Shepard Fairey’s painting, “Forward or Backwards,” shows various forms of energy sources and their implied impact on our environment. It was painted in 2015, so its message is still very pertinent for our present battle with climate change. Fairey paints a form of clean energy, wind mills, at the forefront as well as traditional energy sources, a power plant and coverage towers in the background. The power plant is spews out pollutants that stain the skyline with shades reminiscent of an inferno. Fairey asks us the question of whether or not we are moving forward or backwards in terms of clean energy efficiency. The windmills seem to somewhat distract the viewer from the destructive power plant in the background because they are at the very front, catching the viewers eye. Because of this, the windmills are the tallest object in the painting, furthering the argument that they are the focal point. In the case of the painting, the wind mills represent looking at only the surface because they are at the very front of the landscape while the power plant would represent the deep complexity of climate change because it is in the background. The painting symbolizes the human tendency to not look deeply into an issue but rather only glance at the surface.

The painting, “Forward or Backwards?” by Shepard Fairey, represents our societies tendency to have a shallow, overly optimistic understanding of climate change. At the forefront of the painting are windmills, representing clean energy, while the background is made up of
various energy sources that are not environmentally friendly. A power plant is the most prominent of the harmful energy sources, painting the sky with a colorful array of toxic pollutants. The main question that the painting asks the audience perfectly captures the collective ignorance of our society; are we moving forward or backwards in terms of climate change? As a society, we choose to focus on the positivity of new clean energy technology and this shadows the fact that we have just crossed the starting line in the marathon of working to improve our environment. This is shown in the painting in that the wind mill in the very front is seemingly the tallest structure in the entire image, even though in reality the power plant would tower over a wind mill. Humans have selective attention, meaning we would only focus on the windmills’ immediate size symbolizing its dominance over anything else. In order for positive clean energy change to continue, the public needs to stay unified to keep the pressure up on the continuation of clean energy incorporation and the decimation of harmful energy sources. While this painting shows us that we need to stay focused, it also does highlight that we have made the first step to creating a cleaner climate. The viewer should be enthusiastic that we as a country have begun the transition towards clean energy. In the painting, the power plant is still a focal point, which contradicts the point that we as a society are ignorant to its harmful existence. The concept of creating (or lack there-of) long term, helpful solutions can be further explained using the lens of deep time, introduced by Colin Dickey in his short story, “Deep Chill.”

The painting seems to be about the progress we’ve made towards improving our climate, but when seen through the lens of deep time, we can see that the painting also critiques the human need for apocalyptic language to generate talk of change. Deep time is a
theory more centered around geology that looks at the big picture instead of immediate results that prove to be even more problematic in the future (Fairey 5). When we as a society see an issue as being a tier one imminent threat, we then finally decide to take action. Unfortunately, that action is generally a short-term solution that ends up being even more problematic in the future than the present issue. The power plant in Fairey’s painting is still pouring dangerous pollutants but the general public would avoid talking about that fact. They would instead focus on how we have implemented the wind mill, clean energy, into the mix. Perhaps Fairey is suggesting that our methods of clean energy are a short term solution that will inevitably move us even farther backwards in the future. We perceive our attempts at clean energy as a great success, but does that leave us blind susceptible to losing sight of the overall goal of trying to be completely clean energy efficient? Clean energy is a potential solution, but the progress made also makes people lose interest or lose passion in forcing our government and energy companies to continue to improve, instead of be content and stall. While Dickey may say that our clean energy efforts are a short-term solution, it could also be the answer to creating a safer climate as long as progress continues. Clean energy could very well fall perfectly in line with the concept of deep time. It has the potential to be a long-term effective solution, which is rare to find. This is only possible if the entire world is on the same page. The US is helping to lead the charge into clean energy but other countries must follow in order to preserve the safety of our environment. Hao Xin discusses the issue of a particular country, China, of not following the clean energy initiative nearly as quickly and efficiently as needed in his article, “In Quest to Save Energy, China Ignores Simple Answer.”
Shepard Fairey’s painting represents the struggle to continue the push towards fostering a safer environment, but we can also see that the painting might be a representation of clean energy evolution on a global scale, with some countries contributing and some staying stagnant. In his article, “In Quest to Save Energy, China Ignores Simple Answer,” Hao Xin dives deeper into why the Chinese Government is choosing to ignore a very simple solution that would massively reduce pollutants and help to save energy, washing the coal before it is burned. The coal that is currently used accounts for more than two-thirds of the country’s sulfur dioxide emissions. (Xin 1217) The reason for the Chinese Government not sanctioning the cleansing of coal is due to the pressure of corporations who oppose the regulation of coal quality. While China has verbally committed to becoming more clean energy efficient and set somewhat long-term goals (which they almost certainly will not meet), their lack of action is troubling to those concerned that we are running out of time to save our planet. Shepard Fairey’s could be suggesting that the wind mills in the painting represent countries like the United States, who are making clear progress in clean energy efficiency while the power plant represents countries like China, who are all talk and no action. The United States represents a relatively small part of the global population, which means that while progress is being made, it is miniscule when looking at the big picture. As an entire society, we must work together to help every country advance, because if we are not all united, we all will fall. We must move forward in our attempts towards peaceful progression instead of moving backwards by being restricted by strained relations. If Fairey was truly attempting to demonstrate the advancement of clean energy efficiency among countries, there would be about 100 more power plants in his painting, because the vast majority of countries have done next to nothing. As a society, we
must update our energy standards and strive to reach difficult, but realistic, goals as a whole. In “Scorched Earth,” Linda Marsa claims that an autocratic country like China may survive a climate catastrophe by imposing “Draconian measures” such as massive relocation, rationing, and closing borders but they will be forced to live very low quality lives using the bare minimum to survive.

Linda Marsa claims that climate change is a very real issue, but regardless of its existence, humans will find a way to survive by utilizing technology, part of that potential life-saving technology could be clean energy methods such as the windmills in Fairey’s painting. Marsa describes “hermetically sealed” high-rises soaring thousands of feet into the sky as a sanctuary for humans from the outside world that is too harsh to live in (Marsa 1). She claims that humans have always overcome the downfall of their respective civilizations and rebuilt from the ashes with examples such as the Bronze age civilizations and the global catastrophe’s in the 17th century (Marsa 3-4). These details suggest that what we are seeing now is just a repeat of the past. Clean energy may be part of the solution in the future for human survival, and it is represented in Fairey’s painting through windmills. Now we may not live in “climate controlled high-rises” (Marsa 1) when the climate begins to get volatile, but humans will have to make a change and lean on technological advances in order to survive. The windmills are in the front of the painting, maybe showing us that they are a solution of the future instead of the power plant, which represents the past. The fact that clean energy has been created to combat past technology could mean that we simply trying to take back the damage we have already caused or prevent further damage of our environment. The issue with this is that a natural phenomenon, wind, is both the thing powering the wind mill as well as strewing the harmful
pollutants from the power plant across the skyline. We are utilizing mother nature for part of our clean energy consumption because as of now, it is predictable and reliable. The issue with this is that wind is also spreading the air pollutants spewing out of power plants, the very thing that would make the climate become very unstable and erratic. If the climate was to become too dangerous to live in, wind mills would not save us, they would merely be looked at as a potential solution that hadn’t been implemented or utilized nearly quickly enough. Only if humans were able to find or create a safe environment could clean energy be part of the future. In this hypothetical scenario, it is likely that global powers would have to come together to create a solution and find this safe-haven.

Concepts such as deep time, human negligence, and global advancement are all key parts of the discussion surrounding climate change that can be drawn from Shepard Fairey’s painting, “Forward or Backwards.” The most important aspect, however, is that of technology. Technology was responsible for the creation of our society, but it is also responsible for the climate disaster we find ourselves in today. Ideology has not advanced to the point where our society has accepted that climate change is a very real threat that has the potential to definitively decimate our world. Because of this, we as a population have not proposed nor executed proper long term clean energy goals capable of saving us from our own creation. Shepard Fairey’s painting represents a paradox. The very environment we are attempting to harness towards clean energy efforts is the same environment that we are unintentionally devastating with the use of traditional energy methods. Our environment has been permanently stained by the hands of a single species who inhabited it, and it is too late for reconciliation attempts. At this stage, we as a society must overcome our ignorance to climate
change and attempt to minimize the fallout damage, because as the climate changes, we must transition with it in order to survive. Not everyone will survive, but those who do should savor the life they have now, because the freedoms and happiness we currently take for granted will be reduced to euphoric memories after all is said and done. Technology will save our species, but the real question that can be drawn from Shepard Fairey’s painting is whether or not we decide to learn from our mistakes and move forward, or continue to spit on the hand that feeds us and continue backwards.
Bibliography


