

‘The Oil Machine’: How environmental grand narratives obstruct ‘real’ change

The ‘ecological crisis’ is a big, technical, complicated issue; and all too often, therefore, how this is presented isolates and simplifies, and more especially, relies on commonly-held tropes to convey meaning. But what if those tropes are not objectively correct?; and so as the media feeds-back those tropes, it increasingly distorts how we react to the ecological crisis.



Paul Mobbs, ‘The Meta-Blog’, issue no.25, Imbolic 2023

In late 2022, I was asked to review the film, ‘The Oil Machine’¹. Let’s say, [on viewing it](#)², I was not enamoured by its content. What then dismayed me even more was how, across social media and activist forums, people reacted uncritically to the content of the film – not realising that its underlying narrative was misinforming that discussion, and thus misdirecting how we might address the complex nature of ecological change.

Philosophy and sociology has a concept called the, ‘[meta-narrative](#)’³: The idea that society relies on historical, [self-justifying narratives](#)⁴ in order to provide a framework for how we discuss everyday matters: If ‘[jargon](#)’⁵ is the way experts classify increasingly specialised ideas, to both save time and to render their discussions ‘exclusive’; meta-narratives are the way popular debates encompass great political ideas, social beliefs, or assumed trends, as if they are real, tangible things that affect our lives.

Problem is, those meta-narratives are often not ‘real’. They often assume events or trends with little empirical evidence to validate their existence.

For example, the BBC recently carried out [a review](#)⁶ of its economics journalism. It concluded that the BBC’s coverage [often risked](#)⁷ its need for impartiality, stating that: “*general assumptions seem to lurk... either unnoticed or uncorrected*”; and that this is often carried out unconsciously as, “*these trade-offs can seldom be known or specified completely*”. More pointedly, the report concluded:

“Too often, it’s not clear from a report that fiscal policy decisions are also political choices; they’re not inevitable, it’s just that governments like to present them that way.”

In one sense, ‘The Oil Machine’ does contrast certain social or economic meta-narratives as they apply to oil or energy. Where I had problems with the film was that, in order to make those observations, it used meta-narratives from the environmental movement which are equally ill-defined, and factually flawed; and so, as in the BBC’s ‘impartiality’ deficit, failed to give an objective view of both the problem and the full range of possible solutions.

In Britain, popular environmental narratives are consistently framed within an affluent, ‘First World’ perspective – where any consideration of environment issues unquestioningly accepts an entitlement to that lifestyle. But what if those narratives are, certainly for the future of the environment, fatally flawed? – and are at the root of why ecological damage cannot be halted.

Drilling deeper...

{note, where a time index is given below, e.g. [0:43:17], it relates to the version of the documentary on BBC iPlayer}

When I look at ‘The Oil Machine’ I do not see the same things as the ‘average’ person. That’s because I’ve spent much of the last 30 years researching energy, and energy policy, especially as it relates to Britain; and how the choices made about energy policy and technology affected the environment in the past, and affect it today, and are likely to affect it in the future.

The problem I have with the film is that, for want of a better term, it’s ‘lazy’: These are complicated issues, which – *for the average UK consumer* – have predictably distressing outcomes when explored in detail. Unfortunately, rather than explain that, and creating confidence through imparting knowledge, the film falls-back upon the tired tropes eco-documentaries have used repeatedly for 20 years.

I highlight the BBC's review of its economics journalism because I think there's a similar problem of factual impartiality within the media's environmental coverage. This documentary was part funded, and presented by BBC Scotland. How the BBC, and the mass media generally, have influenced the public's views on climate change in the past, to create the impressions 'recycled' through the film, has to be viewed critically. And when we compare what is said in the film, against what we can demonstrate empirically, inconsistencies arise.

How the film presents this issue could be seen in the context of the [SNP's recent move-away](#)⁸ from North Sea oil; promoting Scotland's renewable resources as a more secure, longer-lasting alternative. While the BBC in England might have problems presenting this, in the context of the [political debate in Scotland](#)⁹ this is not 'revolutionary'.

At a more basic journalistic level, though, there's a problem with both the accuracy of the statements made in isolation, and when set against the background of all ecological issues. For example:

"There's a new oil and gas project, which is set to be licensed in the Cambo Field, which is in the North Sea. It's one of the biggest North Sea oil fields that's ever been found. So we're here to point out the hypocrisy of approving this new field just after the IEA have said that we cannot approve and we cannot invest in new oil and gas." [0:22:47]

That is not true. The [Cambo Field](#)¹⁰ has an estimated 600 million barrels of oil in place. In contrast, the [Forties Field](#)¹¹ had 4,200 million barrels of oil – seven times more. And within the historic trend of North Sea production, how '[Peak Oil](#)'¹² influences the size of past and future field discoveries, and what that inevitably means for the present and future production in the North Sea, was not explored.

I do not expect 'non-expert' members of the public – who feature throughout the film – to know such details. What I do expect is that when members of the public, and especially expert 'talking heads', present contested or partial information, that it is explored against the known technical and scientific criteria which influence those issues.

If that basic thing does not happen then – as outlined in the review of the BBC's economics journalism – wholly misleading 'meta-narratives' will arise, and distort how, as a nation, we decide to deal with these issues in the future.

Environmentalism often frames arguments within an idealised morality; where 'blame', or 'culpability', is a reason why it's good to take certain actions – *because who would not want to 'do the right thing'?*

"Yeah, they're going to blame us and we're not even the ones in control here." [1:11:26]

As the wise lad in the film succinctly puts it, once you admit that you are not 'in control', then that creates a whole new set of problems for environmentalism's 'moral imperative' for action: Not only is it not your 'fault', but also, how can you possibly hope to take action to avert this crisis?

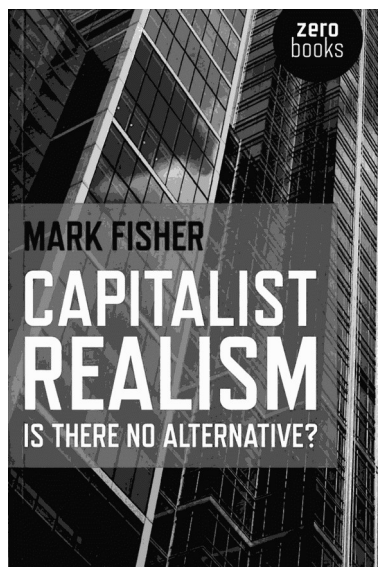
"It does come into question how much we are like living in democracy. How much our politicians are actually representing us or how much they're representing big business." [0:23:33]

It's not the demonstrable lack of political power that is the issue here; it's the question of whether we have ever lived in a democracy. And for those who believe we do, or once lived in a democracy in Britain, there are five keywords which must be considered: 'The Monarch'; and the 'House of Lords'.

Environmental campaigns in Britain do not deal with the 'hard' issue of political and economic power. Those aspects of the ecological debate were jettisoned by the movement in the 1980s as it sought inclusion within the mainstream political arena. Therein lies the root of the problem.

As the philosophers Mark Fisher and Slavoj Žižek say, '*people are more willing to accept the end of the world than the end of capitalism*'. Perhaps, literally, that is an idea far more applicable to environmentalism than any other movement!

Fisher's exploration of '[capitalist realism](#)'¹³ accurately frames the way this film contrasts the political and economic 'reality' of North Sea oil and gas extraction, with both the ecological impacts of that, and the response of the environment movement. The rationality presented by



both sides in the film contests technical issues, but at no point ever challenges the basis for why these resources are being exploited – to maintain [‘The Consumer Society’](#)¹⁴; and at no point is the perceived ‘entitlement’ of a minority of the worlds population to energy, and the economic power that confers, ever explored.

Without an accurate diagnosis of ‘the root of the problem’, how can it be solved?; and why is it environmentalists cannot see this limitation?

Rules turn a ‘scam’ into a ‘system’

This year, E.F. Schumacher’s book, [‘Small is Beautiful’](#)¹⁵, turns fifty years-old. He makes an [astute observation](#)¹⁶ in advancing his case:

“We might remind ourselves that to calculate the cost of survival is perverse. No doubt, a price has to be paid for anything worth while: to redirect technology so that it serves man instead of destroying him requires primarily an effort of the imagination and an abandonment of fear.”

The [Laws of Thermodynamics](#)¹⁷ are ‘absolute’ – we can physically test them, and validate their existence, and for that reason we know that we do not have the power to change them. Our knowledge of geology and the occurrence of minerals is ‘certain’ – in that it is not absolute, but within a known probability we can show that our knowledge of the Earth and its systems is accurate.

In contrast, concepts such as money, or debt, only exist in the mind of humans. That said, what is made in the mind can as easily be remade – an idea which was explored by [David Graeber](#)¹⁸:

“...if there is anything essentially human, it’s the capacity to imagine things and bring them into being... and that alienation occurs when we lose control over the process.”

[Graeber’s book](#)¹⁹ on social movements considers why a failure to be able to change the world around us creates alienation; resulting in the kinds of stress and [‘eco-anxiety’](#)²⁰ that the film presents. In fact, that same contradiction – between knowledge and action – is stated at the beginning of the film:

“It can feel like you’re up against

something that’s so massive, that’s got the support of governments and people who are so much more powerful than you... that it’s quite difficult sometimes to know what to do to change that... I think that’s basically what eco-anxiety is; being constantly worried about whether or not you’re going to have a future.” [0:02:54]

The ‘rules’ of the system which are enforced upon us are defined to favour those with political power – *because they make the rules*. They are not physical laws; they are not geophysical limitations; they are simply ‘ideas’ which could as easily be re-imagined.

Why, then, cannot society simply re-imagine these rules? It is, perhaps, because they are not routinely tested, or validated by popular debate?

The environmental movement consistently argues about technologies, or policy, or targets. Why can it not argue for the dissolution of corporations, banning technologies, or the elimination of property rights? The fact is: Since the 1980s, leading figures in the environmental movement have appropriated the language of [neoliberalism](#)²¹ to make arguments for change; and not only has this failed to stem the decline in the environment, that decline has also become far worse over that time.

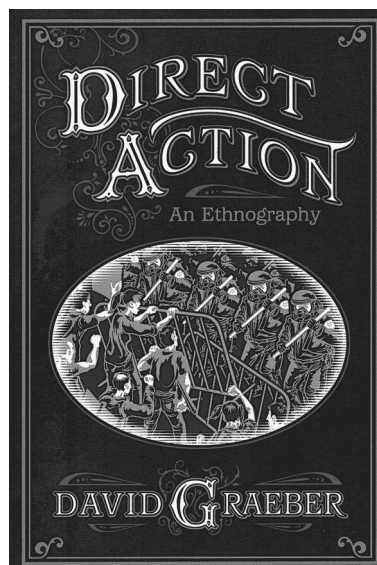
The film doesn’t quantify the time-scale for when this ecological damage took place. In fact, given how it is described in the film, the time-scale presented [is misleading](#)²² because it assumes the problems began in the late Nineteenth Century:

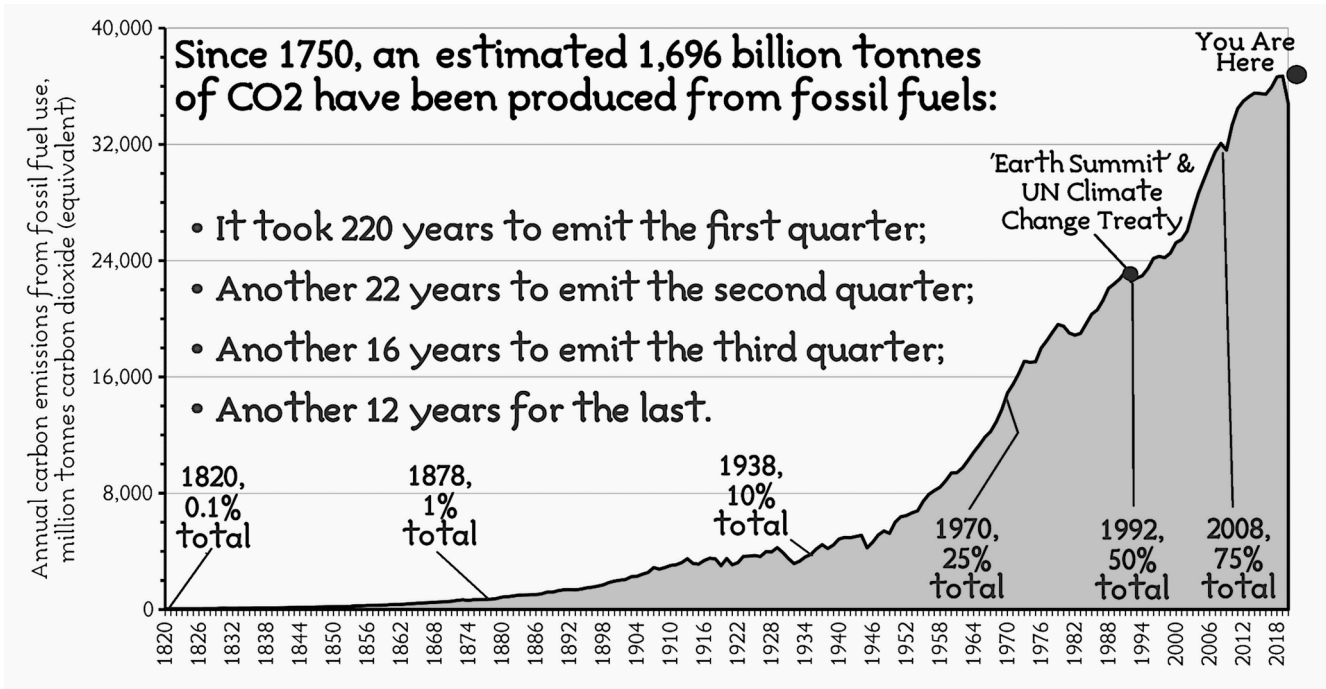
“Oil was discovered in 1859. [what] powered lights in cities – whale oil. About ten years later, half of that whaling fleet was worthless because nobody needed the whales any more. It’s going to take a lot longer, but the rigs of today can be equated to the whaling vessels of 150 years ago.” [1:14:57]

There are 3 problems with that:

Firstly, whales were already in decline in the mid-Nineteenth Century – just as oil is in decline today. In fact, well before fossil oil was widely used, the use of coal to create [town gas](#)²³ was already filling the demand for lighting in new urban settlements.

Secondly, to say ‘oil was discovered in 1859’ presumes oil production began with the [Pennsylvania Oil](#)





[Rush](#)²⁴. In fact, from 1850, the world's first commercial oil refinery was operating in Scotland, [at Bathgate](#)²⁵ in West Lothian – using mined oil shales to manufacture oil, paraffin, and naphtha. And in Scotland, for millennia before that, 'renewable' fish oil [was commonly used](#)²⁶ to fuel lamps.

Thirdly, fossil fuel exploitation is not a linear process; it is an exponential one. In the 270 years from 1750 to 2020, roughly 1,700 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide (equivalent) have been emitted from the use of fossil fuels: It took 220 years to emit the first quarter; it took 22 years to emit the second quarter; it took 16 years to emit the third quarter; and it took 12 years to emit the last quarter.

Let's [state this really clearly](#)²⁷, in bold-type: **Half of all the carbon emissions produced by fossil fuels since 1750, have taken place since 1992, when the world agreed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change**²⁸ (UNFCCC) in order to reduce carbon emissions.

When we talk of 'blame' within eco-debates we don't have to look to the world of Victorian England, or even the early 20th Century. Half of this problem has been created in the last thirty-or-so years by the world ['as it operates' today](#)²⁹ – the system we all know and benefit from right now.

With this shard of knowledge about emissions people often jump to the issue of 'population'; and yes, at some level, population plays a part here. However, when we look at who it is within in the hu-

man population benefits the most from energy consumption, [just over half](#)³⁰ of the world's carbon emissions are attributable [to around 10%](#)³¹ of the global population. It is not the mass of the human population that is creating this problem; it is a small minority, about 800 million, of the globally affluent.

At some point we have stop falling-back upon lazy arguments about corporate power, or a lack of democracy, and actually examine what it is the environment movement stands for. Why is it that the environment movement, [out of all the movements](#)³² which arose out of the political and social upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s, is the only one which has not only failed to make progress, but has presided over an absolute regression of the problem it was formed to address? And this being the case, why does the movement not reassess its fundamental approach and tactics, rather than trying to maintain the same tired, ['statist'](#)³³ calls for action?

By not framing the issue of climate change within an analysis of political and economic power – both who wields that power, and who benefits the most from it – the film not only fails to highlight the scale of the damage, but also the weight for 'who' created it. Again, that is a factor which points directly at the affluent, 'Western' lifestyle; and thus solutions to this problem cannot be contemplated without directly confronting the excesses of that lifestyle.

Restricting alternatives, maintaining stasis

We see this basic failure to test ideas in the way the film presents renewable energy as an ‘uncontested good’; and in polarisation, fossil fuels as bad:

“The urgency of the climate crisis is not entirely unlike the threat we would face if we were to be hit by a meteorite. And, therefore, we cannot rely on self-serving capital gains-making shareholders in oil companies for that transition.” [01:02:36]

A commentator makes the point that fossil fuel lobbyists are present at climate negotiations, often as part of government delegations; and that renewable energy interests are far less represented – as if progress could be made if that were reversed.

Thus far, the expansion of renewable energy has not lead to a proportionate decrease in emissions. There are a number of factors affecting that:

Firstly, as energy consumption grows, renewable energy often just keeps pace [with energy growth](#)³⁴ rather than supplanting fossil fuel use;

Secondly, the current focus on renewable sources necessitates the mass electrification of society – the process of which [increases the demand](#)³⁵ for resources, creating carbon emissions, leading to an [‘energy-emissions trap’](#)³⁶;

Thirdly, the large expansion of mining necessitated by the adoption of mass renewable technologies has the same impacts of [biodiversity loss](#)³⁷ (including the proposed new impact of [deep sea mining](#)³⁸), the creation of [neocolonial relationships](#)³⁹, and the [exploitation of civil conflicts](#)⁴⁰ – all of which the environmental movement has previously blamed the fossil fuel industry for causing.

The [‘Green New Deal’](#)⁴¹, the plan to transition to [‘100% renewable energy’](#)⁴², is not discussed – which is a significant omission. In the film, a person comments on the International Energy Agency’s (IEA) call for ending new fossil fuel developments. The IEA have also issued a report highlighting the [possible resource restrictions](#)⁴³ on the renewables transition – but this wasn’t mentioned.

In fact, a move to ‘100% renewable energy’ is extremely uncertain due to the limits on mineral resource production: Not only the speed at which those resources [can be produced](#)⁴⁴ to meet emissions targets; but also their [ultimate availability](#)⁴⁵.

We have to ask, *what is the root cause here?*: Fossil fuels use; or generally, the [supply of energy and resources](#)⁴⁶ to maintain our economic model?

Both fossil fuels and renewable energy require a large-scale globalised mining effort to sustain them, with all the ecological impacts this entails. On current evidence, while there are differences in the degree or type of impacts, there is no structural difference between a mass consumption system using fossil fuels, and one using renewable energy. Arguing about the ‘source’ of energy is a misdirection from the root of this issue – [energy consumption](#)⁴⁷.

The core, polarising assumption in the film – that ‘renewables are good’ and ‘fossil fuels are bad’ – is a distortion of the available evidence. There is no objective reason to assume: That renewable energy is an incontestable good; that it would solve the problem of carbon emissions; or that it would cure the ills of [neocolonial resource exploitation](#)⁴⁸ – for which the City of London finance establishment, featured in the film in relation to its support for oil, is also a global centre for metal mining interests.

Initially, the environmental movement focussed on changing lifestyles in order to guarantee a future for all species on the planet. Today that [‘deep ecological’](#)⁴⁹ focus, [as was foreseen](#)⁵⁰ forty years ago [when the movement](#)⁵¹ began to fracture, has been sold-off for an [‘ecomodernist’](#)⁵² perspective – which does not challenge ‘business as usual’, and which removes all introspection on lifestyle. Instead the focus for change [are technofixes](#)⁵³ which try to make that mode of living less harmful, but which ultimately have [no significant impact](#)⁵⁴ against the forces driving consumption.

The film’s perspective is not one which makes change; it’s a perspective which creates ‘stasis’.

Practically, what environmentalists advocate is not replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy; practically, they advocate replacing the mining of hydrocarbons – to provide energy – with the mining of metal resources – to provide energy. At no point is that demand for energy, or the global equity of energy use, ever seriously challenged.

‘Stockholm Syndrome’ and consumerism

Of course, this flags the question of, *‘what are the alternatives?’*

The [Paris Agreement](#)⁵⁵ relies on technologies which do not exist, or which have a questionable efficacy, in order to perpetuate the current global economic model. How is this possible, or permissible?

“Through our landmark [North Sea Transition Deal](#)⁵⁶, we are backing the decarbonisation of the oil and gas sector to support high value jobs and safeguard the skills necessary to develop new low carbon industries across the country, said a spokesperson’. I mean, that doesn't really make sense because, I mean, they're talking about decarbonising the oil and gas sector. It's like, you can't decarbonise oil and gas.” [0:13.48]

The future development options for the North Sea mentioned in the film do answer this question – but it is was not explained why this is the case, and why it is wrong. The reality is that these technologies not only [perpetuate](#)⁵⁷ fossil fuel production in the North Sea, they also seek to increase it.

For example, the proposal for [hydrogen production on Teeside](#)⁵⁸ assumes that the carbon dioxide is captured and then buried in the North Sea. What was not said is that this 'buried' carbon dioxide will likely be used for ['enhanced oil recovery'](#)⁵⁹ – flushing out [more oil and gas](#)⁶⁰ from underground rocks.

So when, as comically demonstrated in the film, the industry talk of ['net zero operation'](#)⁶¹:

“In 20 years' time, I would love in the UK that we're still producing the same level, the same level of hydrocarbons that we're producing now, but with a net, with a net zero footprint.” [00:41:24]

The 'net' of 'net zero' means subtracting the amount of carbon buried, from the direct emissions of their operations, to produce the 'net zero' part of the statement; but this does not include the carbon value of oil and gas sold, or the extra oil and gas flushed out with that 'buried carbon'.

This insistence on 'business as usual' – written into the Paris Agreement, and then justified through absurd notions such as 'net zero' fossil fuels – is the [principle obstacle to real change](#)⁶². Unless we tackle these assumptions, by proposing a new paradigm for change, the outlook will be no different to the past few decades of inaction.

There is a growing body of academic research which outlines what we need to do, and which sets some broad guidelines for how we must change:

Firstly, [ending economic growth](#)⁶³, since within an [environmental justice](#)⁶⁴ or [ecological perspective](#)⁶⁵ it cannot be justified;

Secondly, a [rapid simplification](#)⁶⁶ of the most [materially-advanced lifestyles](#)⁶⁷, both relocalising to

close resource loops and eliminate transport, and cutting consumption to reduce demand; and

Thirdly, as an inevitable consequence of these options, ['degrowth'](#)⁶⁸ – a reduction, of [perhaps 75% to 90%](#)⁶⁹, in the most materially affluent lifestyles, in order to guarantee a viable chance of life [for all species](#) on the Earth.

Why do environmentalists not enact these ideas as a solution to civilisation's imminent extinction?

If the *'business as usual'* lobby can write fictitious technologies into international agreements, thereby guaranteeing failure; why can't the environmental movement – in an act of self-preservation – propose collapsing the excessive consumption of a minority of the world's population, in order to ensure that everyone can have a viable future?

The answer is, quite simply, those who lead the environmental movement are members of this minority of consumers – [trapped, like hostages](#)⁷⁰, in a system which engenders their [willing](#) compliance. Unless we challenge the leaders of the movement, demanding they present a truly radical paradigm for change, this history of failure will continue.

This idea was alluded to in the film:

“People in the oil industry and just people in general have a go at environmentalists for, you know, using phones and buying shoes. If people think you're a hypocrite, they're not going to listen to what you have to say and, I mean, that is exactly what the fossil fuel industry wants... we live in an energy infrastructure that means we have to use oil and gas currently because other alternatives are not being promoted.” [0:46:03]

We are beyond the point of solving this with 'new technologies'. This was debatable even if the [alert over ecological collapse](#)⁷¹ had been heeded when it was first raised in the 1970s. It was not only the political and economic establishment who rejected those radical calls for change; many well-meaning people, concerned about the future of the Earth, also rejected them as 'too extreme' because of what it meant for their own economic status.

As I often say, we are not in a situation of having 'problems' with 'possible solutions'; we are in a 'predicament' with only a few, mostly unwelcome 'outcomes' to choose from. Unless we consciously act from that reality, offering-up, as Schumacher suggests, our entire 'modern lifestyle' as the necessary price of change, the outcome is inevitable.

It is not possible to consider why change has failed to happen, or why the ecological situation has become so much worse, without considering the structural failures of the environment movement itself: Both why the options they currently promote have, historically, failed to make an impact; but also, how it came to be that the movement was forced into this literal 'dead end' by passively supporting 'destruction as usual'.

Conclusion: *Why the BBC can't (currently) make a film on energy that I would 'like'*

I could write far more about the problems with this film: The issues glossed over; the empty, 'feel-good' statements which have no true substance; the history ignored because of its unfavourable implications for how we live our lives today – and through all of that, the failure of the environmental movement to make change. But I think I've said enough to make the points required.

It's a painful thing for people to admit that they've been 'taken for a ride', but if we want to address ecological collapse, this is what the environmental movement must do. The 'green agenda', adopted thirty years ago, backed-up by industries and politicians keen to perpetuate 'business as usual', sounded convincing: Today, not only does the statistical evidence demonstrate these ideas have failed to make any real impact; but also, we have sufficient evidence to show these 'green' ideas cannot work. We need a new, more radical paradigm, which exposes the modern technological lifestyle as an 'economic suicide cult'.

Almost twenty years ago I published a book, ['Energy Beyond Oil'](#)⁷², which outlined many of the reasons why the ideas in this film are flawed. Since that book was published, its case has been backed-up by a far greater volume of academic research than existed at that time; and which today, argues for an even 'more extreme' need for change than I wrote about 20 years ago.

The problem is not simply 'carbon emissions'; the problem is [all forms of](#)⁷³ human economic activity; which, across many different environmental media, are [driving ecological destruction](#)⁷⁴ in ways that are [as equally serious](#)⁷⁵ and/or [catastrophic for our future](#)⁷⁶ as climate change.

Clearly, even BBC Scotland isn't about to make that film! And the reason is, very simply: While a highly compromised environment movement, panders to the excessive consumption of a globally affluent minority, the media will not listen to any case which argues for 'more radical' change.

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