see a true change, then we must appeal to the "spirit" that Dissanayake speaks of here. King Gizzard, while they may not be the most popular music group, are doing something incredibly important with their music, and I firmly believe that more artists need to take influence from what they are doing with works such as *Infest the Rats' Nest* and its accompanying music videos. With these projects, King Gizzard forces their audience to react to

the degradation of the environment. When you watch each of these 3 music videos, you have to have some kind of a reaction, even if that reaction is simply “what the hell is going on in this video.” It’s important to note that all art is subjective, and that a song or painting or movie isn’t necessarily going to resonate with everybody who comes across it. At the end of the day, not everybody is going to like or appreciate what the band is doing on this record, but I believe that we need more artists who are willing to produce content like this. We need artists who are willing to call the situation like it is, without worrying about who they might offend along the way. We need art that will make us stop and consider how our own individual actions affect the environment that nurtures us. We need art that is unapologetic, and blatant, and in-your-face, because nothing else seems to be working at this point. This isn’t to say that every artist needs to light themselves on fire just to send a message, but in the end, I believe that art like this is what it’s going to take to motivate true environmental change.

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