

# Messy natures: The political aesthetics of nature recovery

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## Abstract

1. Current aspirations for nature recovery to address biodiversity loss and climate change will involve changing what landscapes look like, which can create challenging aesthetic experiences for members of the public.
2. In this study, we interrogate the role of aesthetics in shaping visions of nature recovery, focussing on the construction and contestation of 'mess' and 'messiness' in nature recovery.
3. We examine the political aesthetics of messy natures using a qualitative approach investigating visual and text materials across different sites of production in Britain, from newspapers to social media, paying particular attention to visual materials
4. Our results show how the mediated debate around 'rewilding' urban environments and a beaver-themed garden winning a horticultural show are examples of a backlash against untidy environments through a politicised discourse, linking messy nature with left-wing ideologies, in contrast to the perceived orderliness and conservative ideals of good citizenship associated with tidiness.
5. In contrast, social media imagery of messy and wild gardens demonstrates how mess is consciously framed aesthetically as a desirable 'look' for restored nature, symbolising progressive and environmentalist ideals of good citizenship through activities such as nature-friendly gardening and initiatives such as 'No Mow May', which celebrate the aesthetic of a more biodiverse messiness.
6. And finally, we traced how environmental advocacy organisations are prefiguring the future of nature recovery in Britain through commissioned graphical representations that portray a 'tamed messiness' and the return of charismatic megafauna. Although these aesthetics may challenge prevailing pastoral aesthetics, they normalise continued inequality in the form of concentrated land ownership, especially in the Scottish Highlands.
7. *Policy implications.* Our analysis shows that aesthetics play an important role in shaping views of what is 'natural', 'normal' and 'good' and therefore desirable in what a future (recovered) nature looks like. We suggest that nature recovery initiatives take aesthetics seriously, by interrogating how idealisations of 'how nature should look' may influence decision-making alongside ecological and other considerations. Taking aesthetics seriously also opens avenues for engaging with

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social and environmental justice, where alternative aesthetics can help in imagining more socially and environmentally just futures.

#### KEYWORDS

critical visual media analysis, environmental aesthetics, imaginaries of future natures, political landscape aesthetics, rewilding, social science aspects of nature recovery

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the context of the dual crises of climate change and biodiversity loss (Pörtner et al., 2023), the United Nations have declared the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration from 2021 to 2030, with ambitious targets for nature restoration and recovery (UNEP, 2023). Against this backdrop, a growing number of landowners, community groups, companies, local authorities and environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are getting involved in what is variously termed nature recovery, nature restoration or rewilding.<sup>1</sup> Projects and initiatives are proliferating, with examples ranging from nature recovery at the landscape scale to small-scale wildlife-friendly urban gardening. These initiatives have a common interest in enhancing ecosystem function and resilience, shifting away from the past focus on species and habitat composition. At larger scales, this involves introducing missing 'keystone species' such as naturalistic grazers to restore trophic cascades and dynamic processes (Fløjgaard et al., 2022).

Alongside ecological changes, these modes of nature recovery are also changing how landscapes look and feel, creating challenging aesthetic experiences for different publics. A paradox arises that 'recovered natures', which may be more valuable ecologically, are often considered less aesthetically pleasing when compared to ecologically degraded landscapes such as traditional countryside, parks and gardens that are historically valued for their scenic beauty (Nassauer, 1992; Prior & Brady, 2017). This challenge is particularly relevant for the UK, which has been identified as one of the most nature-depleted nations in the world (Burns et al., 2023), and the UK Parliament has set targets for restoring habitats to deliver nature recovery at scale (The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2022). The politics of aesthetics associated with these future recovered natures are evidenced in growing debates about what is 'beautiful' (and therefore good, and desirable) or 'ugly' and undesirable when it comes to nature recovery in Britain. For example, in summer 2023, British media debated whether English councils that had stopped using pesticides for weed control were 'making a mess' of local towns (e.g. Limbu & Garcia, 2023 in BBC local news and Narain & Cotterill, 2023 in the Daily Mail, as well as in other media outlets see Figure 1).

Similar anxieties were expressed in media debates around the decision by the Royal Horticultural Society to award the 2022 gold

medal for 'Best Show Garden' at the Chelsea Flower show (a prestigious horticultural show in London) to a garden designed to represent 'a rewilding landscape in South West England' after the reintroduction of beavers. The aesthetics of this garden received both praise and scorn. Such contrasting evaluations of the character, palatability and morality of mess<sup>2</sup> and messy land management capture a wider emerging debate on the political aesthetics of nature recovery. These examples illustrate the need for social science research that acknowledges the power of aesthetics and which critically examines how aesthetics will enable or constrain the trajectories and outcomes of nature recovery.

In this study, we explore how nature recovery decisions will be influenced by aesthetic as well as ecological considerations. We are particularly interested in how environmental aesthetics are intertwined with morality and act normatively to shape perceptions of what is 'good', 'bad', 'ugly' or 'beautiful' in current and future landscapes. Focussing on highly mediated debates, we use those empirical examples to unpack the role of aesthetics in shaping the contested 'social imaginaries' of nature in Britain as it is, and as it ought, to be (Taylor, 2004). We suggest that it is vital that academics and policymakers engage with the politics of environmental aesthetics in ongoing debates about future landscape change. This is particularly relevant for policy development in Britain where nature recovery initiatives are proliferating on the ground, but policies have been found to be lagging behind (Cary & Wartmann, 2024). In this study, we present examples of aesthetic contention and show why considering notions of power in who defines what is aesthetically desirable matters for deliberating more inclusive and societally just future landscapes. In the following, we first briefly introduce the literature that shapes our conceptual framework.

## 2 | THE POLITICS OF LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS

Aesthetics emerged as a branch of Western philosophy in the 18th century (Brady & Prior, 2020).<sup>3</sup> It initially centred on the experi-

<sup>1</sup>We acknowledge differences in meaning and debates around the use of terms such as rewilding, recovery, regeneration and restoration (Deary & Warren, 2019; Schulte to Bühne et al., 2022). In this study, we use *recovery* as an umbrella term to describe an improvement in environmental condition from a degraded state (Gann et al., 2019).

<sup>2</sup>In the Oxford dictionary, 'mess' has several uses in contemporary language. It can describe the state a person finds themselves in (*he is in a right mess*), to paraphrase animal excrements deposited in a place where they are considered inappropriate (*the dog's mess on the side of the road*), or be used to describe states of places (or environments): 'A *dirty or untidy state of things or of a place; a collection of disordered things, producing such a state*' (OED, 2024).

<sup>3</sup>This review is centred on the Western European, UK and North American aesthetic literature, but for a critiques of non-Western aesthetics see for example Blocker (2001).



FIGURE 1 Examples of headlines in British media related to the debate on aesthetics of nature recovery.

ence of works of art, such as paintings or sculptures. Nature and the environment were not considered fit for aesthetic appreciation until the German philosopher Kant (1724–1804) elevated them as worthy subjects of concern (Carlson & Lintott, 2008). Kant's influential interventions led to a shift in the 18th century towards the aesthetic appreciation of rural and agricultural landscapes alongside more 'dangerous' or 'wild' places. This change in the perception of landscapes eventually led to the development of three distinct categories of aesthetic appreciation: the beautiful, the picturesque and the sublime (Brook, 2018; Carlson & Lintott, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

The *beautiful* describes landscapes characterised by regular, smooth, tranquil and relatively small features, exemplified in the archetype of the pastoral landscape. The *sublime* refers to landscapes marked by large, powerful and even terrifying features, such as steep cliffs, massive waterfalls or torrential storms, that would preferably be observed from a safe place. The *picturesque* falls between these two extremes and includes landscapes with varied topography and features. The picturesque landscape also expresses the idea that the more a landscape resembles a work of art, the more appealing it is. Appreciators of the picturesque travelled with handheld tinted mirrors (or Claude glasses) that filtered the colour range seen. On arrival they turned their backs to the landscapes they wanted to appreciate to view them in the two-dimensional pictorial fashion familiar from encounters with

landscape paintings (Brook, 2018). The picturesque, also known as the 'scenic model' (Brady & Prior, 2020), became the most popular of these three aesthetic categories. It inspired English tourists to visit places such as the English Lake District and Loch Lomond in Scotland in the 18th and 19th century (Bohls, 2015). It had a powerful and lasting influence on the development of tourism and the character of the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002) that is still evident in these regions today.

The philosophical study of the aesthetics of nature declined in the 19th century, even as the popular appreciation of nature blossomed in Europe and North America with the rise of the Romantic movement. Writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and William and Dorothy Wordsworth helped popularise the scenic aesthetic and fostered the change in public attitudes that contributed to the emergence of the early environmental movement (Buell, 1995). This movement, together with direct lobbying by nature writers such as Muir, resulted in the designation of the Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks in the United States based on their scenic qualities (Hargrove, 1979). In Britain, the concept of 'natural beauty' played a key role in the post-WW2 legislation that created the National Parks and associated landscape designations of 'Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (Selman & Swanwick, 2010).

Environmental aesthetics re-emerged as a field of academic research in the 1960s (Brady, 2003; Carlson, 2005, 2010). Its proponents emphasise the difference between the aesthetic appreciation of the arts and the natural environment. They focus on the multi-sensory, embodied aesthetic experience of being in a range of more or less human-modified landscapes, including parks and

<sup>4</sup>A lot of attention was dedicated to defining and differentiating these terms by philosophers such as Edmund Burke (1757) on the beautiful and sublime, and William Gilpin (1867) on the picturesque.



**FIGURE 2** (a) The scenic but ecologically degraded Quiraing on the isle of Skye, Scotland (Image credit: Photo by [Bjorn Snelders](#) on [Unsplash](#)). (b) Highly manicured lawns might be aesthetically pleasing to some, but are low in biodiversity (Image credit: F. Wartmann).

gardens, urban and agricultural landscapes, as well as deserts, oceans and montane landscapes (Carlson & Lintott, 2008). This field explores the intersection between environmental aesthetics and ethics, conceiving of aesthetic value as a type of environmental value that can be set alongside ecological or economic value. Aesthetic values are defined as 'normative positions that ascribe relative or absolute goodness or badness to certain things such as individuals, processes and places, but also species and other components of ecosystems' (Brady & Prior, 2020, p. 255). Although most considerations are preoccupied with positive valuations, aesthetic value can also be negative, giving rise to common descriptions of landscapes as 'bland', 'ugly' (Brady, 2011) or 'unscenic' (Saito, 1998). Positive aesthetic environmental values are seen to provide moral force for environmental concern and to steer environmental action (Kempton et al., 1996).

In some instances, aesthetic and ecological value are at odds with each other. For example, when ecologically valuable habitats such as wetlands or dense old-growth forests are not valued as scenic (Parsons, 1995). Another example is when ecologically degraded environments such as the Scottish Highlands (Macdonald & Macdonald, 2009) (Figure 2a) are valued as scenic or picturesque, or when manicured and artificial lawns (Figure 2b) are seen as beautiful.<sup>5</sup>

Efforts to address this paradox underpin interventions to reconcile ecological and aesthetic values in landscape architecture and design. For instance, Nassauer (1992, 1995) illustrates how the perception of unfamiliar, and thus often undesirable, natures can be improved by 'designing orderly frames for messy ecosystems' (Nassauer, 1995, p. 163). She explains how 'cues to care', such as mowed strips in wildflower meadows or fencing, signal human care for a landscape and reframe potentially 'messy', 'disorderly' or 'ugly' features to help improve public perceptions (Nassauer, 1992, 1995).

Research in environmental aesthetics has identified how aesthetic values differ between people from different age groups, educational backgrounds and with differing environmental attitudes (Sevenant & Antrop, 2010). To date, research in this field has paid less attention

to the (uneven) power relations that configure who decides what an environment should look like, and what is deemed to be normal, natural and right. Such questions are a mainstay of work in the social sciences that focuses on the politics of landscape aesthetics (Benediktsson, 2007; Copley & Garside, 1994; Jenkins, 2018). This work traces the emergence of powerful ways of seeing landscapes, or visualities (Rose, 2022), that naturalise the presence of certain people and practices, smoothing over and thus effacing long and sometimes violent histories of socio-ecological transition. For the political philosopher Jacques Rancière (2023), aesthetics are central to the framing, evaluation and normalisation of particular and always partial ways of seeing a landscape. Work in this vein has criticised the picturesque aesthetic for its power in concealing political repression and economic exploitation (Copley & Garside, 1994). For example, the pastoral aesthetic of a beautiful suburb in New York is consumed by its residents and helps to maintain property values and social status, but hides the uneven power relations between the residents and the Latino workers living in poor conditions in a neighbouring town whose labour as landscapers and gardeners is essential to maintaining that aesthetic (Duncan & Duncan, 2003). Or the case of Yellowstone National Park, where the imposition of a Western aesthetic of scenic wilderness is an example where a power imbalance in defining desirable aesthetics contributed to the exclusion of indigenous groups who did not comply with these imposed ideas of the scenic, even though they had created those very scenic qualities through their landscape management practices (Sapignoli & Hitchcock, 2023).

Similarly, Copley and Garside argue that the picturesque invention of the Scottish Highlands is 'a hegemonic cultural manifestation of the English colonising presence' (1994, p. 7). The picturesque masks the history of forced migration during the Highland Clearances, where small-scale farmers were evicted from land to make way for more lucrative sheep farming (Devine, 2018). Likewise, prevalent visions of the lowland English pastoral—exemplified in the grand estates of the aristocracy and the National Trust—brush over the long histories of enclosure and eviction, as well as of colonial extraction, that led to their creation (Fowler, 2020; Matless, 2016). Critics suggest that the scenic aesthetics of different parts of Britain that are portrayed in tourist brochures today help render invisible past and present human suffering. They also risk naturalising the unequal power relations associated with the

<sup>5</sup>Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) may occur in people who recognise the ecological damage but still find a degraded landscape scenically appealing.

current political economy of who benefits from state-sponsored or market-based nature recovery activities (MacDonald, 2023). This understanding of aesthetics as involving much more than individual and collective environmental ethics helps us understand why the current debates about the messy landscapes of nature recovery have become so heated. A lot is at stake if the moral order that is naturalised in the scenic pastoral aesthetic is called into question.

There is now a growing literature applying these concepts to explore how the cultural and political significance of environments and nature conservation are portrayed in the media and by environmental NGOs to construct narratives and to encourage practical action (Arts et al., 2021; Silk et al., 2021). However, despite increasing (traditional and digital) media coverage, there has so far been limited visual and intertextual media analysis of how aesthetics are debated, and of how aesthetics work politically to shape norms and ideas about what is desirable for future landscapes and natures in Britain.

### 3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to examine political environmental aesthetics in debates around the messiness of nature recovery, we employed online ethnography (Hine, 2000), discourse analysis (Gill, 2000) and critical visual analysis. For selecting our materials, we used a purposive sampling approach (Battaglia, 2008) to incorporate key 'sites of production' of visual materials (Rose, 2022) spanning social media, legacy media such as newspapers, and organisational websites. Using this purposeful selection across sites of production allows us to investigate the different sites that span the 'universe of discourse' in the debate on messiness and nature recovery in Britain. As a starting point, we conducted a 'broad-brush' qualitative analysis of these sites and the different visual, audio and textual materials they contained. This analysis of materials from a wider trawl enabled us to identify different aspects of his debate. In the following, we will illustrate in more detail how we selected empirical examples from these materials that serve as micro-manifestations of what we claim is a wider cultural zeitgeist and are thus expressive of broader sets of tensions and anxieties around ideas about nature and its recovery. This research received ethical approval from the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford with ethics approval number SOGE C1A2368.

#### 3.1 | Online ethnography of social media—The aestheticisation of mess

We selected X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram as popular social media sites<sup>6</sup> that are used in research about how people represent

<sup>6</sup>We also searched for content on TikTok but did not find relevant content to warrant analysis.

ideas around nature and their relation to it (Arts et al., 2021, 2022; Tscholl & Sturm, 2022). We conducted an online ethnography of Instagram content using the hashtags #rewildingUK, #mess and #messygardens. We selected these hashtags based on our focus on outdoor mess (e.g. not messy houses). Thus, we chose #messygardens to specify the type of #mess. We used #rewildingUK to highlight the geographic context of our study as a hashtag that we found was commonly used to tag pictures we deemed relevant for this study. Initially, we considered related terms such as #restoration but had to exclude them due to semantic ambiguity, such as with car restoration, which yielded many irrelevant images. We reviewed content of over 2000 images that had been posted and ranked as top results at the time of analysis (July–August 2023) and that focussed mostly on the positive aesthetics aspects of mess. Furthermore, we identified debates on X on influential accounts as a source of data about ideas around messy natures. We pinpointed the satirical account @ShitLawns (with over 64k followers) as an illustration where discussions regarding various environmental aesthetics and sensibilities converged, particularly in relation to messiness. This convergence was exemplified through the exchange of 'negative' and 'positive' examples, which were subsequently commented on. We analysed over 200 posts and reposts (from other accounts) and associated comments (totalling over 1000 comments) posted between May 2023 and January 2024.

#### 3.2 | Discourse analysis of debates playing out in digital newspapers

A second site of production we identified was online articles in legacy media where we found public debates on messy natures played out, which we were alerted to by a subscription to GoogleAlerts on 'rewilding'. These debates, which we refer to as a 'pushback', can be summarised as on the one hand debates related to events that channelled uneasiness and 'angst' about mess, such as the 'Beaver-themed Rewilding Garden' winning the Chelsea Flower Show. On the other hand, we found examples related to more gradual processes, for example around efforts by Local Councils to boost nature recovery by reducing pesticide use. To analyse these debates, we built a small corpus of those digital newspapers focussing on the debated nature of 'mess' by searching for articles through a keyword search on 'mess' and 'messiness'. In total, we integrated 11 articles published until the end of August 2023 (Appendix S1) for discourse analysis (Gill, 2000).

#### 3.3 | A critical visual analysis of future visions by nature recovery advocacy organisations

Furthermore, through our online ethnography on social media, we observed the important role of advocacy organisations in shaping online content. We therefore added the web-presence of advocacy

organisations as a third site of production for our analysis. We initially selected 10 nature recovery organisations across Britain (Appendix S2), whose websites contain more than a total of 1200 images. After a qualitative and quantitative image coding phase (not reported here), we focussed our critical visual analysis on imagery depicting a desired future state of the Scottish Highlands that is prominently used by 'Rewilding Britain'—an influential organisation currently advocating for rewilding in Britain, with 1.4M GBP charitable expenditure in 2023, as reported by the Charity Commission (<https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/>, accessed 6.8.2024). We conducted a critical visual analysis (Rose, 2022) of their website content, with over 127 images and accompanying texts, as well as social media content (not reported here), zooming in on the illustration of idealised future landscapes as a particular focus for this analysis.

## 4 | RESULTS

In the following, we present our analysis of the representations and contestations of messy natures from different 'sites of production', unpacking the role of messiness and neatness and showing how associated positive and negative environmental aesthetic values shape and constrain nature recovery in Britain.

We examine three different themes that emerged from our analysis, focussing on the construction, and contestation of messy natures across these sites of production. First, we describe how certain natures are constructed and portrayed as 'messy' in discourses around nature recovery in Britain. We unpack how this messiness is debated, highlighting how different positive and negative values are intertwined with moral underpinnings that form the core of these debates. Second, we focus on the role of mess in social media aesthetics. As an entry point, we used the satirical account @ShitLawns on X that ridicules the aesthetics of neatness, and by doing so, re-shapes ideas of what is 'normal' and desirable in terms of environmental aesthetics, interfacing with associated environmental movements such as 'NoMowMay'. On Instagram, we analysed content tagged with #messygarden that normalises messier forms of nature through carefully framing and aestheticising gardening practices that construct and celebrate messiness as a form of more responsible, nature-friendly gardening. An example of the culmination of aesthetic framing of mess is the prominent Chelsea Flower Show crowning a 'Rewilded Garden' as their best show garden. This horticultural show garden not only represents the nature recovery aesthetic entering the horticultural mainstream but also highlights the considerable backlash in traditional and social media that ensued when a broader public was exposed to such 'messiness'.

After focussing on current examples of representations of mess, we then investigate how aesthetics shape the construction of future landscapes by interrogating how the (lack of messiness) acts politically in representations of organisations advocating for particular aesthetics of nature recovery.

### 4.1 | From neatness to messiness—The aestheticisation of mess on social media

In the following, we explore how positive aesthetics of messy nature are constructed in representations on social media posts and representations from environmental campaigns such as 'NoMowMay'. The account @ShitLawns had a following exceeding 64k in the beginning of 2024. The satirical account is dedicated to presenting content showcasing instances where artificial grass is used to achieve a tidy and ostensibly aesthetically pleasing appearance (Figure 3), which is then ridiculed through accompanying text statements.

The account specifically highlights unfavourable examples, featuring posts or reposts that depict what their followers perceive as the negative aesthetics of a particular ideal of neatness achieved using artificial grass. Our online ethnography highlighted that these comments underscore a collectively shared recognition of the negative aesthetics depicted. For instance, comments such as 'Excellently planned to capture every aspect of bad taste' reflect followers' aesthetic assessment, while others expressed disdain with remarks such as 'disgusting plastic backyard' or a simple 'Yuk.' Some users opted for emoticon responses such '🤢' or utilised GIFs, including an animation of Edvard Munch's painting 'Der Schrei' (The Scream), to convey their assessment. Comments centred on the negative aesthetics of the featured gardens, while simultaneously highlighting apprehensions regarding the absence of wildlife habitat and the generation of (micro)plastic waste.

While there seems to be consensus on the negative aesthetics of neatness and the use of plastic lawn in gardens among a certain group of followers, we then ask if and how messiness in nature is positively aestheticised in visual imagery on social media. A post by @ShitLawns in May 2023 serves as an entry point, to which over 200 people replied:



**FIGURE 3** An example of artificial grass found somewhere in London that would be worthy of the tag @ShitLawns (Image credit: F. Wartmann). Similar images were found to be commented on with remarks such as 'disgusting plastic backyard', 'bad taste' or 'empty, sterile, ugly'.

Time for some Not So #ShitLawns! Show us your #NoMowMay efforts! And please do keep it up into #LetItBloomJune 🌻🐝🦋.

(@Shitlawns, posted on May 31, 2023)

Examples of posts #NoMowMay included colourful wildflower strips, unmowed meadows with long grass interspersed with flowering buds in different colours, which serve to normalise an image of untamed or messy gardens as an intended form of gardening by mowing strips (as visual cues to care and/or for access).

Furthermore, our analysis of images on Instagram that are tagged or described as 'messy' and 'wild' gardens found them to be characterised by an exuberance of different plant colours, usually in the form of flowering plants, as well as the absence of strict boundaries between planting or of geometrically trimmed grass or flower beds. Yet, perhaps in contrast to pictures of 'Let it Bloom June', there is little to suggest that these gardens are the result of 'letting go'. Instead, they exhibit a carefully curated 'mess' that challenges the established gardening aesthetic of short-cut lawns by skilfully mixing different colours of flowering plants and textures to create a carefully curated 'messy garden' look. This careful curation of mess is perhaps not unlike similar trends in hairstyles where carefully curated messy looks demonstrate skill, time and often expense, rather than chance (Holton, 2020). In addition to different colours of flowering plants, the interplay between framing and atmospheric lighting conditions such as sunrise and sunset, prevalent in many images, serves to further enhance the aesthetic appeal of the content, signalling to viewers its positive aesthetic value. A salient example of this is an image by garden and flower photographer Clive Nichols posted on Instagram, which received over 23,000 likes (Figure 4).

On Instagram, the image format itself that is presented to users as an overview of quadratic tiles (for a user's profile) or embedded in a feed can act as a virtual 'frame', implying an underlying aesthetic purpose, thereby obviating the need for additional visual cues within the image themselves. Nonetheless, certain images incorporate physical 'cues to care' (Nassauer, 1995) in the form of painted fences, or mowed strips.

We observed that the users posting these images consider them beautiful, evidenced by using both #messygarden and #beautifulgarden as hashtags for the same image. The reactions to these images by other users on Instagram were positive, evidenced through likes (👍) for the images themselves, and through comments such as 'Looks beautiful' or 'What a beautiful garden 🌸'. On Instagram, we found no instances of negative feedback regarding the aesthetics of these 'messy' gardens. However, the lack of critique did not apply to the 'Beaver-themed Rewilding Garden' at the Chelsea Flower Show. This garden can be seen as the mainstreaming of aestheticising 'messiness'. In the following, we examine the debate around the messy natures and perceived underlying ideologies of the 'beaver garden' and other urban rewilding initiatives.



FIGURE 4 A highly liked picture on Instagram showing how wild and messy gardens can be perceived as beautiful (Image credit: Clive Nichols—Silver Street Farm, Devon by Cameron Gardens, reproduced with kind permission by Clive Nichols).

## 4.2 | The backlash to messiness—Or the politics of messy natures

The gold medal for 'Best Show Garden' at the Chelsea Flower show 2022 went to the design by Urquhart & Hunt of 'a rewilding landscape in South West England' after the reintroduction of beavers (Figure 5).

There were no real beavers in the garden—it was crafted by landscape designers, but made to resemble a beaver habitat, by including sticks that had been gnawed by beavers and collected to be used in dam building, by putting beaver paw prints in the mud, and by scattering wood chippings that would have been left if beavers were chewing away at a tree after they had felled it.<sup>7</sup>

An enthusiast celebrated the disordered, naturalistic and messy appearance in a reader comment to a Daily Express article (Sheldrick, 2022):

<sup>7</sup>For full description of the design see <https://urquharthunt.com/work/a-rewilding-britain-landscape/>.



**FIGURE 5** 'A Rewilding Britain Landscape' by Urquhart & Hunt showing a rewilding beaver habitat in the South west of England that won best show garden at the Chelsea Flower show 2022 (image credit: Jason Ingram, used with kind permission by Urquhart & Hunt <https://urquharthunt.com>).

The sprawling, untamed Rewilding Britain garden took the top prize at this year's Chelsea Flower Show. It's great to see messiness triumph over manicured at the world's biggest horticultural event.

This comment captures to an emergent affirmative 'aesthetics of mess' that is infused with high moral values associated with caring for nature and addressing the biodiversity crisis. This is emphasised by a comment from a Rewilding Britain employee on the garden and the surrounding controversy:

Maybe some people might see this [display] as slightly messy, but you can just see the sheer diversity here (Beament, 2022).

In contrast, the ecological values and eco-morality underpinning the design of the Rewilding Britain garden show exhibit were unpalatable to others, with a journalist from the Telegraph expressing how the Chelsea Flower Show got 'lost in the weeds' and was 'clonking you round the head with a massively important message' (Cumming, 2022).

Another post in the debate on X captured the dissent stating:

It was a shit garden and looked totally messy, like an outhouse next to a stream with twigs.<sup>8</sup>

The contestation around the Chelsea flower show exhibit reached the national media after a visit from the gardener and BBC presenter Monty Don, who spoke on the BBC's coverage of the flower show 26 May 2022, asking 'is it a garden?' (Heath, 2022; Rudgard, 2022). His comments started a debate that continued on X

<sup>8</sup>To safeguard the privacy of individuals quoted from X, usernames are omitted except for those of public figures. Additionally, we made slight adjustments to the wording to prevent reverse searches that would circumvent anonymity.

## Unsafe and 'looking like a dump': How Brighton's controversial eco policy went to seed

The council's decision was well-intentioned – but created a city full of unsafe, overgrown roads and pavements

By Boudicca Fox-Leonard  
4 September 2023 • 2:50pm



Every week Ivan Lyons receives emails from residents with photos and stories about how the weeds outside their homes have become a blight

**FIGURE 6** Example of an online article from The Telegraph illustrating negative aesthetics of vegetation.

about the definition of a garden and what fell within acceptable parameters of a garden, specifically concerning the inclusion of other species in their design, such as beavers.

Another case, where debates around messy natures became highly mediated in the summer of 2023, occurred when several English councils, including Lydney and Brighton, ceased using pesticides for weed control. This decision faced heavy criticism, particularly from the political right (Weston, 2023). The media portrayed the results as a 'mess' imbued with negative aesthetic, using specific linguistic choices and imagery (Figures 1 and 6). Local news headlines explicitly referenced mess, accusing the council of 'making a mess' of local towns (Limbu & Garcia, 2023). In Brighton, media reports indicated that some areas were 'becoming increasingly messy' (Dole, 2023). Additionally, a Daily Mail article quoted a councillor describing the place as a 'complete pig sty [sic]' or 'looking like a dump' (Fox-Leonard, 2023). The presence of certain plants, not chemically or mechanically removed, was framed as a category error, matter out-of-place in an urban or suburban area and pilloried as an 'infestation'.

These arguments against messier green spaces in council areas interwove other perceived negative values with aesthetic concerns. For instance, residents expressed concerns that rewilding made the area 'look very down-at-heel' (Narain & Cotterill, 2023), linking aesthetics to a perceived associated economic state of deprivation. Residents also worried about the negative impact of messy aesthetics on property values (cf Robbins, 2012). The state of 'messiness' was further criticised due to safety concerns for residents, including tripping hazards and potential pet injuries from thorns, along with the economic costs associated with their treatment (Fox-Leonard, 2023).

Images accompanying the articles highlighted the seemingly uncontrollable growth of plants, emphasising the challenges faced by

dedicated residents in managing them. Images show plants growing between pavements, a person standing in between plants growing on a stretch of pavement, where the grass reaches his chest (Figure 6). The visibility in these images emphasises that the seemingly out-of-control growth of these plants defies the management of dedicated residents, and shares certain similarities with imaginaries of plant growth in post-apocalyptic scenarios where plants take over urban environments, as well as gothic garden aesthetics of plant exuberance (Hughes, 2020). The colour composition of the images used to illustrate this article was fairly homogenous and rarely included flowering plants, for example a single white bloom of hogweed at the centre of high growing grass and brambles (Figure 7). The framing of these images highlighted the lack of visible signs of management or 'care' (Nassauer, 1995). All of these techniques emphasised the lack of aesthetic value placed on these forms of messy environment.

Aesthetic arguments against mess at the local level were connected to a broader British media debate about garden aesthetics and biodiversity values. English gardener and broadcaster Alan Titchmarsh questioned the ecological value of rewilding gardens in a House of Lords' horticultural sector committee enquiry (Limbu & Garcia, 2023). Other media articles focussed on his comments, claiming that rewilding was '*catastrophic for wildlife*' (Fernandez, 2023; McDonagh, 2023). These discussions aim to shift the focus from subjective aesthetics to an argument about biodiversity without necessarily providing scientific evidence. Additionally, the potential economic consequences for the horticultural industry, which supplies products to deal with 'mess', of what is referred to in the articles as 'rewilding' (understood as the withdrawal of pesticide use and manual cutting or uprooting) were cited as a justification for not embracing such no or low management practices. Opposition to nature recovery that involves withdrawing plant management in urbanised areas is politicised in these debates, where arguments about negative aesthetic values and mess are intertwined with economic and other concerns.

After our focus on predominantly urban spaces and gardens, we now turn to our final example of the role and power of aesthetics in shaping a desirable vision of future (rural) landscapes.



FIGURE 7 Illustration used in article to illustrate the lack of aesthetic appeal of rewilded urban council areas (image credit: LDRS).

### 4.3 | Future landscape aesthetics of nature recovery in Britain—Taming the mess?

How are aesthetics influencing visions about the future of nature recovery in Britain? As an example, we use artwork commissioned and utilised by Rewilding Britain to illustrate the kind of future that they envision, represent, and seek to normalise for the Scottish Highlands (Figure 8).

This artwork represents the final stage in a kind of 'triptych' that starts with a drawing of the degraded landscape (today), followed by a slightly restored landscape in transition, and ends with the vision of a rewilded landscape in 50 years (Figure 8). The choice of painterly watercolour artistic representation, resembling an illustrated children's book, is in itself an aesthetic choice, one that is emerging almost as a genre (pioneered by the artist Jeroen Helmer from ARK Rewilding Netherlands) with other organisations also choosing similar artistic styles to illustrate their visions (see e.g. the Northwoods Rewilding Network <https://www.scotlandbigpicture.com/northwoods> or Bamff Wildland, unpublished). The three representations are drawn to instil a sense of healing of the land and recovery as time progresses, meticulously designed to suggest a positive transformation with brighter colours and a bluer sky in the last image (Figure 8) compared with the first. Some messiness is evident in this artwork in the form of small shrubs and scrubland. However, this is a carefully curated, controlled, and almost sanitised version of mess—a portrayal that avoids the gothic exuberance and ideas of nature 'taking over' that we saw reflected in the negative media representations earlier. Consequently, it represents a less intimidating vision of future nature, one likely to garner more support than resistance from a broader public.

This last stage in future epitomises the ecological boldness envisioned through the return to predator–prey relationships: a lynx perched on a tree branch, having preyed upon a fox; an eagle carrying a wild boar piglet in its talons; and an anthropomorphised wildcat traipsing through the foreground inspecting a butterfly with its cute big eyes, which render it iconographically similar to a children's cartoon character such as the fluffy mouse lemur 'Mort' in the animated Madagascar films by DreamWorks. The effect is that of an unthreatening, cute future of ecological recovery. In this vision, the focus is on the landscape and the fauna. People are visually relegated to the background. Those represented slightly closer in the foreground are tiny figures that are discernible as mostly visitors or tourists engaged in nature-based recreational activities such as hunting, hiking, cycling and camping/glamping, whereas farmers or crofters cannot be seen as persons, their presence can only be surmised based on the existence of infrastructures such as polytunnels. The visual scarcity of people contrasts with the textual narrative accompanying the illustration that asserts that the Highlands of the future are '*alive with people*'.

The artwork of the future portrays an ecologically radical vision, as it normalises the reintroduction of apex predators such as the lynx, which are currently absent. However, this ecological radicalism is not mirrored in the social vision, which we would



**FIGURE 8** Artwork by Jeroen Helmer commissioned by Rewilding Britain representing the imagined future of a Scottish Highland landscape (image credit: Used with kind permission by Jeroen Helmer/Rewilding Britain).

argue leans towards conservatism in the way that landownership is approached. There is little to suggest any change to the current system of concentrated landownership within quasi-feudal structures, and there is no mention in the accompanying text or in the imagery itself of addressing unequal land ownership through, for example community-owned land buyouts or similar schemes in this case.

Through the expression of aesthetics in these depictions, we can discern the ecological transition that is being envisioned. However, this vision is not inherently tied to a socially just transition. Instead, the current portrayal of the future seems to reinforce and maintain the status quo of landowners by not engaging with the debate on land ownership in the Scottish Highlands. Yet, as we interpret this image, we also suggest that it signifies a shift in the power dynamics of defining the future landscapes of Britain. Here, an urban environmental advocacy organisation is gaining influence in defining a new rural imaginary, one that allows for certain forms of ‘mess’ to emerge. This is a topic that merits further exploration.

As Fraser MacDonald points out in his analysis of ‘Balmorality’ (MacDonald, 2023) referring to the historical power of the landscape paintings of Sir Edwin Henry Landseer (1802–1873), an influential English painter and sculptor: ‘these pictures show what the Highlands look like, whom they should belong to, who should do the work, which species are thought to matter and for whose benefit the land should be managed’. Aesthetics are, and always have been, political in that they shape notions of what is ‘good’, ‘desirable’ and normal. As MacDonald (2023) points out, such notions are imbued with, often unequal, power. For transformative nature recovery that addresses biodiversity loss as well as issues of social justice, we need to take aesthetics and the politics of aesthetics seriously.

This raises questions about whose voices and perspectives are being centred in the aesthetic visions that serve as a blueprint for the future. Here for example, nature recovery organisations with

a typically more urban base of supporters, are defining aesthetics for the Scottish Highlands, in ways that are uncannily reminiscent of the English elite travellers who defined the Scottish Highlands in terms of scenic beauty and sublime views in the 18th and 19th century, with what has been termed an imperial agenda to pacify the Scottish Highlands through tourism development (Bohls, 2015). This vision, like notions of the picturesque and sublime written about by Victorian travellers, is imposed in a similar way—crafted by outsiders rather than defined by the people who actually inhabit these landscapes. This vision also stands in contrast to current policy and legal changes in Scotland. For example, the Land Reform Act was introduced to the Scottish Parliament in March 2024, which makes provisions for a more egalitarian approach to land ownership. Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands Mairi Gougeon, for instance, stated that ‘we will introduce measures so that more communities are be given information and the opportunity to take on ownership before sales from landholdings over 1000 ha’ (Scottish Government, 2024). Thus, while the artwork does not engage with these political debates, is not apolitical, as it portrays a certain politics of social conservatism in the face of imminent policy changes to address historically rooted inequalities.

## 5 | CONCLUSION: WHY AESTHETICS MATTER—THE IMPLICATIONS OF TAKING AESTHETICS SERIOUSLY

We started this article by showing examples where public acceptance of biodiverse but aesthetically challenging new natures is low, leading to a resistance against or even the abandonment of nature recovery efforts. In this paper we demonstrated that the careful framing and aestheticisation of ‘mess’ that happens on social media may help to normalise messier and nature-rich habitats for a broader public. In combination with publicised movements for

'messier' gardens and environments e.g. through the 'No Mow May' or 'Let it Bloom June' initiatives, public opinion may further shift to accept less orderly environments, and not to 'read mess' as equaling neglect. Our analysis of empirical materials from diverse 'sites of production' (Rose, 2022) reveals that mess is constructed in multiple ways: It is seen as both aspirational and untamed, symbolising the recovery of nature and an ecological awakening among those who encourage or permit mess in their gardens. However, it is also portrayed, both discursively and visually, as the opposite of neatness—something that must be controlled and resisted to reestablish the preferred order. Mess is transgressive not only ecologically, in shaping more diverse habitats, but also socially in questioning who controls land and what land looks like. In this sense, mess is akin to a more feral version of the city, where forms of gardening with mess such as 'guerilla gardening' and fostering messier gardens through sharing present transgressive gardening practices that question the normativity of tidy gardens and the social order they represent (Brooks & Francis, 2019; Robbins, 2012). We have shown examples where the mainstreaming of these more transgressive forms of gardening is met with resistance particularly from those on the right-wing of British politics that resist these new forms of gardening and associated notions of social and ecological transgressions. Nature recovery activities consequently become highly politicised and resisted, where certain aesthetics are read and interpreted as political expressions and manifestations not only of a politics about landscape but also about wider societal debates.

Although the highly politicised character of the aesthetics of nature recovery in gardens and other urban areas may hinder up-scaling nature recovery, we argue that nature recovery advocacy organisations are not actively engaging with the politics entangled with messy natures. Representations by advocacy organisations such as Rewilding Britain show a tamed and picturesque version of nature recovery, where messiness and the thorny political questions around access and ownership of land are glossed through an amended scenic version of the pastoral. These representations reflect a move towards a new paradigm of landscape aesthetics and ideals, where ecological considerations are at the forefront. These representations are powerful in that they act prefiguratively: anticipating and performing a vision of a 'better world' to come (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021). They provide a blueprint for action to deliver that future. This act of future-making through visual material is inherently political, as it shapes a desirable future with implications for social and environmental justice in nature recovery, influencing who is portrayed as belonging to a particular envisioned future and who is not.

The politics of aesthetics means that public acceptance of more diverse and messier natures may be complicated by the political entanglement of mess and social order, any change to which is firmly resisted. Taking aesthetics seriously for nature recovery means that a withdrawal of human care in public areas could be accompanied by targeted information campaigns, and the incorporation of conventionally aesthetic elements into the 'mess' (such as colourful native flowering plants) to make these new natures more acceptable

to a broader public (Nassauer, 1992, 1995), even though such adaptations would potentially clash with ideas about non-involvement and 'letting nature do its thing' that are rhetorically associated with rewilding. For a more transformative nature recovery at scale that addresses biodiversity loss as well as issues of social justice, we will need to question the inherent power in defining visions of future natures and landscapes, and their aesthetics. We thus see a need for future research and public engagement to take the political aesthetics of nature seriously, and for future work to deliberate and co-develop more inclusive visions for future landscapes under nature recovery. We argue that a more inclusive co-creation of future visions is core to addressing social justice challenges and addressing power imbalances between those who can shape aesthetic visions and those who currently cannot. Instead of imposing certain picturesque aesthetics, a more socially inclusive approach would enable deliberation over different futures, building towards shared, rather than imposed, visions of the future.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Flurina M. Wartmann: Conceptualisation; methodology; investigation; formal analysis; writing—original draft. Jamie Lorimer: Conceptualisation; supervision; funding acquisition; writing—original draft.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no competing interests to declare.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This research is based on online materials. The terms of service of the social media platforms used explicitly prohibit the download and archiving of material. Where online materials such as digital newspaper articles were analysed, we provide weblinks to these articles in the [Supporting Information](#).

#### STATEMENT OF INCLUSION

Our study was conducted in and on the British context by researchers who live and work in the UK.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**Appendix S1:** Text corpus of digital newspaper articles and blogs on nature recovery debates.

**Appendix S2:** Rewilding and nature recovery advocacy organisations analysed.

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