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Guest Editors • Sighting Oil • Sheena Wilson & Andrew Pendakis

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The image we have chosen for the cover of this special issue on oil and visuality nicely frames our problematic. To one side, burns oil literalized, oil in the shape of its own productive apparatus, the classical image of the silent, effective refinery. This is a culturally transparent image, one which domiciles oil’s complexity, its life as social process, and even its historical contingency, in the simple immediacy of a functional industrial procedure. Oil does nothing more or less than its societally prescribed duty: there are no spillovers or externalities, no leeks in the coherence of its A = A. It may be, however, that this identity is today unraveling and that the refinery—here smoking brightly in the background—already has about it the whiff of an apocalypse, a dying industrial Mordor. Very quickly the gleaming effectiveness of oil’s technologies can morph into their opposite: images of excess and failure, a process without a subject, utility pushed to a point without telos or reason, sheer instrumental nihilism. Though we would not want to dismiss the urgency, even the political necessity of this picture, there is a way in which it suffers from the same debilitating iconicity, one which pushes into oblivion the whole ramifying nexus of petroleum. Meanwhile, in the foreground of the image, we are confronted abruptly by an oil extraterrestrial, anonymous, without use or place, beyond sensible scale, a creature, weapon, or tool, perhaps, depending on the light. At once hideous and seductive, this is an object freed to a place beyond stable relations, beyond meaning or inheritance, pure defamiliarization in all its discomfort and uncertainty.

We do not want to rest content at any moment of this dialectic: not the first stabilized image of functioning production, nor its apocalyptic reversal, nor even this classical figure of aesthetic or epistemological rupture. Instead, looking again at the image, but now from within the spirit of what Ursula Biemann calls visual research, about it the spirit of what Ursula Biemann calls visual research, a project of hiding, an explicit machinery of deception and spin, its pervasiveness, its presence everywhere, perhaps singularly christens its position as “hidden in plain sight” (Szeman & Whiteman). At the same time, there is no alternative to oil, no substance available to the system by which its functions can be replaced or exchanged without massive structural disorder; it is this indispensability, the way oil comes to appear more and more like our time’s secret substantia that necessitates the diverse situating procedures employed by the various contributors to this collection. Their research makes blatant the visual rhetorical strategies of individuals and groups invested in either maintaining or disrupting hegemonic structures. Taken as a whole, the articles in this issue lead us to question how diverse visual petro-narratives function collectively to construct a public understanding, whether factual or fantastical, about the role of oil and energy within our historical moment. Oil in the field of vision: the balance of all that stands to be squandered or saved remains to be seen.

Works Cited


Sheena Wilson is Assistant Professor at Campus Saint-Jean, University of Alberta. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature with specialization in Film and Media studies. She is interested in the relationship between the written word and the image as socio-political contexts. Her research involves an interdisciplinary approach to the study of human/civil rights abuses as they are represented in literature, film, and media. More recently, her interest in human rights and women’s issues have crossed over into an analysis of the relationship between gendered and other forms of marginalization within context of global oil cultures. Dr Wilson is the co-director of the Petrocultures Research Group (petrocultures.com) and in the fall of 2012 she co-hosted with Imre Szeman, an international conference titled Petrocultures: Oil, Energy, Culture. Homepage: sheenawilson.ca


Andrew Pendakis Bio, see page 16, cf. pg 16.
This piece is a dialogue between Andrew Pendakis and video artist Ursula Biemann. In it they attempt to work through questions pertaining to the aesthetics of petroculture: How can one represent oil? Is there a generalized aesthetics of oil? What are the linkages between oil and secrecy? What strategies are best avoided in attempting to force into visibility the complex realities of oil culture?

Cet entrevue a pris place entre Andrew Pendakis et la vidéaste Ursula Biemann. On essaie d’y explorer les questions liées à l’esthétique de la culture pétrolière: comment représenter le pétrole? Quels liens existe t’il entre l’industrie pétrolière et la confidentialité? Quelles stratégies faut-il éviter dans les tentatives de rendre visible la complexité de la réalité pétrolière?
Andrew Pendakis: I want to begin by asking you a very general question about the aesthetics of what we might call primary substances, those materials or liquids, like oil, water and coal, which come to peculiarly mark or subvert the cultural structure of an economy. I am interested particularly in those substances which we are tempted to imagine vertically at the bottom of things, the floorboards or groundwork of any given historical period or locale. Both water and oil would appear to be candidates here: the first, indispensable, structural, perhaps, in a manner wholly unto itself, the very ur-liquid of life; the second, a basic condition of modernity, essential, but ‘artificially’, as the element necessary less for life itself than life lived under the conditional second nature of industrial capitalism. In what sense can we speak about an aesthetics of oil cultures, a set of recurring spatial, infrastructural, or architectural motifs, for example, or even a dominant structure of feeling or experience which seems to pass through the very molecules of a whole historical reality? Is there an aesthetics of oil or are its cultural manifestations too diverse and localized to be usefully generalized?

Ursula Biemann: Water has traditionally been associated with specific cultural or symbolic meanings, so it is hard to generalize the aesthetic dimension of this life-sustaining liquid. But oil is an entirely different case: it has literally propelled humanity into a different era of mobility and consumption. Hydrocarbon society is rooted in a concrete moment of discovery—it has a specifiable beginning—and an end! It has engendered the whole universe of plastic culture. We usually do not associate crude oil with the vast number of new substances and objects which have entered our lives as products of petrochemistry. In our minds, the preciousness of oil is more closely linked to petrodollars: it is a political substance. Apart from geopolitics and its inevitable spatial tropes—and that is certainly a major problem in the representation of oil—as a mineral resource, the discourse that shapes the image of oil is articulated in economic and industrial terms: it is, in other words, very much a corporate substance as well. Corporations are hyper sensitive when it comes to their public image, they are very careful in controlling visual representation. There is always some pipeline patrol lurking on the horizon, ready to charge down the hill and prevent you from filming. So we ended up with an aesthetic that essentially foregrounds the gigantic investments in the infrastructures necessary for extraction and evacuation, as well as their spectacular failures. The petro-era coincides with a period marked by technology and hardware; it seems that culturally speaking it has already come to an end.

Pendakis: I think you are right that our conception of oil is usually oriented by this wide-angle image of the remotely running oil refinery or platform. Oil is, in this sense, dangerously literalized, wrongly conceived as simply coextensive with a highly simplified figure of its own productive apparatus. What do you think is screened out by this image? Also, I am intrigued by this invocation of “plastic culture”. Might this be a kind of shorthand for our moment’s particular relation to oil? It is true that it seems the ‘age of oil’ is coming to an end, not in the literal spectre of Peak Oil or some kind of imminent shift to a new primary energy source, but in the sense that oil seems to shift into the present like an echo from the nineteenth century. The roar of the combustion engine feels quintessentially modernist, almost embarrassingly promethean and earnest when viewed from the angle of the silent and immobile microchip. Could you speak more about this paradoxical end to (or transformation within) a certain dominant era of petro-culture?

Biemann: I see this level of abstraction in the representation of oil as yet another way to keep it firmly in the hands of market dynamics, a remote and inaccessible entity, supposedly too big and complex to grasp for the average citizen. What does not come through in these repetitive stencils of oil related images is the regional histories and local textures of interaction between infrastructures and social communities, the thorough reorganization of cultural alliances and political forces on a regional level, the relocation of populations as a result of big money flowing into an impoverished area and the non-democratic decision-making processes of regimes involved in these deals as well as the impressive epistemic apparatus that is set into motion by the conception of big infrastructure projects. All these dynamics affect large populations one way or another. To begin by giving these ephemeral processes some form of visual presence, is a way to start filling in the missing elements.

The discovery of the vast potential of oil for the creation of new materials mustering an extraordinary range of qualities has fueled our imagination to create a synthetic world and overcome natural limits. This fact is probably just as important for the understanding of who we are today as the mobilization and substitution of labour power facilitated by the combustion engine itself. It seems to me that humanity has jumped ahead in out-of-synch rhythms. While it advanced its material sophistication to a high degree, the engine remains sadly stuck in the 19th century and yet we still invest huge resources into building infrastructures for a system we know is long outdated. But I sense there is another connection there that would be important to understand better. The ability to chemically synthesize the world and thus create its artificial extension has simultaneously triggered an imagination of nature and its relation to the human subject. This bizarre construction of nature as something separate from us is what makes the gigantic ecological devastation of petro-culture possible.

Pendakis: Oil and water, though not quite opposites, are anecdotally understood as chemically incompatible (“they don’t mix”). This incompatibility mirrors a very strong associative or symbolic antagonism. Oil is arguably the dirtiest of liquids, ‘the devil’s excrement’, not just from the angle of its (highly racialized) material properties (its blackness, its stickiness, its opacity, etc.), but on the terrain of its social and political usage. Sociologists have long noted the ways in which reserves of oil have a way of evolving into inflexible or brutal state structures (layers of corrupt officials and bureaucracy) even as they engender uniquely consumerist life-worlds, populations habituated to expect an inexhaustible and ‘labourless’ flow of automobiles, luxury goods, etc. Water seems to come from an utterly opposed moral universe. Linked to ablation, sustenance, openness, transparency, purity, etc. water is the liquid of transcendence, but also the most modest and common of social goods. This opposition has been dramatically compromised by the increasing commodification of water and the emergence of huge conglomerated interests in the profits available to those who own and market it. How do your works attempt to...
of theory building and the social struggles around is a center/periphery dynamic set up between the cores resource fringes where these situations take place. There

explanatory heart of energy geography in urban centers is that there is a considerable discrepancy between the

star from scratch. But what I noticed during my research

earth. Without such inspiring prose, I practically had to

a fantastic vocabulary around this dark lubricant and

then like Reza Negarestani's

unarticulated. I wish there had been books available

very few aesthetic productions on the topic. It would

IMAGINATIONS IMAGINATIONS

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aesthetic productions that will make commodities more

dynamics. The question here is how we can engage in

and decision-making rather than leaving it to market

number of stakes start to emerge. A central issue is

records of pharmaceutical companies: secrets populated

production facilities, 'creative accounting', the research

The insider's stock tip, offshore accounts, classified

powerful impact of invisible structures is true, of course,

migrants, peasants, fishermen, prostitutes, oil workers

a loose cartography of multiple voices uttered by

narrative provided by oil corporations I instead install

corridor clearing the access far into former Cold War

Biemann: Are you alluding to the idea that infrastructures

processes are structurally invisibilized in the process

perspective on the world whereby everything is turned

For some of my most urgent concerns how can image resource

industries in the oil-producing countries of the Middle East and the Caspian. These are some
democratic substance in that governments, which are

disinterested in the molecular

This is not a pipeline

Biemann: Rather than looking at oil and water in

water by foregrounding its symbolic virtues is that we

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water by foregrounding its symbolic virtues is that we

we share a high degree of DNA.

in the epistemological obsessiveness of your work, how

mediums which render possible the liberal vista and its life-

of creating the transparency of consciousness; Karl

level of production, positing an order of the invisible

because natural processes have been hitherto subjects of economic-

perspective on the world whereby everything is turned

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what’s not considered to be of immediate world interest, which is almost everything. What is shown is merely a selected narrow vision. I see the problem not so much in the incorrect representation but in the selection process itself and the pretense to bring clarity via this scripted formula of news writing, when in my experience, the production of knowledge on site is an immensely confusing and fragile undertaking. In an interview with two sex workers in the presence of their pimps and agents, I attempt in Black Sea Files to make the emergence of misunderstanding more transparent.

The essayist video format with its diverse image sources, scrolling text and voice-over narration generally tends to stack multiple layers of meaning and interpretation, none of which pretend to be a stable, exclusive representation of reality. On occasion, I even weave myself into the process by reflecting on my practice as an undercover agent to find hidden, secret knowledge and in the process by reflecting on my practice as an undercover agent to find hidden, secret knowledge and in the process of not providing a stable, exclusive representation of reality. I discern in your work the illusion of their separation, one which draws on myth (without devolving into holism or apoliticism), but also on science or sociology (without giving into determinism or a too-simple empiricism). Am I wrong to think you are trying to invent videographically a new form of universality, one that is fragile, plural, ragged, full of holes, yet somehow coacervated by the muddy oneness of the planet itself? I discern in your work the lineaments of a very interesting materialist universality, one which confidently draws on scientific naturalism, the methodologies of the social sciences (especially ethnography), but also on poetry, aesthetics, and the mythic imagination without stumbling into incoherence or eclecticism.

Biemann: This unspeakable image of thousands of villagers building a giant mud embankment entirely by hand without any mechanical assistance is what detailed climate patterns and melting ice fields will mean for many of us on earth. The image speaks of the primordial need for safety from extreme weather events and floods and of the futility of believing we could protect life on the planet with ridiculous technological measures. Part 1, by the way, is shot in the toxic tar sands of Alberta where the dirtiest of fossil resources is being extracted that will no doubt continue to impact on the living conditions of populations on the other side of the earth. We are speaking of a terrestrial scale here.

When we have been thinking in global dimensions over the last two decades, this is the time to go planetary. And this shift requires a whole new vocabulary, both visual and verbal. Geography as a theoretical platform for tackling global issues such as migration networks, supply lines or communication infrastructures, turns out to be insufficient, or simply too flat, for this enlarged dimension because it falls short of grasping the depth of many dawning questions such as species survival and the transformation of the biosphere. So my new images intend to evoke temporal depth by returning to moments prior to the industrial revolution, and agents, I attempt in

 Pendakis: As I alluded to above your latest work appears to be focusing less on oil proper and more on the human (and in- or non-human) geographies of water in an age of climate change. And yet there remains a great deal of continuity here: transformations in the viability of global water are only the flip-side of our dependence on fossil fuels, the perverse externality of oil’s central location at the heart of our societies. In your video Embankment, part 2 of your project Deep Weather, we are presented with an opening shot that almost appears to arrive unfiltered from the origins of stabilized agricultural civilization itself. Approaching from the sea, the camera captures a seemingly infinite line of wriggling human motion, a continuous flow of Bangladeshi workers dragging bags of mud to shore up and secure a barrier they hope will prevent their communities from being flooded by rising waters. This is a primeval image, one resonant with echoes from the original domestication of the Nile and other such ‘cradles of civilization’. In such moments, you seem to be working in a mode that transcends or transmutes realist documentarity, one imbued with a sense for anthropological invariance, the repetitions of cyclical time, even a poiesis conceived of as co-extensive with nature itself. I sense a very similar set of concerns in the fragments I have seen from your current project, Egyptian Chemistry. Here again past and present seem bound in a space/time that defies the illusion of their separation, one which draws on myth (without devolving into holism or apoliticism), but also on science or sociology (without giving into determinism or a too-simple empiricism). Am I wrong to think you are trying to invent videographically a new form of universality, one that is fragile, plural, ragged, full of holes, yet somehow coacervated by the muddy oneness of the planet itself? I discern in your work the lineaments of a very interesting materialist universality, one which confidently draws on scientific naturalism, the methodologies of the social sciences (especially ethnography), but also on poetry, aesthetics, and the mythic imagination without stumbling into incoherence or eclecticism.

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with its frantic dam building activity, and to scientistic knowledge with its partition into disciplines and infinite sub-disciplines. It is this alchemist approach of raising metachemical and philosophical concerns, perhaps, that imbues the video with a mythic imagination. Al Khemia (Arabic for chemistry) also happened to be the ancient word for Egypt, meaning the Black Land, possibly due to the dark muddy Nile floods periodically covering the land. The term alludes to the vision that, before anything else, the earth is a mighty chemical body, a place where the crackling noise of the forming and breaking of molecular bonds can be heard at all times. So when documenting vast land reclamation projects in Egypt, beyond a comment on technocapitalism, it is first and foremost a videography of the conversion of desert dust into soggy fertility.

So yes, I would love to think that I am inventing videographically a new, if flawed and ever morphing, sort of universality through the meddling with the muddy materiality of the Earth itself. Incidentally, for Egyptian Chemistry I took a number of water samples from the Nile, so the project is not about making images only. I'm not primarily focusing on strategies of representation, it also contains objective reality. I have come to realize that if we solely attempt to culturalize the discourse on the physical and chemical transformations our planet is currently undergoing by prioritizing meaning and representation, we fail to address a deeper problem. For if we are to speak about the non-human world -- weather patterns, organic pollutants, copper atoms -- it will not suffice to deploy an anthropocentric discourse. Not everything comes into being through human intention, we need to examine the ways in which human and non-human realities emerge together in a variety of formations. Rather than through a particular set of criteria, this is more likely to happen through the hybrid consciousness engendered by the assemblage of technological, social and natural stuff, where some elements signify, others not. Metachemistry grasps this turbulent instance of physical and epistemic change, or lineament, as you call it, and propels us into a slightly altered dimension that can only be invoked mythically through space travel, time barriers and the interbiospheric mobility of species.

**Image Notes**

*Fig. 1* Biemann, Ursula, dir. *Black Sea Files*. Video. 2005. Video stills reproduced with the permission of the artist.

*Fig. 2* Biemann, Ursula, dir. *Black Sea Files*. Video. 2005. Video stills reproduced with the permission of the artist.

*Fig. 3* Biemann, Ursula, dir. *Black Sea Files*. Video. 2005. Video stills reproduced with the permission of the artist.

*Fig. 4* Biemann, Ursula, dir. *Black Sea Files*. Video. 2005. Video stills reproduced with the permission of the artist.

*Fig. 5* Biemann, Ursula, dir. *Deep Weather*. Video. 2012. Video stills reproduced with the permission of the artist.

*Fig. 6* Biemann, Ursula, dir. *Egyptian Chemistry*. Video. 2012. Video stills reproduced with the permission of the artist.

*Fig. 7* Biemann, Ursula, dir. *Egyptian Chemistry*. Video. 2012. Video stills reproduced with the permission of the artist.
Biemann, Ursula: Ursula Biemann, is a video artist and theorist based in Zurich, Switzerland. She has produced a considerable body of work on migration, technology and resource geographies. She is curator of research projects such as The Maghreb Connection (2006), Sahara Chronicle (2006-2009), Egyptian Chemistry (2012) and the collaborative media platform Supply Lines (2012). She published several books including Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age (2003), Geography and the Politics of Mobility (2003) and Mission Reports (2008), a monograph of her video works. Biemann’s practice has long included discussions with academics and other practitioners, she has worked with anthropologists, cultural theorists, NGO members and architects. Her video essays reach a diverse audience through festival screenings, art exhibitions, activist conferences, networks and educational settings. She holds an honorary degree in humanities of the Swedish University of Umeå and is a researcher at the Institute for Critical Theory at the University of the Arts Zurich. www.geobodies.org


Pendakis, Andrew : Andrew Pendakis is Postdoctoral Fellow of Contemporary Culture at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on contemporary political culture, with a special interest in the conceptual and institutional histories of centrist. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Criticism, Imaginations, Politics and Culture, Essays in Canadian Writing, and Mediations. He is also a contributor to upcoming books on Adorno (Polity Press) and Canadian Cultural Studies (Oxford UP) and the co-editor, with Dr. Imre Szeman and Dr. Nicholas Brown, of Contemporary Marxist Theory: An Anthology (Continuum Press).


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This essay attempts to make visible the physical reality of the Athabasca oil sands mining developments in Canada, a reality that has been occulded by corporate and governmental disinformation as well as by citizens' unwillingness to face the consequences of their actions and their inaction. By presenting photographs of oil sands mining operations interspersed with brief ironic narratives, aphorisms and poems, the essay creates a collage of disjunctive responses to the contemporary situation in the Canadian petro-state. Given that this situation is one of national self-deception, denial and fundamentally irrational behavior, the paper sets aside any attempt to make reasoned arguments about conservation or regulation, and instead embraces irrationality as the last possible mode of engagement with a contemporary public that will no longer listen to reason. In tone and structure the essay echoes F. T. Marinetti’s 1909 “Futurist Manifesto,” but it is very different in its intent, mapping a way toward a different kind of future than the technologized and hyper-individualistic one that Marinetti espoused. By moving into the realm of the irrational and engaging with Canadian petroculture as an expression of a kind of national unconscious, the essay attempts to reveal some of the psychological structures that prevent Canadians from seeing the dirt that is on their hands.

Cet article veut rendre visible la réalité physique des complexes minières des sables bitumineux de l’Athabasca, au Canada. Les désinformations des entreprises et du gouvernement ont occulté cette réalité, mais les citoyens ont aussi contribué à cette occultation en évitant de faire face soit aux conséquences de leurs actions, soit à l’absence de celles-ci. On offre ici un collage des réactions variées face à la situation contemporaine de l’état pétrolier canadien à travers des photos des travaux d’exploitation minière des sables bitumineux recoupées de petits segments écrits, d’aphorismes et de poèmes. Étant donné que cette situation est le produit d’un aveuglement et d’une négation à l’échelle nationale qui stimule un comportement irrational, cet article met de côté les arguments traditionnels raisonnés sur la conservation ou la régulation et adopte le ton irrationnel comme dernier recours afin d’en appeler à l’engagement d’un public qui se détourne de la raison. Le ton et la structure de cet article font écho au “ Manifeste du futurisme » publié en 1909 par F. T. Marinetti, mais l’intention est d’indiquer la direction d’un autre avenir que celui technologique et hyper-individuel que Marinetti proposait. En adoptant l’irrationnel afin d’envisager la culture pétrolière canadienne comme une manifestation de l’inconscient national, j’essaie de dévoiler quelques structures psychologiques qui empêchent les Canadiens de se rendre compte qu’ils ont les mains sales.

Look at us! We are not out of breath, our hearts are not in the least tired. For they are nourished by fire, hatred and speed! (Marinetti)

Have you noticed anything about your hands? I mean, I didn’t want to say anything at first, but I couldn’t help seeing it, and… what are friends for, right? If you had guacamole in your teeth, I’d say something. If your fly was down… not that it is! Nothing like that. But still, I just thought I should ask: have you noticed?
Okay, I've lost it.

I was going to write my manifesto and be done with it, nail my 95 theses to the parliament door and all that, stand back and listen to the silence, all reasonable like. But then my nation embarrassed me (again) by reneging on an international climate treaty, and as I cringed, I recognized the problem with my plan: nobody listens to reason anymore. In the court of national opinion, reason is treason. That's the only explanation for Canada's current climate change and energy policy. And even when people do recognize the rational validity of something as unpleasant and intractable as climate change, they simply don't want to accept it. They find ways to think about something else. Anything else.

A manifesto needs to make things manifest: to open eyes, unclog ears. And if reason doesn't work anymore, then I'll have to try something else. Anything else.

Tarhands rose up out of the swamp wearing a nation on his back. He was hungry.

The people fed him whatever they could. They had wakened him, after all, and they knew he was going to go far, so they shoveled all kinds of everything at him: trucks, roads, steam, pipes, trains, muskeg, lives, methamphetamines, rivers, passahowin, laws, futures. He ate as fast as they could shovel, and sometimes he was almost satisfied. But everything he touched turned the opposite of gold. He wanted more than anything to have that gleaming metal for himself, to fold it in his sticky embrace, but every time he tried, the tarnish spread in seconds. It wasn’t fair, he thought. Someone else got all the gold and he couldn’t touch a bit of it.

Still, he tried to keep himself happy. He wore that colourful nation like a cape, and it waved out behind him almost cheerily, fluttering in the breeze of his motion. But when he wasn’t moving (which was, let’s face it, most of the time) it hung straight down and dragged in the muck. If he wasn’t careful, he stepped on it with his heels. Sometimes it annoyed him, that nation dangling there from his neck, always rustling, getting caught in his hands when he tried to scratch his back. Once in a while he stepped backward on purpose, pinned that nation under his heels, and leaned forward as far as he could. The fabric stretched, but no matter how hard he pulled, it wouldn’t break. Worst of all, it tightened around his neck like a slipknot. Sometimes he leaned there for ages, pressing against his own weight, until he passed out. He always woke up with a mouth full of dirt and a tighter collar.

“Guess I’m stuck with you for good,” he said finally, rubbing his neck.

The nation said nothing, as always.
CARIOUTARHANDS: A MESSY MANIFESTO

The Tarhands Institute is a stink-tank based in beautiful downtown Waterways, Alberta, but we have chapters, sties and tarpits all across this great nation. We reside online at tarhands.org, just next door to the national unconscious, and some day soon we’ll move in next to you.

What do we do? We make a stink. We disturb the proverbial shit. Because something is already rotten in the petro-state, and NOBODY SEEMS TO NOTICE.

How do you point out that the air smells, when everyone’s already used to it? By making more stink.

How do you point out that everyone’s hands are dirty? By making more mess.

That is our credo. Mess as manifest. Stinking as thinking.

And this is our membership drive.

What I remember most about the tar sands is the stink. We stood there with our cameras, trying to capture a record of that obliterated landscape, but I could hardly even see. The fumes were like hammers: sulfur and benzene and diesel and something else—a dead smell, a charnel residue on the back of my tongue. I had a migraine in half a dozen breaths. I breathed into my shirtsleeve, trying not to retch. How could people work in this, day after day? How could the Cree, Metis and Dene people of Fort MacKay live in it?

“Oh I used to smell it, too” one security guard laughed, after warning us to stay off Company property. “But after a week or two you don’t notice a thing.”
My country pulled out of Kyoto, and now I want to pull out of my country. Make a mess on the sheets, on the ground, wherever. Why not? Everyone else does.

Pull out! It's the Canadian way. We're always pulling something out, of the ground that is. Pulling and pulling.

Everyone else does. That's the problem, isn't it? Everyone else.

Generations ago, the Cree and Dene used the tar on the banks of the Athabasca River to seal their canoes. Today, it's used to plug the holes in a sinking ship called modernity.

How long will it keep us afloat? How much will we burn in the effort?
Have you ever gone to shake someone’s hand and noticed, too late, that yours was dirty? At the last moment you saw that patch of grime on your palm, that sticky residue on your fingers, but you couldn’t abort the handshake because—well, because a handshake is never stopped once initiated. That would be rude. Unthinkable, really. So you went through with it, shook that hand as briefly as you could, maybe trying to cup your palm a little bit, gazign straight into the face of your new acquaintance without even flinching. Hoping it would be over soon.

But even worse, before it was over, you realized that the other person had noticed the dirt too. You could tell by the look in their face, that squeamish little half-smile, and by the way they held their right hand away from themselves afterward, waiting to wipe it on their pants as soon as you’d turned your back. Which you did—turn your back—as soon as you possibly could. And you walked away quickly, without looking back to see what that poor unfortunate was doing.

And the strangest thing was that neither of you ever said anything to anyone about what had passed between you. Both of you pretended it was never there.

The futurists on speed.
They got off on it: hard, fast, gleaming, efficient. The iron and the motorcoach, the rocket and the train.
They were hateful, like velocity.
But they never forgot the muck, the grime, the smoke. They knew where their god came from, and where it would go back. And they were damn sure they’d all be dead by then. No need to care about that future.
If you look at something for too long, it becomes invisible. Your eyes need a little shake, \textit{saccade}, to wake them up, so you can see what’s right in front of you. A bit of blur, some judder, to make it all come into focus.

When I say give your head a shake, that’s what I mean.

There. See it now?

That apple you’re eating. The milk you drank at lunch. Every little thing you touch, even just to lift it into your mouth. It’s there. It rubs off. Think about that.
Inhale, my friends: breathe deep the bitumen air. I give you a waveless lake, stacks blowing brimstone, the slick earth itself turned out, spilled like troubled guts into the pipeline of need. The stink that lingers on the back of your tongues is the scent of our conjuration. We are wanted here. The heavy-haulers drone our names, the pit-sumps wail to us, desperate as sirens, and mile-long flags drape from the mouths of smokestacks waving us in. I for one will enter and plant my ensign here. Which among you hordes will follow? Come then, hurry!— wings unfurled, torches on high, past evaporators and bright ziggurats of sulfur, past even the unstanchable pits themselves to the waiting world. This time, the ground is laid for us wide open. Sniff and you know: all of it was made to burn.

Denken ist Danken, Heidegger was fond of saying: thinking is thanking. But I think he was misquoted. What I believe he really said was Denken ist Stinken.

Who can deny that some forms of thought create a noxious atmosphere, a stink, sometimes subtle and other times overwhelming? We all believe this about the people we disagree with, the ideologies we hate. But maybe it’s even true that most thinking creates a kind of exhaust, a residue that lingers in our air. And maybe the other kinds of stink that humanity creates—the hydrocarbon pollution, the sewer gas, the industrial waste—can be seen as a kind of thinking. Thought bubbles. Olfactory philosophy. Smell is irrational, of course. That’s what makes it so appropriate to the modern human condition.

But I believe we need to learn a new kind of stinking. We need to think outside the nox. It will be like inventing a new language, a new medium of being.

Let’s go. Follow your nose to somewhere, someone, you’ve never been.
Could there be a different futurist movement, one that actually cares about the future, not as a technological apotheosis of the now but as the grandchildren, the great-grandchildren, the generations of creatures, the species, the biomes? The future as life, as what will live on after we’re all gone, back to muck and tar, to the mess we were made from.

The future we are making, whether we admit it or not.

Letter for a time capsule to be opened in 2112

This is just to say
we’ve burned up all the oil
and poisoned the air
you were probably hoping to breathe.
Forgive us.
It was delicious
the way it burned
so bright and
so fast.
Join us. Together we can make visions that shudder a billion eyes, make a stink to awaken the nostrils of the world! There is still some time, maybe enough, but we need numbers, we need creativity, we need community. We can refuse to be everyone else. We can look around ourselves and see what’s happening, we can say to the future that we saw, and we acted. We did whatever had to be done.

Tarhands.™ How clean are yours?
Cariou, Warren: Warren Cariou was born in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan into a family of Métis and European heritage. He has published numerous articles on Canadian Aboriginal Literature and he has published a collection of novellas, The Exalted Company of Roadside Martyrs (1999) and an award-winning memoir/cultural history entitled Lake of the Prairies (2002). He has also co-directed and co-produced two films about Aboriginal people in western Canada’s oil sands region: Overburden and Land of Oil and Water. His latest book is Manitouasapoe: Aboriginal Writings from the Land of Water (2012), co-edited with Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair. He is a Canada Research Chair and Director of the Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture at the University of Manitoba.


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Whatever Happened to Peak Oil?

A funny thing happened on the way to Peak Oil. It has not happened, or so it seems, at first. A few years ago—between 2003 and 2009, to be precise—there was much talk in the public prints (the ‘mainstream media’) about ‘oil running out’—this was how ‘Peak Oil’ was apparently conceived. Kenneth Deffeyes, the author of _Hubbert’s Peak_, declared that Thanksgiving, 2005 was the official date of Peak Oil: after this, presumably, oil would get progressively more expensive, and society would collapse. ‘Peak oilers’ were identified with ‘doomers,’ those who imagined that soon we would all be living in caves, surviving as we could with early twentieth century implements and weapons (at best), James Howard Kunstler’s novel, _World Made By Hand_, published in 2008, depicted in its rather aimless narrative a society that had somehow reverted either to a nineteenth century mode of existence, or perhaps to a new dark ages, depending on how one wanted to interpret it.

Facts seemed to bear out the prognostications of the ‘doomers,’ at least for a while. Oil hit $147 a barrel in July of 2008, and yet production did not rise, which it should have, assuming conventional laws of economics (higher price means higher production, and an eventual fall in price). Motorists were not waiting in lines before the gas pumps, as they had during the ‘energy crisis’ of the 1970s, but they were paying the (then) astounding price of over $4 a gallon for that precious elixir, gasoline. The world seemed to be shifting on its foundations: China was booming, ever more oil was called for, and yet production was stagnant, at best. Would we all be living in caves in a few years?

Daniel Yergin, the Pulitzer Prize winning author of _The Prize_ and mainstream go-to guy on oil, was called on to make his pronouncement, and he did so: through CERA (Cambridge Energy Research Association), his high-priced (and profitable) think tank, his spokesperson proclaimed: Peak Oil is garbage,5 but which Peak Oil? At this point a careful observer could start to note a problem: Peak Oil was coming to mean different things to different observers. For Yergin, it was indeed the sudden dropoff of production leading to a ‘primitive’ existence—perhaps the future as foreseen in caricature by Kunstler. But Yergin himself recognized, if not a “peak” followed by a sudden drop-off in production, then at least a slow rise, an “undulating plateau” (another geological/topographical metaphor) followed, in, say, forty years by—decline.4 He wasn’t calling it Peak Oil—he excoriated the term and those who used it—but it amounted to the same thing: an eventual drop-off in oil production. One had the strange feeling that people were arguing about semantics, for Deffeyes, and any number of other ‘Peak Oil’ gurus, had already indicated that the issue was not so much a sudden peak followed by apocalyptic, but rather the steady falloff in production caused by the decline of returns on energy investment: in other words, energy from oil from here on out would cost more in energy to extract and produce; “Energy Return on Energy Investment” would tend toward a point of negative returns. Oil, in short, would simply cost more. While some people were arguing about apocalypse, and trying to score points, the real problem started to appear: how to calculate the rate of change of oil (in energy invested), presumably, but not necessarily, reflected in the price of oil (as measured in dollars)? But how would high cost manifest itself, if not in high price?

What happened next served to discredit the peak oil as apocalypse story, but for attentive observers hardly diminished Peak Oil in its larger sense to the trash heap of discredited ideas. The price of oil fell dramatically, going as far down as $35 a barrel in February of 2009. Suddenly oil was ‘cheap’ again, but there was a massive recession; car sales fell through the floor, GM was headed for bankruptcy, and it seemed that the American Way of Motoring had finally wavered into a ditch.

If oil was cheap, its cheapness clearly had something to do with the recession. Cheap oil, coming so soon after peak oil, taught everyone a serious lesson: even if oil production is stagnant, fall in demand will cause prices to fall dramatically. Oil is not or will not be eternally expensive (in price); a recession due precisely to high oil prices will cause demand to fall, and prices along with it.6 One can well imagine that the famous “undulating plateau” would be caused not by continual discoveries of new (often ‘unconventional’) oil sources and their quick exhaustion, but by the rise and fall of demand as the world entered a roller-coaster phase in which demand gyrated with the onset and alleviation of multiple oil-price induced recessions. Peak Oil, from this perspective, would be associated, precisely not with a simple peak but with the undulations of a not so calming and bucolic plateau. The plateau, after all, announces the inevitable fall; thus it is a kind of long drawn out peak (long in media-attention span terms)—another few years or even decades—but hardly on a geological or even historical scale. An undulating peak?

By this time the mainstream media had pretty much lost interest in the whole question: Barack Obama’s election and his standoff with the Republican Party stole media attention not only from energy issues, but from questions of ecology, which had been highlighted in the last few glowing years of prosperity before the crash. Michael Pollan’s _Locavores_, issues of city structure, food miles, active transportation—all that headed back to the blogs from whence it came.7 And then, starting in late 2009, the real blockbuster: natural gas was no longer in crisis mode (because there had been talk of ‘Peak Gas’ as well); gas supplies were growing more plentiful, and the bottom of gas prices was nowhere to be seen. Oil production too was actually rising, the same technological breakthrough that was enabling the uptick in natural gas production—namely hydraulic fracturing or ‘fracking’—was having its effect in the oil fields. The era of ‘unconventional’ oil and gas was finally dawning: these resources were being wrested out of the ground through the injection of steam and a witches’ brew of chemicals, transforming and traumatizing local economies from Montana and North Dakota (the Bakken fields) to Pennsylvania and New York State (the Marcellus Shale). Moreover, the Athabasca Tar Sands, producing synthetic oil from cooked down tar, were also proving to be a new major source for oil, as ‘conventional’ oil production inevitably declined (as per Peak Oil theory). Hence the mainstream take on oil, following, as always, Yergin: yes, conventional oil was in decline—as was natural gas—but unconventional sources would make possible not only the replacement of disappearing conventional oil, but would actually provide more oil to the market. The seeming peak of Thanksgiving, 2005 would be forgotten.8

So what is one to make of all this? Will the price of oil and gas continue to drop not because of a terminal recession, but because of ever increasing ‘unconventional’ production?

What is interesting, I think, is the fact that at a certain point people lost their ability to understand what the rising cost of oil could mean. The basic, most primary meaning, was obvious: more expensive oil was oil that had a higher price in dollars. So when oil hit $147 a barrel, everyone talked about “Peak Oil.” If oil cost more it was because it was getting scarcer; the specter of ‘lights out,’ of the decline of empire, hovered over considerations of easily measured price. Of course some skeptics, including President Obama, argued that the price run-up was due to nasty speculators. The latter, for some reason, had never existed before, at least not in the oil markets. But the skeptics’ protestations, as long as a general fear of high prices, and the overarching question, “Where will this end?”, presided over debates. As soon as prices started to fall, however, a surprising thing happened. “Peak Oil,” it turned out, really was garbage, or so it seemed, precisely because prices were falling—it was irrelevant why. Suddenly, a disconnect took place between price and cost: it was generally ignored, at least in the public prints, that the falling price was due to a recession caused in large measure by the preceding rise in oil prices. The fall in oil prices, in other words, was now caused by nothing less than their previous rise, and by, yes, increasing scarcity. What was starting to appear, and what subsequently appeared very clearly, was that the price of oil had to be seen in the context of the cost of oil. The cost, moreover, was not always to be measured in dollars—but then how to measure it?
One could easily answer—perhaps too easily—in recession, in generalized (or more generalized) human misery. As money went to pay for oil, it could no longer pay for other stuff: housing, industrial investments, whatever. The entire growth/debt economy was threatened. The cost of oil would now be measured in rising joblessness in political angst, in the rise of a lunatic right, in a not-so-charging insouciance pertaining to global climate change. The important thing, though, was that the cost of energy, and the cost of Peak Oil—which is always how Peak Oil will manifest itself, through cost—was being ‘externalized.’ Costs, in other words, were being passed on, or passed off, in such a way that they did not seem to be a factor in what was happening. Oil seemed to be cheap—$35 a barrel—Peak Oil was dead, but now the rising cost of oil was to be measured in terms that did not lend themselves easily to quantification, uncomplicated pricing, and sudden recognition. In other words, ‘Peak Oil—the ever-rising cost of conventionally produced oil—makes (and makes) itself felt through externalized costs that may (and may not) initially be associated in a direct way with the price of oil at all.

Peak Oil’s really high cost, then, was not primarily the scary price of $147 a barrel, but the endless ‘Great Recession,’ and the larger (ecological, social) costs of the production of ‘unconventional oil.’ The beauty of the recession, though, is that it can be attributed to so many things other than Peak Oil. Similarly, the costs of ‘unconventional’ production—contaminated water, air, and land, along with the larger effects of global climate change—can be overlooked, or can be dissociated from the actual price of oil, and thus ignored. This difficulty of conceptualizing and quantifying the import and precise impact of external costs was not due, I think, entirely to the obfuscations of pundits on television or in the Times. It was due to the inherent and profound difficulty of determining external costs. It is one thing, in other words, to realize that the real cost of things is being passed off and somehow obfuscated. It is another thing to figure out what those real costs are, and locate them.

The Puzzle of External Costs

Externalized cost in the case of the Athabasca Tar Sands can be characterized in a number of ways. The most important, I think, and the most general, is this: it is not fully knowable. This is the paradox of external cost: it is extreme, but it plays out in scenarios of the future that resist representation, prediction, calculation, and that, quite clearly, extend over long periods of time into the future. In his excellent book, Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent, Andrew Nikiforuk says this about water use in the production of ‘unconventional’ oil:

For nearly a decade, scientists, as well as environmental and Aboriginal groups, have asked the government to study how much these city-scale withdrawals are impacting the [Athabasca] river’s health and instream flows. To date, nobody can say with any certainty whether the province’s promissory permission-granting has left enough water in the Athabasca for the fish. In the wintertime, water levels drop so low that by 2015 industry will be withdrawing more than 12 percent of the water’s flow. (Nikiforuk 65)

The non-knowledge of the future of environmental contamination—the externalized cost of unconventional oil (and hence of oil in general)—is in principle never fully knowable because the future is never precisely predictable. Costs will make themselves felt, but may not be recognized as costs, and will have to be paid, in one way or another, for periods of time that are beyond the time scale of (modern) civilization as we know it. Writing of proposed carbon capture technology—which in principle would store the carbon produced through unconventional production and refining—Nikiforuk notes that

Once CO2 begins to be injected at carefully chosen sites, the EPA has proposed that regulators track CO2 plumes in salt water, monitor local aquifers above and beyond the storage site to assure protection of drinking water, and sample the air over the site for traces of leaking CO2. And this isn’t something to be done over twenty or fifty years—the EPA believes this oversight needs to be maintained for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. (Nikiforuk 141)

What’s true of the imagined (really science-fiction) technology of ‘carbon capture’ is true of the very real and present danger of the spread of other kinds of ‘plumes.’ Nikiforuk writes, for example, of Arsenic plumes that result from SAGD (Steam Assisted Gravity Drainage), a technique used to ‘melt [bitumen deposits] into black syrup’ (69):

Arsenic, a potent cancer-maker, poses another challenge. Industry acknowledges that in situ production [...] can warm groundwate and thereby liberate arsenic and other heavy metals from deep sediments. Canadian Natural Resources recently reported that one arsenic plume moved nearly twelve hundred feet over a fifteen-year period but estimated ‘it would take centuries, if ever,’ for that arsenic to affect drinking water. No one, however, knows how much arsenic seventy-eight approved SAGD projects will eventually mobilize into Alberta’s groundwater and from there into the Athabasca River. (Nikiforuk 72)

Here again we see unpredictable ‘movement’ and ‘leakage’ (Nikiforuk 140-141) tied to deep uncertainty and an inconceivable time-frame: ‘centuries, if ever’ for disaster to happen—or not. My point is not to highlight the dangers of all this plume-movement—Nikiforuk, with his impeccable and detailed research, has already done that—but to note the ways in which this movement is unknowable in at least three ways, at a cost so external in its hiddleness that it becomes inconceivable. Maybe (or maybe not) the arsenic will move (first unknowability); maybe this movement will happen over centuries, or over thousands of years (second unknowability). As with the CO2, one can imagine that it would have to be monitored for millennia, even in the uncertainty of its movement. But by whom, and under what circumstances? (Third unknowability.)

But at this point the smallness of human calculation collides with the vastness of cost beyond human scale, and certainly beyond the momentary scale of the spasm of capitalism now driving Tar Sands development. What human civilization will be found in Alberta in, say, two thousand years? What sense will it make of our ‘addiction to oil’? What will be the cost to that civilization of the future of the ‘plumes’ of ‘moving’ arsenic? The cost of monitoring it? Of ameliorating it? Of abandoning the region because it is unlivable? All of this is unknowable, and unknowable too, for that reason, are the final, externalized costs of ‘unconventional’ oil.

Seeing these costs as ‘hidden,’ however—and unknowable in their hiddleness—has a corollary: they will leak out. Just as ‘plumes’ drift, and eventually show up in drinking water, or on the surface, so costs will appear, unpredictably, showing themselves in ways that do not immediately allow us to see the costs. Just as arsenic might appear far from its initial source, on a completely different geological level, so cost might appear in forms that conceal, rather than reveal, their sources. Leakage, then, is both material and semiotic, and the two are linked, indeed inseparable. The cost of arsenic leakage depends on the movements and directions of that leakage, which can never be fully known, and yet will refuse to stay hidden; in the same way cost as a measure and consequence shows up in different places, never fully knowable or definable, coming in different forms or versions, ruining things, leaving issues whose resolution or amelioration seems to have nothing to do with the strata out of which it has emerged. This will (or may) go on for centuries, millennia, forever, for people whose civilization is shrouded in the distant future.

External cost, like arsenic plumes, like the fictional CO2 plumes, drifts, appears, disappears—is known, ignored, represented, conjured away. Costs continue, or will continue, to be felt (or reckoned, ignored, displaced) long after what incurred them—‘oil’—is forgotten. What is the ‘origin’ of this (not-so) hidden cost, then, of those plumes? Our ‘fossil fuel addiction’? This is as difficult to pinpoint as the movement of cost itself, in all its various guises. Just as we will have a hard time indicating the true cost—let alone price—one of ‘unconventional’ oil, so too we will have difficulty in accounting for the ‘need’ for oil that drives its extraction and refinement. We know by now all the arguments: that we could live with the consumption of a lot less energy, of a lot less fuel; that our houses could be more efficient, and our cities too. There is no need to drive

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UNCONVENTIONAL OIL AND THE GIFT OF THE UNDULATING PEAK
so much, heat empty and leaky rooms, waste energy consuming stuff we do not want and that only alienates us from others. We know all that. But still we consume. We consume heedlessly, locked in the semiotic-material linkage of leakage, of the drift of poison and cost.

What language can we use to represent cost, what calculus to quantify it? And what psychology, what physiology, what cultural urge or somatic drive to explain, fully reckon, the ‘need’ for the useless expenditure of energy? Energy that, moreover, comes to us from sources we do not need to know about, cannot know about. Thinking about the fate of the Athabasca river, really understanding its ecology, the movement of all the plumes, even the barest outline of all that, the future of all that to infinity, would ruin a nice drive to McDonald’s. Just as cost and the origin of all those costs is unknowable, ungraspable, we have a motive to keep them unknowable. This, I suppose, is yet another level of unknowability. The unknowable, ungraspable urge to spend, to consume, to burn—by definition irrational,

The Agency of Oil

To say that the carbon footprint defies simple calculation is not to say that we have a free hand in polluting. It is to say, however, that our response to egregious catastrophes like the Athabasca Tar Sands projects must be nuanced in the sense that simple representation of a clearly identifiable event—an event without leakage, so to speak—by clearly identifiable and singularly responsible subjectivities is no longer sufficient.

Why, after all, do corporations produce oil from the Tar Sands? Why do legislators and jurists enable them? Why do television and print journalists in the mainstream media affirm their activities? More is at stake, I think, than simple economic pressure, the love of profits, and purity of motives. We have a profound anxiety of unknowability. The unknowable, ungraspable urge to explain, fully reckon, the ‘need’ for the useless energy produced by the burning of oil at the very end of the process (see Heinberg 45-84). As subjects, we are interpellated by oil, by its demands and inconsistencies. As with the auto, we care for it, cultivate it, propagate it, use it from its slumber by freeing it from shale or melting it from sand, love it, abuse it, waste it. That is what we do, what we are. We are subjects of, and subjected to, the energy slaves provided by oil—we are inconceivable without those slaves, their demands are our demands. When they call, we answer. (Indeed if Hegel were alive today, he would rewrite the master-slave dialectic as the confrontation between a subject living under ‘late’ capitalism and the energy slaves powering her appliances, cars, providing her food, her heat, her leisure.)

Industry is not producing desire, but is rather responding to the need for information required for the material practice of lawn care by the turfgrass subject. Neither does community pressure, a clear driver for individual behavior, engage in some simple way through the demands of industry. Rather, it can far more easily be argued that community pressures suit most directly the demands of turfgrass. (Robbins and Sharp 121)

Of course, the ‘demanding’ agent in a case like this need not be animate. To be sure, plants of all sorts ‘use’ humans to proliferate; as Michael Pollan has pointed out, corn, apples, marijuana and other crops “use” us to aid them in their genetic quest for dominance, just as much as we “use” them (Pollan). But what Robbins and Sharp say of turfgrass can be just as easily said of the automobile: virtually all of human society turns around the acquisition, care, development, and disposal of cars. In other words, an extraterrestrial observing earth could be forgiven for thinking that cars are the dominant species, and humans are bred simply to serve them.

Which brings us back to the Tar Sands, sustainability, and Peak Oil. As with turfgrass, oil too ‘moulds the capitalist economy into certain forms—indeed one could argue that the rise of capitalism itself was a function of ever cheaper and more efficient energy sources, with the energy produced by the burning of oil as the very end of the process (see Heinberg 45-84). As subjects, we are interpellated by oil, by its demands and inconsistencies. As with the auto, we care for it, cultivate it, propagate it, use it from its slumber by freeing it from shale or melting it from sand, love it, abuse it, waste it. That is what we do, what we are. We are subjects of, and subjected to, the energy slaves provided by oil—we are inconceivable without those slaves, their demands are our demands. When they call, we answer. (Indeed if Hegel were alive today, he would rewrite the master-slave dialectic as the confrontation between a subject living under ‘late’ capitalism and the energy slaves powering her appliances, cars, providing her food, her heat, her leisure.)

But the demands of those energy slaves—and ultimately of oil, whose agents they are, as close as we can come to quantifying the external costs of oil, and understanding Peak Oil as a function of those external costs. Just as, when the policeman calls, we can never be sure what he is calling about as we turn around, so too when oil calls we can never know fully what its demands, and its costs, will be. Where will the plumes of its poison reach? What will be the limits of those demands? When will oil go away, leave us without our dear slaves, force us to respond to the demands of ever more costly fuels? We can never be sure of the ‘other’, never firmly grasp its position as us only separate from us, the mirror of our subjectivity all the while being a profoundly foreign agency, a profoundly alien and even hostile one. In the face of this anxiety we will leave no stone unturned, spare nothing to provide the apparatus of oil—it’s vast industrial infrastructure, its energy slaves working in every continent and in every service—with what it wants and needs, despite the obvious risks to the environment and even to our own health. We can never fully and clearly calculate that cost, but we can depict, quite clearly, our dependence on an agency that is unconcerned with all that other stuff, with all the stuff of our subjectivity in (impossible) isolation from a socio-technical ‘frame’ that brooks no opposition.

Put another way, to free ourselves from that ‘other’ agency, as from turfgrass or some other noxious monoculture (corn, for example, itself obviously dependent on an oil infrastructure), we will have to imagine defeating an agency which has called forth, through its interpellation, our very subjectivities—and something to which we are subjected. Not an easy task, for we never really know where this agency is coming from or where it will take us; where, in other words, its plumes are drifting, where its leaks are opening, what new demands it will make. If we could draw the line once and for all and be done with it, it would perhaps be easy. But ‘it’ can never be pinned down: when will Peak Oil ‘arrive’? How will its external costs be manifested in 30 years, 50, 100? Who will be there to attend to those costs, how can we prepare those people of the future by preparing and attending to our own needs, now and in all the possible futures to come?
It is not, then, just a matter of ‘kicking our addiction to oil.’ Or perhaps it is, if we can argue that any addiction— to heroin, food, cigarettes, cars, whatever—is about not just us and what we want, but also what the ‘other’ wants from us, how its character, makeup, whatever, determines how we go about acting (or not acting) in relation to it. If the heroin addict is called by his drug, finds it to be “my wife, and my life” (as Lou Reed put it), so we, and the entire civilization, are called by oil. We turn around to face it—with guilt, perhaps, but we turn around. Every other addiction flows (literally) from this

One can imagine an antidote, after a sort, to this economy of interpellation and indebtedness (I am obliged to the policeman to turn around when he calls me: I owe it to him, to what he represents). It is the gift economy. Now there is already a gift giving implied in the Tar Sands developments, but it is not a very happy one. Canada is exporting synthetic crude to the US, and retaining all the environmental destruction that goes along with it. In short, the US gets the oil and Canada gets the devastation. This is the biggest gift one country can give to another, dwarfing even the gift giving of the Marshall Plan about which Bataille waxed so enthusiastic. But this giving is nothing more than an affirmation of the supremacy of oil and its agency, through recognizing above all the US’s need for oil.

One could imagine another giving of oil: to give the gift of oil in this case would be to refuse dependence on it. Rather than giving the poisoned gift (to oneself, one’s own country) of ecological devastation, one could give the gift of the agency of the other. In this case, the other—here oil—would not be seen as a hostile agent of finitude (which oil, at its peak, certainly is).

In Marguerite Duras’s screenplay for the Alain Resnais film Hiroshima mon amour, Duras has her heroine cut herself off from the power of the traumatizing memory of the shooting of her German lover at the end of the war. Speaking to her own 18 year old self in the city of Nevers, she says: “Je te donne à l’oubli”—“I give you to forgetting.” In this case, the ferocious agency of her other, her double—herself as a traumatized girl, guilty of collaboration—is given to forgetting. In this scenario, a lack of remembrance is an agent—it receives something, a memory—but an agent as non-agency. Of course no forgetting is permanent, one is always subjected to the appetites of the eternal return, but in this case forgetting can serve as a recipient of a gift whose giving puts in question an economy of demand, need, addiction, and careful calculation of payback (cost). This is, in other words, a movement by which another economy is embraced; this one, however, is not one of giving to another clearly defined entity (the US, for example) but to forgetting—the absence of agency— itself. A forgetting as gift.

This, then, is a relation not of precise calculation but of disengagement. Imagine if one could give turfgrass to forgetting. Just stop watering and mowing it. But how to give oil—now in its imperious agency—so to forgetting? That’s a much more difficult question, because oil, as I’ve noted, is in many ways the ‘root’ of all other addictions.

This is hard, in the same way that kicking turfgrass is hard. The agency of turfgrass depends not just on what grass wants (water, pesticides, the labor of mowing), but on what a number of socio-technical infrastructures demand: neighbors, friends, communities, industries. Grass’s demands, we could say, are framed by a number of other subjectivizing structures. But the demands of oil, its unknowability—Where is it? Where are the plumes associated with it leaking? How is it to be gotten? What is its finitude and futurity?—is tied to the demands not just of some other people but the gravity of one’s apparent survival. My car interpellates me, but my food keeps me alive.

Perhaps this is the true moment of not-knowing. At a certain point, the gift of forgetting cannot be knowing, anticipating, calculating. Calculation may be only an infinite regress in which the overwhelming agency of the other—oil’s interpellating power—is recognized and ultimately affirmed: how can we balance accounts, how can oil be mastered, but only to the extent that its use is formatted within a fully sustainable economy? Forget by just doing it: stop feeding it. Starve the beast. Consume less. Eat less (especially ‘cheap’ food). Stop driving. Hell, give up the internet. Do anything to break a dependency in which external costs are seen only as a staggering sublim, a mind-boggling infinite, rather than what they also are: ideological forms to be given away, to the recurring oblivion of forgetting.

Such a forgetting cannot be permanent, definitive—any more than can be that of Duras’s heroine. The days of the supposed easy measure of efficacy (like the easy measure of externalities) is over. But it is a gesture, the first one to ‘take,’ or to let go.

(Endnotes)

1. See, for example, the prediction of Thanksgiving 2005 as the official date of peak oil, at Kenneth Deffeyes’s website: http://www.princeton.edu/hubbert/current-events-05-11.html.


3. “Peak Oil theory is garbage as far as we’re concerned”, said Robert W. Esser, a geologist by training and CERA’s senior consultant/director of global oil and gas resources, according to Business Week online national correspondent Mark Morrison (Sept 7). See http://www.energybulletin.net/node/20418. HIS-CERA defines itself as a “global energy information company,” providing research to corporations. Its website: http://www.hcs.com/about/index.aspx.

4. See Yergin’s comments, as reported on The Energy Blog: http://therasedomain.typepad.com/energy/2006/11/cera_the_undo.html


7. See Gay the Actuary, “Oil Limits, Recession, and Bumping Against the Growth Ceiling,” for an exhaustive discussion on the relation between the availability of oil and the prosperity of the growth economy.

8. See Pollan, “Why Bother?” on the virtues of confronting global climate change through changes in energy and food policy—in this an open letter addressed to the next president (undecided at the time of the writing of the article). Such idealistic, and inspiring, articles rarely seem to appear in the Times any more (at least as of 2012).

9. See Krauss: “This striking shift in energy started in the 1990s with the first deepwater wells in the Gulf of Mexico and Brazil, but it has taken off in the last decade as a result of declining conventional fields, climbing energy prices and swift technological change. […] The United States may now have the means to reduce its half century of dependence on the Middle East.”

10. On external costs, see Laffont.

11. On energy slaves, see Heinberg 30-31.

12. By this I mean that the flourishing of our “late capitalist” economy is entirely dependent on fossil fuel inputs: agriculture (monocultures), transportation, the widespread production of delightful commodities and toys, all of this is unthinkable without massive fossil fuel inputs. The cost of every other addiction goes up when the overall cost of oil goes up.

13. For the classic analysis of gift economies, see Mauss.

14. See, for example, the last chapter of Bataille’s The Accursed Share.
15. In German, of course, gift means poison. On the poison-gift connection, see Mauss 81.

16. The full line is “Petite tondue de Nevers, je te donne à l’oubli”—“Little shaved-headed girl from Nevers, I give you to forgetting” (Duras 118). Duras’s heroine has had her head shaved by members of the Resistance (or simply by nasty townspeople), as punishment for “horizontal collaboration.”

17. Szeman notes the absence of a coherent discourse on the left concerning peak oil and all its consequences. How, precisely, to see that capital will end before nature, and not vice versa? (820-821). Citing Jan Oosthoek and Barry Gills (821), Szeman notes that what’s needed is “a new political economy [that] must take our impact on the planet’s environment fully and realistically into account.” As Szeman also notes, this is “easy enough to say, but much, much harder to produce when what is called for is a full-scale retraction against the flow of a social whose every element moves toward accumulation and expansion.” I would note here only Oosthoek and Gills’s use of the word “realistic” in the above quote. How does one take one’s impact realistically into account? What is real? I can only suggest here that a gift economy might very well have a different definition of the real—or the Real—than that of a growth/debt economy.

Works Cited


Stoekl, Allan: Allan Stoekl is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Pennsylvania State University. He has written extensively on twentieth century French intellectual history, from the double perspective of intellectual engagement and the economies of expenditure. Recent work has focused on issues of energy use and waste in the postmodern fossil fuel economy, from the perspective of a revised reading of the French philosopher-critic Georges Bataille, Bataille’s Peak: Energy, Religion, Postsustainability (2007). Future work involves readings of avant-garde theories of the city (surrealism, the situationists, Le Corbusier) from the perspective of contemporary questions of energy use and mobility in the city.

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This photo-essay constitutes an initial attempt to map out the forces and dynamics of capital at work in Fort McMurray, Alberta—a primary site of global oil extraction and a space that is now at the heart of the contemporary Canadian economy; it does so through the practice of ‘critical realism’ advocated by artist and critic Allan Sekula. The essay consists of three parts. In the first part, we describe the characteristics of Sekula’s critical realism, focusing in particular on his employment of this aesthetico-political practice in his book *Fish Story* (1991), an attempt to challenge dominant narratives about globalization as immaterial and unrepresentable by means of a focus on the transportation of goods by container ships. In the second part, we explore the challenge of representing another all-too frequently hidden material dimension of globalization: our continued dependence on oil and its by-products. Instead of focusing directly and literally on the site of oil extraction, the photo-essay we produce in the third part probes the effects of oil on life and labour in Fort McMurray. We do so in order to better understand the city’s specific socio-political challenges and to grasp the broader implications of oil for contemporary politics, culture and representation.

**CRITICAL REALISM AND THE OIL SANDS**

Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman

In what ways might it be possible to more fully explain the social and economic dynamics at work in the Alberta oil sands? This essay constitutes the beginning stages of an aesthetico-theoretical experiment, undertaken jointly by an academic and an artist, whose aim is to map the forces at work in Fort McMurray, Alberta, through the combined use of text and images. The way in which we frame our approach is through the employment of a critical realism that attempts to uncover the forms and shapes of life in late capitalism in a manner that is analytically rich and nuanced. We take the term “critical realism” from the work of photographer and theorist Allan Sekula, whose photo-series and book *Fish Story* remains (to our minds) unduly neglected as an aesthetic project whose intent is precisely that of navigating the complexities of global capital and to do so in a manner that might engender new political possibilities.\(^1\)
The thought that any kind of realism—much less a realism indebted to the necessarily troubled relationship of photography to the real—might be open to the task of naming the operations of twenty-first century global capitalism might, for many critics and scholars, be seen as misguided and misplaced. After the criticisms of the Frankfurt School and Bertolt Brecht of the literary theories of Gyorgy Lukács, and Fredric Jameson’s description of the relation of different generic forms to specific historical periods, the affirmation of an untroubled political function for realism today seems to constitute a willful misunderstanding of the operations and possibilities of genre. Sekula’s version of realism is not one that relies uncritically on the relation of the photographic image to some easily accessible real that can be comprehended outside of the discursive and narrative frames that constitute the social. At the same time, Sekula resists the all-too easy dismissal of the possibilities of the photographic image—its almost unprecedented capacity to be a cognitive mapping, a pedagogical, theoretical and political openings as a result of its relation to the real. Our visual-textual experiment proceeds in three parts. First, we offer an overview of Sekula’s account of critical realism in order to address some of the potential anxieties that attend the link of photography with realism, as well as to explore and explain the manner in which he assembles photo-texts that address aspects of operations of global capital that would otherwise remain hidden or obscured. Second, we briefly explore the specific difficulties of capturing our subject matter in photographs, in order to shape the focus of our critical-visual practice with respect to the oil sands. Finally, we experiment with a mapping of a specific, essential aspect of capitalism—its dependence on oil as dominant energy source—by means of a critical-realist photo-essay of Northern Alberta oil, specifically the city of Fort McMurray located at the heart of Canada’s controversial oil sands development. 

In Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Fredric Jameson writes:

An aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system—will necessarily have to respect this now enormously complex representational dialectic and invent radically new forms in order to do justice to it. This is not then, clearly, a call for a return to some older kind of machinery, some older and more transparent national space, or some more traditional and reassuring perspectival or mimetic enclave: the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of Postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. (54)

The short critical-realist photo-essay found in the third part of this essay is by no means an example of that “unimaginable new mode of representing” that Jameson names in his famous description of cognitive mapping (2003). At a minimum, however, we hope to show that (contra Jameson’s claim in the epigraph) photographic realism can operate in a mode other than in the direct one-to-one relation between image and object/event. This essay is in part about how photos can contribute to a cognitive mapping of a resource reality about which we too commonly imagine we already know everything there is to know.

On Critical Realism: Photography and Capitalism

The exhibit and book that make up Sekula’s Fish Story are framed in explicit opposition to what had by the mid-1990s become the dominant way of understanding globalization—as comprised by the immaterial flows of media images, economics, politics and ideology across now anachronistic national borders. Fish Story is an appropriate title for the project, the third in a series of projects that explore “the imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world” (202). Sekula’s photographs, the accompanying text, and the long essay that breaks up the book, explore the central and continued importance of shipping and the sea in our attempt to make sense of the present. It does so in order to counteract what Sekula sees as the hyperbolic “fish story” of globalization, as it has been developed both in academic accounts and in the popular press, which stresses the easy movement of culture and money across borders at the expense of the materiality of global labour and the physical goods moved around the world via the world’s oceans. Sekula writes:

My argument here runs against the commonly held view that the computer and telecommunications are the sole engines of the third industrial revolution. In effect, I am arguing for the continued importance of maritime space in order to counter the exaggerated importance attached to that largely metaphorical construct, “cyberspace,” and the corollary myth of “instantaneous” contact between distance spaces. In the imagination, e-mail and airmail come to bracket the totality of global movement, with the airplane taking care of everything that is heavy. Thus the proliferation of air-courier companies and mail-order catalogs serving the professional, domestic, and leisure needs of the managerial and intellectual classes does nothing to bring consciousness down to earth, or to turn it in the direction of the sea, the forgotten space. (50)

Sekula’s photographic project undertakes the challenge of presenting a material history of globalization. In contrast to those attempts to theorize global space that take as given a description of the world as dominated primarily by the chaotic flow of disembodied sign-systems—whether this is seen as the transnational flow of money or of culture—in both text and images Sekula traces out the concrete labour and material networks that produce and are produced by globalization. The aim is to deny the existence and importance of communication technologies and their effect in collapsing the globe spatially, or to contest the fact that capitalist space is being fundamentally reorganized. Rather, he wishes both to compile the picture and to restore to the study of global capitalism a number of factors that are in danger of fading away from our contemporary perspective of the globe. For example, the focus on the harbour, the site where “material goods appear in bulk” (12), allows Sekula to emphasize the ways in which the globe resists being turned into a one big village. He writes:

Large-scale material flows remain intractable. Acceleration is not absolute: the hydrodynamics of large-capacity hulls and the power output of the diesel engines set a limit to the speed of cargo ships not far beyond that of the first quarter of this century. It still takes about eight days to cross the Atlantic and about twelve to cross the Pacific. A society of accelerated flows is also in certain key aspects a society of deliberately slow movement. (50)

Sekula’s emphasis on the materiality of globalization might seem to be merely the result of a photographic imperative or limit: the need to focus on and capture visible signs. And of course, one of the problems that the global present has posed for contemporary art, especially art that is politically committed, is that the reality of the world system is something that seems altogether impossible to represent. The complicated web or network of technological and social systems that make up contemporary global finance or mass media, for example, defies the ability of our contemporary aesthetic forms (all of which had their genesis prior to the twentieth century) to render them in some way comprehensible, due both to their scale and their invisibility—powerful electronic phantoms (in the case of financial and media transactions) whose presence everywhere and at all times makes them no easier to frame in snap shot of any given place, event or thing. So what does Sekula propose to do that is different, that makes comprehensible what seems incomprehensible?

As Benjamin Buchloh points out, the avant-garde in photography has since the 1950s become identified primarily with modernist experimental forms such as photomontage, while documentary photography, with its insistence on capturing the ‘real’, has been marginalized as an artistic practice. This is because the relationship of the photograph to reality has been viewed with increasing suspicion over time, especially in terms of the political potential of photography. Once seen as the

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Instead, Sekula’s aim has been to create a “critical realism” that does not settle for the quotidian surfaces and experiences that are usually imagined (especially in relation to the photographic images) as reality, but a realism whose function of individual photographs is problematized by their incorporation in a narrative that has necessarily been created rather than offered up by reality. Second, since the photographs exhibit a wide range of techniques, photographic conventions and aesthetic choices, the different ways of producing the real are highlighted formally. Finally, as Buchloh notes, “the sudden focus on a seemingly irrelevant and banal detail interrupts the overall narrative in the manner of a Brechtian intervention that reminds the viewers/readers of the constructed nature of the representation with which they are confronted” (196).

In assessing the operations of critical realism, it is important to actually look at Sekula’s photographs themselves, however briefly, in order to assess its possibilities and limits as a way of analyzing the space of global culture. Fish Story is comprised of seven narrative sequences of photographs interspersed with short pieces of text that add additional information to the reading of the narrative, either in the form of anecdotes or historical or social information. The book also includes an essay in two parts entitled “Dismal Science” (41-55; 103-38) that traces with great complexity the historical shift in representations of the sea, from the maritime panoramas of seventeenth-century Dutch painting to the development of containerized shipping in the 1950s and 1960s, and from an ocean sublime in its sheer breadth and scale to one entirely rationalized by the logic of containment; the container hides its cargo, transforming its concrete contents into abstract units that, stacked up, even resemble money. To capture the full complexity of Sekula’s project, the multiple narratives that exist within Fish Story—the seven photographic narratives themselves, the accompany text, and the essay—must themselves be read as a larger, heterogeneous and ambiguous narrative about globalization that remains indeterminate, even though Sekula adheres to a vision of globalization that emphasizes the importance of the economic within it.

We will limit ourselves here to a consideration of two of Sekula’s photographic narratives in Fish Story. The second photographic narrative concerns Ulsan, the factory town built by Hyundai in order to serve the largest shipyard in the world. Here, we see a contemporary version of Utopia coming to completion (the ship Hyundai Utopia in a shipyard), followed by the myths of its primordial origin (a picture of the ironclad turtle-ship used in defeat of Japan in 1592 in the Hyundai headquarters); the laboring body, displaced from the fishing village that once occupied the site of the shipyards and from the former site of industrial labour in the West, set against the profits extracted from it (a photo of an executive golf course on the edge of the shipyard); a billboard announcing plans for an amusement park set against an image of the fishing village that it will displace. Against these images of Ulsan, it is important to weigh Sekula’s anecdote about the “The Korean Workers’ Museum” established by an American crew on one of the first ships built by Daewoo, another of Korea’s shipbuilding giants.

When an American crew picked up the first of these ships from the Daewoo dockyard, completed the sea trials, and began the voyage across the Pacific, they discovered in the nooks and crannies of the new ship a curious inventory of discarded tools used in the building of the vessel: crude hammers made by welding a heavy bolt onto the end of a length of pipe, wrenches cut roughly from scraps of deck
American elites have cultivated a fantastic fear of superior Asian intelligence, in doing so they obscure their own continued cleverness. (74)

It is perhaps hard to get a sense of Sekula’s entire project from these brief descriptions of his photos and a summary of small portions of his text. Nevertheless, it allows us to suggest what we see in this effort to map global space and to do it in a ‘concrete’ or material way rather than from a large-scale assumption that culture is deterritorialized in the way imagined by some critics and transnational corporations, and to engage in this mapping through photography—a medium whose ability to relate to the concrete has been rendered increasingly suspect in critical thought. Sekula’s photographs and text together produce a vision of the global present that is just as complex as one that a critic such as Arjun Appadurai wishes to think of a ‘capitalist realism’—anxious because of a misunderstanding of realism as an easily-adopted interpretative pragmatism instead of a historical genre of critical realism opens up a way of thinking about the politics of globalization and of the globalization of culture that permits us to remain both open to the circuits and spaces of globalization into something that, like Kant’s sublime, is ‘too big for representation.’ Finally, by mapping the everyday spaces of labour that are all too often hidden from view, it encourages a renewed ethnographic attention to globalization, the reading of signs in and from reality, rather than as they have been transformed and rendered symptomatic in those global cultural commodities that cultural critics love to decode.

We do not mean to suggest that Sekula’s attempt to reinvigorate the genre of realism is without its own problems (which would need to be investigated in more depth). Nevertheless, it is clear to us that Sekula’s mode of critical realism opens up a way of thinking about the politics of globalization and of the global capitalism” (Dirlik, “Global” 36).

More than a strict model that should be taken as the framework for all future politically motivated aesthetic investigation, Sekula’s critical realism highlights a means and method by which to name the materiality of a global system whose generative force all too often seems to have evaporated into the immateriality of communication systems and the effects of a hi-tech revolution. Against those who are anxious at the very thought of a ‘capitalist realism’—anxious because the conjunction of the terms immediately suggests a theoretical limit, a too quick arrival at a solution, or a misunderstanding of realism as an easily-adopted interpretative pragmatism instead of a historical genre burdened by hermeneutic preconceptions—the analysis that we hope to provide here by means of a photo-essay of a key site of globalization in Canada is intended to challenge the comforts of incapacity that all too often attends the identification of global capital as an unrepresentable system.4

Oil in the Streets?

Such is the promise of critical photographic realism. To what effect might it be used in trying to name another
largely hidden dynamic of globalization: the system of oil extraction and production that is the lifeblood of capitalism—so essential to it that capitalism could not even exist in its absence? It is telling that even in the age of Apple and Google, any list of the largest companies on the planet is crowded with firms who generate the ultimate substance on which the planet’s economy runs: oil.

It might seem questionable to start from the assumption that the realities of oil are hidden from view. But consider: even in the streets of Edmonton, a city whose economy has continued to grow as a result of the oil extraction and production that is the lifeblood of this part of the world—a billboard advertising a strip club with the tag-line “We Support Big Oil!”, a life-sized bronze statue of rig workers in the middle of West Edmonton Mall, a multi-coloured pumpjack in the parking lot of a suburban McDonald’s—but none longer in one’s imagination. Instead of demanding an account of the what and the why of Canada’s most northerly major city, they appear as the sort of curiosities one might expect to come across in the wild, wild West, and can be as quickly and easily written out of one’s view as the much larger and more intimidating industrial structures from whence the lifeblood of petrosocieties flows.

Fig. 3 Imre Szeman, Pumpjack

One could object: is not the very existence of Edmonton a visible sign of oil culture? Are not its skyscrapers and that of its sister-city, Calgary, nothing if not oil rendered visible? Indeed, is not the whole of global modernity itself nothing but liquid oil transformed into the capacity for movement and solidified into objecthood? The problem of rendering the reality of oil visible in the form of a photo-essay like the one that Sekula produces in Fish Story is two-fold: either oil is so contained within the quotidian landscape of modernity that it does not present itself to view, or it is so omnipresent, equivalent to global capitalist modernity itself, that it is hidden in plain sight. Given this either/or, all or nothing, is one to proceed? To try to map oil imaginaries via images of oil produces an interpretive hermeneutic that is full of problems. The limit introduced by the search for small visual clues—a billboard, public statue, a faux pumpjack—is that one already knows the answer to the problem. The statistics tell us that Edmonton is a city whose economy is highly dependent on oil and so one goes looking for examples of oil iconography in its streets—and finds the results disappointing. The disappointment is two-fold: the (relative) absence of the kind of visible signs that one hoped to find; the lack of an appropriate index of a practice whose import suggests that one should find signs of it here, there and everywhere. This is a disappointment founded on a series of flawed interpretive presumptions, which nevertheless force us to confront the question of how to interrogate an oil imaginary in the absence of perceptible images of oil—the equivalent to the space of Sekula’s harbours and the traffic between them.

As with Sekula’s interrogation of Ulsan, we have chosen to engage with oil by looking at the way in which a local, supposedly peripheral space is mapped into the circuits of globalization. Situated in the northeastern corner of the province, and linked by a single, treacherous highway to other ports of call, Fort McMurray, Alberta, is far from the dominant population centres of Canada. At the same, it lies at the heart of the country’s twenty-first century economy. In an age that is thought to be defined by the operations of service economy and cognitive capitalism—a high tech age in which immaterial capitalism trumps the material variety—40% of the value of Canadian exports consists of the commodity extracted from the oil sands that surround the region (Cooper). The financial canyons of Toronto are filled with cash the origins of which can be traced back to a northern community struggling with the challenges of isolation and ferocious growth, which together produce social and economic difficulties of a kind experienced nowhere else in the country, and, indeed, in few other places on earth.

The most familiar images from Fort McMurray are of the oil sands themselves. These images are inevitably aerial shots whose intent is to emphasize the sheer size and scale of those sites at which bitumen is extracted—a vast and destructive mining operation that requires surface vegetation to be shoved aside, and which leaves behind massive tailings 'ponds' and mountains of sulfur. With the exception of small vehicles that appear to be more like toy trucks than the genuine monstrosities they
in fact are (the largest ground vehicles on the planet are put to work in the oil sands), there is seldom evidence of human bodies in action in the mine sites. To frame the scale of these sites in a single image is to say all that one needs to say about them: such images constitute not only a specific indictment of the oil sands, but form an allegory that condenses the brutal environmental consequences of capitalist modernity into a single image. Or such seems to be the presumption, based on visual representations of the oil sands to date.

We will leave aside the question of whether or not this scalar approach is ultimately successful, either aesthetically or politically. What we want to draw attention to is what is left out of such oil images: labour, forms of life, the experience of bodies working and living in proximity to the oil sands—in other words, all those varied registers of experience on which Sekula draws on to produce his critical photo-narratives of the shipping trade and its role in late capitalism. In a world replete with signs, images of the oil sands have limited themselves to the visualization of extraction sites; in doing so, they provide almost no account of the full complexity of the space and time called ‘Fort McMurray.’

Let us be clear: by turning our attention away from mining sites, we intend no apologia for oil extraction and its environmental consequences. On the contrary: we think it is only by more fully naming and explaining the dynamics of life and labour in relation to the sands that we can begin to figure the significance of a place that oil imaginaries in Canadian urban centres are so quick to render peripheral, assigning to it an environmental culpability which they somehow do not share. Paying attention to the signs of labour and globalization in Fort McMurray, to the organization of life and work at a central site of resource extraction on the planet, offers us a beginning point for a more complex and nuanced narrative of oil economies and their role in global capitalism.

Recovery: Life, Labour, Oil—A Photo-Essay

There is an incredible infrastructure needed to manage and enable work in the oil fields. In addition to the primary sites of oil extraction, workers are required to fill out a huge secondary economy made up of all manner of service industries—from fast food and gas stations to firms specializing in the complex equipment required for oil exploration. With few notable exceptions, the oil extraction sites up north are hidden from view, accessible only via gated and guarded dirt roads. Much more visible—indeed, inescapable to vision—are the oil service companies, their vehicles, machinery, and the physical detritus that comes with infrastructure work. These
companies occupy hastily constructed light industrial buildings on either side of the city; the strip malls that stretch between them contain bars, liquor stores, and those few companies in the city that can manage the high rents and uncertain economics of the place.

The workers who spend their days in these parts of Fort McMurray are perhaps the most heavily impacted by the high cost of living in the region. Well-paid, but not nearly as well compensated as the oil workers whose high salaries inflate the cost of housing, they must scramble to find a decent place to live. The lack of affordable housing (indeed the dearth of housing in any form) is due in part to the limited land made available for the development of private accommodation. The majority of the land surrounding the city is owned by the Crown, which has been slow in releasing it to the Municipality of Wood Buffalo—too slow to absorb the rapid expansion of population. As for the size of the population: a huge gap exists between municipal censuses and the ones conducted by the federal government, largely because the latter finds it hard to count the number of people living in unusual, quasi-legal dwellings across the region. The result: too few services for too many people, without even taking into consideration the large numbers of workers who spend chunks of time in Ft.

Mac, flying in to work and out for breaks, who make demands on municipal services and extend the line-ups of the country’s busiest Tim Hortons (Pratt).

New condo towers are being constructed in the city core, but for now, they remain sketches whose details have yet to be filled in. In other places, land is left unused by developers intent on driving up prices by producing and managing property scarcity. And so, on the outskirts of town, clumps of young men live in trailer homes, their new trucks squeezed together in the narrow driveways of their homes-away-from-home. It is hard to commit to a place where one must live in such conditions, which is no doubt why the city tends to feel ephemeral and impermanent, despite the ferocious activity in its streets.

The streets can be full of traffic. As with so much else (water and sewage systems, social services, etc.), there are more people living in the region than the architecture of the streets was designed to handle. At the beginning and the end of each workday, Highway 63 is jammed with traffic—a shock to a visitor or newcomer, who might expect the energies of commerce to run at a slower speed this far north. The city is in the midst of a massive expansion of road infrastructure. The bridge across the Athabasca River, which can already handle more
than three times the load of normal bridges in order to manage massive construction and transportation loads, is being widened and will eventually host ten lanes of traffic. Enormous new intersections, whose scale seems out of proportion with the size of the community it services, are being crafted to move traffic in and out of the huge suburbs nested in the boreal forest above the noise and chaos of the river valley.

Adding to the traffic: a fleet of mud-caked buses, which move workers from home to field, from field to airport, and from airport to work camp. On its 400 coaches and 300 site vehicles, the company Diversified records 5 million passenger trips a year. Even in a city whose economy depends on a substance linked to private car travel, mass transportation is a necessity. Much of the workforce arrives via plane to start their shifts at far-flung mining and in situ sites. Without access to private cars, they are ferried by bus up and down 63, before snaking out on dirt and gravel roads whose sign posts bear the names not of nearby towns, but of extraction sites of specific companies: Suncor, CNRL, Shell.

In front of PTI’s Athabasca and Wapasiw Creek campsite 60 km north of the Ft. Mac, drivers pick up and unload workers in a scene reminiscent of a large city’s central bus stop. Wearied workers stomp into the main entrance, grabbing a snack or coffee from the on-site Timmy’s, before trudging off to their rooms. In the lobby, one can imagine that one is at one of the nicer chain hotels located off a highway ramp close to a big city. From the outside, however, the camp is lifeless, and resembles nothing if not a detention facility or prison. It comes as no surprise to learn that PTI built the military camps used by Canadian Forces in Afghanistan. The same disciplined, controlled, institutional logic pervades these buildings, up to the fact that many such camps are dry: no alcohol is allowed. In the rooms, workers are provided with Internet and satellite TV. Outside, the poorly constructed basketball court looks as if it has rarely been used; so, too, the golf driving range, which is dusty and empty of life. Camp life is time to be endured until the next spell away from work and back in civilization.

Recovery: what the body gets when it is away from Ft. Mac, but also the promise that everything will be replaced after industry has extracted what it needs. Whether recovery is in fact possible is hard to gauge from the few existing examples. A tour of the Suncor site ends with a trip through Wapisiw Lookout, a tailings pond that has been turned into a grassland dotted with...
clumps of rock for animal habitation and monitoring stations to measure the health of the soil under the grass. A video shown on the tour bus makes it clear that a great deal of science and effort was put into the task of reclaiming the site; to the eye, it looks unimpressive, incomplete, especially with the dunes of the Suncor site just behind it all too visible, regardless of which way one turns. A sign on the edge of the grassland reads: “Do Not Enter.”

At the junction where Highway 63 loops back upon itself, one finds an earlier patch of reclaimed land: Syncrude’s Gateway Hill. Across it run the Matcheetawin (the Cree word for “beginning place”) Trails, at the head of which sits an installation representing the Cree circle of life. We walk the length of the trail and encounter no one. Indeed, the trail seems disused and forgotten: it is overgrown and many of the interpretive markers that identify reclamation dates and names of trees stuck back in are in danger of disappearing into the underbrush. Gateway Hill is experienced more as an object lesson of corporate responsibility whose message grows old fast, than as a space where one can spend time in nature. An industry pamphlet picked up at the Oil Sands Discovery Centre (printed on recycled paper) reads: “Canada’s oil sands industry is committed to reducing its footprint, reclaiming all land affected by operations and maintaining biodiversity” (CAPP n.p.). Even if one were not to doubt the commitment, the existing evidence of the recovery suggests that the industrial use of the land will leave permanent scars, both on nature and on those who will live alongside these spaces.

At the Suncor Community Leisure Centre, people lift weights, make use of the jogging track, enjoy the pool and read in the community library. On the day we visit, the indoor soccer courts are taken up with events connected to the 32nd Annual Alberta Surface Mine Rescue Competition. This is the only sign that we are someplace strange—the only burst to the surface of consciousness of an economy that elsewhere is able to all too easily hide in the nooks and crannies of daily life and habit.
moment to come when we finally are off work for good and don’t have to spend our days in thrall to the private solitude of satellite TV?

By using photographs to open up an investigation of the material realities of globalization, Sekula’s practice of critical realism has offered a counterpoint to those discourses that too quickly narrate the global present through the ephemerality of telecommunications systems and the near instantaneity of the movement of ideas, money, and even bodies. Sekula’s Fish Story emphasizes the sites where multiple forms of exchange take place—the harbours and docks—as well as the slowness of physical movement in a world whose contemporary substance is most often given form through narratives of speed. We believe that engaging in a critical realist photo practice in relation to oil produces similar insights into both the narratives that surround it and the role this substance plays in giving shape to global reality. Oil is an omnipresent feature of the world we inhabit—the life-giving substance of the physical and imaginary infrastructures we have shaped over the past century-and-a-half. Even so, there is a tendency to ignore or to underplay its significance, seeing it instead as an important but not irreplaceable substance, as one form of energy which can eventually be substituted for others without necessitating major changes in social life. Our focus on Fort McMurray is meant to give shape, depth and complexity to a place that has become little more than a normative by-word for all that is wrong with the world. As with Sekula’s visual-textual interrogations, critical realism of the oil sands also generates more general reflections on the narrative forms through which globalization is named and explained, and draws attention to the real bodies and the living labour that continues to be put to use to generate profit regardless of the consequences.

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Morton's response to the habit of the "beautiful soul" to remain in cynicism. He writes:

Our choice is false if it has been reduced to one between hypocrisy and cynicism, between wholeheartedly getting into environmental rhetoric and cynically distancing ourselves from it. In both cases, we would be writing liturgies for the beautiful soul. Although it is 'realistic' to be cynical rather than hypocritical, we do not wish to reinforce the current state of affairs. Our answer to the ruthless ransacking of nature, and of the idea of nature, must be yes, we admit to the reality of the situation. And no, we refuse to submit to it. (140)


6. "The main service area of Fort McMurray is surrounded by Crown land and therefore, there is limited and available for development where most people live." (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo).

(Endnotes)

1. The one sustained confrontation with Sekula's critical realism can be found in, a collection of papers from a symposium held at the Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography and Visual Studies (Belgium) in September 2005.

2. See the essays in Bloch et. al. and Fredric Jameson's essay "Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism."

3. Other art photographers identified with realism use it to different effect through the size of the photos in their exhibitions and the scale their images represent. For a discussion of this form of realism, see Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman, "The Big Picture: On the Politics of Contemporary Photography."

4. Against the comforts of capacity, we follow Timothy Morton's response to the habit of the "beautiful soul" to remain in cynicism. He writes:

Our choice is false if it has been reduced to one between hypocrisy and cynicism, between wholeheartedly getting into environmental rhetoric and cynically distancing ourselves from it. In both cases, we would be writing liturgies for the beautiful soul. Although it is 'realistic' to be cynical rather than hypocritical, we do not wish to reinforce the current state of affairs. Our answer to the ruthless ransacking of nature, and of the idea of nature, must be yes, we admit to the reality of the situation. And no, we refuse to submit to it. (140)
For much of the history of Alberta’s tar sands, a series of visual conventions have shaped Canadian imaginaries of the resource, the emergence of the non-conventional oil industry, and the mining of oil. We introduce a series of archival images dating from 1880 until the opening of Great Canadian Oil Sands (Suncor) in 1967, to analyze how visual representations were used to justify government and public support for bitumen mining and refining, to legitimate state research into the separation of oil from the sands, and to ideologically sustain public funding of the development of this unique Canadian resource industry. We conclude that many elements of these early positive normative conceptual frameworks remain in play today, used by corporate and government meaning-makers to blunt contemporary critiques by the public of social and ecological tradeoffs, and ultimately to legitimate Alberta and Canada’s pursuit of non-conventional oil as an acceptable energy future.

Au cours de l’histoire albertaine, une série de conventions visuelles ont contribué à façonner l’imaginaire canadien des ressources naturelles, l’émergence d’une industrie pétrolière non conventionnelle, et les pratiques d’extraction minière. Nous proposons ici un regroupement d’images d’archives allant de 1880 jusqu’à l’ouverture de Great Canadian Oil Sands (Suncor) en 1967, afin de montrer le rôle de ces conventions visuelles dans plusieurs sphères. Premièrement dans la justification des soutiens gouvernementaux et publiques de l’industrie d’extraction et de raffinage. Ensuite dans la légalisation des recherches sur la séparation du pétrole et des sables. Enfin dans le maintien idéologique du financement public pour le développement de cette industrie d’exception au sein des ressources canadiennes. En conclusion, nous indiquons que même aujourd’hui les entreprises et les fasseurs d’opinions politiques utilisent plusieurs éléments de ces premières méthodes conceptuelles normatives. Ils le font pour émousser les critiques contemporaines en faveur des compromis social et écologique, et ultimement pour légitimer l’industrie d’extraction pétrolière non conventionnelle dans l’avenir.

Introduction
The visual record of activity in the Athabasca tar sands of Northern Alberta extends more than 120 years and claims over a century of storytelling, in which the photographic images built a public imaginary of the landscape and the industry. Early photographs helped national and international audiences picture a remote, geographic place and led them to see in the tar sands its economic potential for a young Canadian nation. In the province of Alberta (founded in 1905) that visual record worked alongside political narratives of meaning-making to legitimate an uncertain and precarious public investment throughout the entire time period of our study. Representing the tar sands as an immense resource in the wilds of Canada, and its exploitation as heroic, historic, and carried out by hardy Albertans, carried the quest to extract non-conventional oil from the tar sands into broader Canadian narratives of the conquest of nature: the holy grail to countrywide nation-building.

From the late 1880s onwards, photographs of “the Athabasca tar sands” would begin to evoke both a geographic place and a natural resource in the minds of colonizers and settlers in Calgary and Edmonton or interested bureaucrats in Ottawa, and investors in faraway Montreal, New York, or London, England. The camera use by geologists, surveyors, and travelers added credibility to claims about potential natural riches at the edge of a remote northwest Canadian frontier. Images picturing the landscapes as extractive (Pratt and Karvellas; Schwartz 966) were reinforced by the classical perception that the camera provided a documentary record of reality (Mraz 163-192). For much of its history, a series of visual conventions or tropes have...
shaped Canadian perceptions of the mining of oil and the industry’s difficult emergence. Two exceptionally positive storylines emerged: (1) the application of human ingenuity, science, and technology to release usable crude oil from the bonds of sandy bitumen, and (2) the key importance of the Alberta state and public investment in the process to open Alberta’s northern wilderness to commercial investment and industry. Like all powerful social facts, these well-constructed meanings and images now appear familiar to modern readers, internalized and normalized, part of our mental and symbolical geography. Imagination, Castree and Braun argue that images work together to influence meaning-making about society/nature relations, blunt the contemporary critique of social and ecological tradeoffs, and legitimate state support for non-conventional oil for the future of civilization (Davidson and Gismondi).

Age of Discovery
Looking at photographs in historical geography is, ultimately, not a search for ‘truth’ but rather a mode of inquiry. By going beyond subject content and photographic realism to think more broadly about the way in which photographs, gathered in the empirical practices of exploration and surveying, played an active role in the production of geographical knowledge and the construction of imaginative geographies. (Schwartz 125)

The opening photograph, taken on the banks of the Athabasca River in 1892, shows two men, perhaps Government of Canada geologists, dwarfed by an enormous band of tar sands (Fig. 1). The angle of the image, the apparent scale of the resource, the survey marker, and the gaze of government employees confirm the identity of hand drawn landscapes, early photographs detailing the history of exploration and interpretation, played an active role in the production of geographical knowledge and the construction of imaginative geographies. (Schwartz 125)

Concentrating on the dominant readings of tar sands visuals from 1880 until the opening of Great Canadian Oil Sands (Suncor) in 1967, we analyze how a network of images and meanings teamed up with scientific or political explanations to legitimate state support for bitumen mining, the separation of oil from the sands, and the commercial viability of the industry. Geographers Castree and Braun argue that images work together with discourses as acts “of conceptual construal” (167); what Hajer and Versteeg describe as an “epistemic practice” (181). In this paper, we draw to the surface patterns across a series of historical images of the tar sands to argue how these elements formed part of an increasingly sophisticated cultural web of meanings that guided public consciousness in these early years. We conclude that many of the elements of these conceptual frameworks remain in play in current political struggles, used in new ways to continue to influence meaning-making about society/nature relations, blunt the contemporary critique of social and ecological tradeoffs, and legitimate state support for non-conventional oil for the future of civilization (Davidson and Gismondi).

Other pioneers like Count Alfred Von Hammerstein would punch holes along the Athabasca River in the early 1900s hoping to hit conventional oil. Kodak images of Von Hammerstein’s drill works appeared in Agnes Deans Cameron’s widely read The New North: Being Some Account of a Woman’s Journey through Canada to the Arctic (1909, see Fig. 2). While the Count was unsuccessful drilling for “elephant pools of oil,” Deans Cameron’s book and its images became a best seller and made her a media celebrity. Deans Cameron would lecture across Canada and the United States about her “Journeys through Unknown Canada.” As a Canadian Government representative in Britain, this magic lantern slides of her photographic images on display, she promoted Prairie immigration. She offered this description of the Athabasca region:

“...In all Canada there is no more interesting stretch of waterway than that upon which we are entering. An earth-movement here has created a line of fault clearly visible for seventy or eighty miles along the river-bank, out of which oil oozes at frequent intervals. [...] Tar there is [...] in plenty. [...] It oozes from every fissure, and into some bituminous tar well we can poke a twenty foot pole and find no resistance.” (71)

Her photographs were recently reproduced in an exhibit at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, Canada.

As a promoter, Von Hammerstein would work the region for almost forty years. This image (Fig. 3) from the early 1900s is attributed to him by the Library and Archives Canada and shows tar weeping from the river bank with the scribbled note “Tar Sands and flowing Asphaltum in the Athabasca District ca. 1908.” The same image is also held by The Alberta Provincial Archives and includes the legend “millions of tons of material in sight.” The Provincial Archives of Alberta file advises that the image is “a Fragment of printed publicity leaflet on the Athabasca District’s oil potential and illustration of oil sand exposure on river bank.” A gloss of mathematical scribbles left by one eager reader suggests more (Fig. 4).
Images of bitumen and oil seeping from the Athabasca River banks (Fig. 3 and 4) acted like eyewitness testimony (Burke) invoking the scale and immensity of the resource for those living in distant cities, reinforcing narratives of commercial possibility especially in the minds of government administrators and petroleum investors. The effect of image on perception stemmed from an historically specific view, as Schwartz argues, that camera images were a mirror of reality: “the society which produced and consumed these images placed unwavering faith in the truthfulness of the photographic image and its ability to act as a surrogate for first-hand seeing”; the photograph became a “surrogate for first-hand observation—a convincing visual experience akin to being there” (Schwartz 113). Presenting cornucopian images of the Canadian North, members of the Geological Survey and entrepreneurs like Von Hammerstein and writers like Deans Cameron partook in a process that anthropologists call turning sights into sites, whereby images become cultural or symbolic shorthand that instill preferred meanings onto a geographic space. At the start of the petroleum and automobile age in Canada, such images from Alberta’s North presaged new economic staples and indicated new directions for industrial futures. As with other staples, the tar sands also promised enormous wealth and personal power for those who controlled it (Huber 2008). The stories and visual impressions of the promoters of the tar sands were not all truthful, but they were true in their effects; drawing entrepreneurs, investors, and both levels of government into the region, as well as into a particular way of seeing the landscape. Von Hammerstein would be named to the Canadian Petroleum Hall of Fame in 2011 (“Honoured CPHFS Members”).

The Government Gaze

Sydney Ells, considered by some the “father of Alberta bituminous sands research” (Ells 101) spent over thirty years as surveyor, cartographer, and engineer researching tar sands for the Canadian Government Department of Mines. His field survey of the bituminous sands along the Athabasca River in summer 1913 examined reaches and tributaries south and north of Fort McMurray, first presented in a Preliminary Report published in 1914 that comprised over eighty-five dense pages, including forty photographs.

In 1962, the Canadian Department of Mines published his memoir, Reflections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands—a less technical narrative of his career in the region, covering the years between 1913 and 1945. From opening poem to closing words, Ells sketches a manly frontier (Fig. 5) where skilled ‘white’ engineers supervised urban tenderfoots, with
the assistance of “shiftless” Aboriginal labour. Ells’ memoir includes fascinating images and descriptions of quarrying techniques, use of explosives, power shovels, and shalers in early mining activities, alongside discussions of various paving tests and results of trials at separation of the oil from the sands. Described by his colleagues as “one of these hardy pioneers,” and a “rugged individual,” Ells admits he was seduced by the “romance of mining” (Ells 4). Despite the official topics, his reports come alive with recounts, in muscular tone, of camping in the open air at fifty-below zero, drying clothes by campfire and repairing snowshoes after a long day of winter surveying. Ells literally took the measure of the place, concentrating his geologist’s eye on verticality and not on surfaces. For months in 1913, he surveyed the region, measuring and photographing the depth of bands of bitumen deposits (Fig. 6), and the depths and densities of its overburden. He identified high grade deposits (many in commercial play today) and his map work is especially attentive to the commercial challenges of moving the bitumen to market, describing the locations of prime deposits, transportation challenges like crossing terraced land (Fig. 7) and impossible river banks (Fig. 8), and cost predictions per ton based on distances from mine deposit to future railheads.

Ells’ original 1913 maps, and a later series of topographical maps he completed in the early 1920s (surveying over 1240 square miles of deposits), became the only comprehensive maps of the region (and are available at Glenbow Museum, Calgary). One oil company official argued that industry specialists relied upon his early maps well into the 1950s.

In *Imperial Landscapes*, Mitchell argues that maps, surveys, reports and photographs of colonial agents construed ‘facts’ about a distant geographic place, and that this ‘government gaze’ was used by state administrators to guide political decision-making about the management of colonial peoples and resources from afar. Another researcher argues that early survey and mapping work charting northern Canadian resource landscapes “provided a provisional form of surveillance,
control, and supervision,” a “projection of state power” over places and peoples (Sandlos 196). Anthropologist James Scott calls these “maps of legibility,” conventional descriptions which simplified complex realities for state administrators in ways that marginalized certain social groups and practices, or valued certain aspects of geologic formations, wildlife, and ecosystems over others (2).

Aboriginal peoples are glimpsed occasionally in the dotted lines on Ells’ maps around reserves, or in images (Fig. 9) or diary descriptions of their labour as trackers and freighters hauling the tar sands south. But like most reports of the age, they are empty of Aboriginal land uses—an omission that Mitchell (10, 15) calls a ‘social hieroglyph’ of the historical social relations they conceal.

Ells’ early reports and memoir are also largely devoid of attention to ecosystems; for him, natural systems (climate, local foods, disease, weather, terrain, waterways, and more) are subtly classified as either supporting or inhibiting extractive strategies. Nature is not denied, but circumscribed. At best the muskeg, forest, and climate are presented as human trials, obstacles to be endured and conquered: “A fly-infested country, of many streams, in timbered or burned out areas, and almost limitless muskeg” (Ells 10), to be overcome, in the masculinist discourse of the day, by hardy men charged with developing a modern industrial nation. But it was under the dual gaze of commerce and government that the Athabasca territory became constructed into a commodity frontier, understood in terms of deposits of natural resources, relationships to markets, and obstacles to extraction of tar sands for human use. Rivers were seen for their navigable properties, not as natural ecosystems—as means to move people and technologies inland or move products out (only later would the importance of water for the separation and waste tailings processes become important). Forests and muskeg became reduced to obstacles—not sources of biodiversity and habitat. The original inhabitants simply became a part of that landscape. Aboriginal peoples became at best a potential labour force or disappeared into a wilderness terrain. “Objective images” and “disinterested scientific facts” began to appear as more authentic depictions of the region, displacing indigenous and local understandings, while affirming traveler observations with expert confirmation of geological
formations, navigation routes, engineering opinions on potential mining sites and so on—a topography of exploitation.

Ells, the engineer blended physical masculinity with a confidence in the technological domination of nature (Fig. 10). Such attitudes were common among engineers at this time, part of their civilizing mission. Early ecologists shared in this ideology of technological progress in the 1920s, convinced of the role of scientific knowledge in helping human society overcome the constraints of nature (Lecain 57-59). Despite Ells’ predictions, the scale of tar sands operations remained limited for many decades. The arrival of the railway to the region made some things easier. But the resource itself was not quite so free and easy (Fig. 11) as first depicted. Commodification of the resource required new methods of separation of oil from the sands that would take decades to evolve, dampening this early enthusiasm.

Political Handfuls of Tar
Railways were crucial to the Canadian extractive economy. In the early 1900s business pressure mounted for the Canadian and Alberta Governments to support railway expansion westwards and northwards. Zaslow notes that initially “the oil boom [in 1910 in the tar-sands lands] quickly faded. . . but while it lasted, it strongly affected the railway program of the Alberta Government” including their commitment to the proposed Alberta and Great Waterways rail line to join Edmonton to Fort McMurray (212). Financial issues associated with its development would force a government resignation and a new election in 1910, but the rail line reached Draper in 1922 (12 kilometers south of McMurray) and McMurray in 1925-26. Alberta developed considerable public debt building northern transportation and communication (Richards and Pratt 19-20). Images of well-dressed men, with handfuls of tar, repeat across the visual record of this time. This first image (Fig. 12) includes right to left: S.E. Mercier, Northern Construction Company; Hon V.W. Smith, Minister of Railways; Alberta Premier Herbert Greenfield; and Colonel Jim Cornwall, Northern Transportation Company. Greenfield, Smith and the United Farmers of Alberta party were first elected that year, the powerful hands of politics and public transportation alongside those of private finance at the tar sands in early 1921.

Men in urban business attire out in nature (Fig. 12) suggest the easy availability, access, and abundance of the resource and the apparent ease of its potential extraction. Edmonton business men, in dress clothes and fashionable urban headgear (Fig. 13), collecting handfuls of tar sands or dipping into liquid tar pools (Fig. 14), sent a message about the riches of this place as a kind of repository of black gold.

The arrival of well-dressed men at the tar sands suggests the coming of commercial investment to the region (Fig. 13-15). Alongside reports of the mile-by-mile approach of the railway, such images no doubt encouraged distant publics, shareholders and the state. But the images also spoke to a difficult problem: how to separate out the oil from the sands and the need for investment in the process of extraction. The next stage in this process was to bring such visions to fruition through science.
Fig. 14 Robert Fitzsimmons, *Unidentified Man Checking out a Surface Pool of Bitumen*

Fig. 15 Group Examining Tar Sands, Fort McMurray, Alberta. Left to Right: Walter Jewitt, Ted Nagle, Bill McDonald.

Fig. 16 Rutherford Caley, *Man Looking at Oil Flowing Freely from Tar Sands Exposed to Heat of Sun*
The transportation costs to move heavy and unwieldy bituminous sands to market heightened the need for an industrial process to convert bitumen into a liquid form that could flow southwards for commercial use and profit. But bitumen’s special material conditions—it was dense, heavy, and mixed with sand, water, other chemicals, and clays—meant that large investments in science would need to be injected for an extensive period of time before any returns on those investments would begin to flow. No process to separate the oil from the tar sands appeared to work well at an industrial scale, although many images (Fig. 17) record homespun efforts at separation.

One of those whose perseverance would prevail was Dr. Karl Clark, a University of Alberta scientist, and employee of the provincially-supported Research Council of Alberta (founded in 1921 with the initial purpose of pursuing industrialization of the Athabasca sands). Clark is credited with developing a hot water separation method in 1926. Over many years, Clark moved his research back and forth from university laboratory to Edmonton warehouse yards to wilderness workshop.

Images like that of the scientist at work (Fig. 18), lab coat stained in oil, affirmed Clark’s efforts at applied science. Clark’s work in the field brought increased authority to his laboratory science at the University of Alberta and to the government’s Alberta Research Council, and vice versa. Pilot plants were built in Edmonton and the Dunvegan rail yards (Fig. 19) in 1924 and rebuilt in 1929 (Ferguson 191 and 53-54).

Karl Clark: Geographic Sites of Science

Fig. 17  Daniel Diver, Interior of Shack with Sample of Tar Sands and Extractions, Fort McMurray. Remarks: “Pail on stove holds tar sands, bottle shows oil and a milk like substance. Gas comes from tube at other end. 8 pounds, sand produces 12 ounces, oil; 6000 pounds, sand produce 1 pound bitumin (sic).”

Fig. 18  McDermid Studios Edmonton, Dr. Karl Clark, University of Alberta, Tar Sands Department.

Fig. 19 D. S. Pasternack, Oil Sands Extraction Plants- Edmonton Dunvegan Yards
While the end goal was commercial investment and profit, the scientific challenge itself appeared to be a strong source of enthusiasm. Barry Ferguson argues that “the fact that the Premier himself was chairman of the Research Council of Alberta and that the board included both cabinet ministers and the University President” indicates its importance (52). Whether intentional or not, scientific and technological problem solving brought a dose of heroism to the process that often obscured the ultimate ends—which were always commercial exploitation. Images of bush laboratories confirmed that lab experiments and processes could be adapted to the terrain and climatic conditions. This visually conveyed presence on the land was crucial to legitimating Clark’s work, and to attracting future commercial investment to the tar sands. Separation was shown to work in nature: that is, in “real” conditions albeit at a moderate scale. Field experiments brought with them the powerful authority of science and the university, and confirmed a separation process based on universal principles of chemistry. In Putting Science in Its Place, Livingston argues that the location of where science is carried out adds to its claims. Clark’s strong presence, at a time when science was revered, further increased public acceptance of government taking a role in the industry by using taxpayers’ money for research and infrastructure, while at the same time reassuring the eventual private investors needed for commercial scale production (Ferguson 31-58).

**Early Commercial Uses - Asphalt**

The arrival of the Alberta and Great Waterways rail line to south McMurray and Waterways made it possible to transport heavy machinery for use in commercial separation experiments northwards, and to ship large amounts of bitumen south. But separation would not come until the late 1920s, and commercial scale extraction still much later. In the meantime, Ellis and...
Fig. 23  Robert Fitzsimmons, Experimental Pavement Laid with Alberta Bituminous Sand under Direction of Mines Branch, Department of Mines.

Fig. 24  Sidney Ells, Walkways at Jasper Park Lodge Surfaced with Bituminous Sand, Jasper, Alberta.

Fig. 25  Robert Fitzsimmons, Early Process of Liquefying Bitumen

Fig. 26. Robert Fitzsimmons, International Bitumen Company Limited. Unidentified men using early process in liquifying bitumen.
Clark and both governments were under pressure to demonstrate return on public investment in science and infrastructure.

A number of high profile experiments took place. Ells, on behalf of the federal Department of Mines, describes packing tar sands by dog or Aboriginal and Métis labour tracking scows south on the Athabasca river (Fig. 21), and later by train (Fig. 22) to pave roads and sidewalks on Jasper Avenue in the commercial heart of the capital in Edmonton (Fig. 23), surface approaches to the new Alberta Legislature (see the Alberta legislature paving image in Hunt 347), and to pave approaches to Jasper Park Lodge, a federal landscape (Fig. 24). In its natural state, barely reworked, bituminous sands proved a useable surface.

Billboards that announced train cars of tar sands in Edmonton or its use in federal government paving experiments, no doubt somewhat justified the public investment in mapping, research, and the rail line to McMurray. And high profile ‘experiments’ at the Alberta Legislature and at the federally controlled Jasper Park Lodge symbolically linked each competing level of government to the resources future. The Dominion of Canada would control the Athabasca tar sands region for the Crown until Alberta took control of its natural resources in 1930. Even then, the federal government retained tar sands leases in the McMurray area until 1945, indicating federal priorities for the resource. Both governments would later play a role in co-funding Syncrude in the Lougheed era (1971-1982).

The high profile of the experiments resonates with many current corporate and government promotions that extol publicly funded university science and its role in cleaning up the industry.

**Commercial Scale Experiments**

Between the 1930s and the 1940s, two important, privately-funded commercial projects—International Bitumen followed by Abasand Oil—emerged, and failed. Images of these pioneer commercial plants (e.g., Fig. 25 and 26) are sprinkled throughout Canadian history books, invoking pride for the industriousness of commercial pioneers on the tar sands frontier.

Robert Fitzsimmons’ efforts in the 1930s are described as amateur and promotional, but they also caused a contagious “fever of belief” among his followers. Ferguson (85) describes the hypnotic effect of the tar sands on engineers and scientists who worked with Fitzsimmons to try to make separation and production commercially viable, but by 1939, just nine years after construction, the International Bitumen plant, was considered “worthless” and consigned to the dustbins of industrial history.

This photograph of the Fitzsimmons Tar Sands Building under construction in Edmonton (Fig. 27) suggests his optimism and certainly would have added to the public ‘fever’ around the business. Even today, snazzy head offices of tar sands companies have important symbolic value.

The Abasand Oil plant began operations in 1936 (Fig. 28), and was considered a vast improvement over Fitzsimmons’ earlier efforts, constructed under the guidance of Max Ball, an American engineer. The Abasand plant took years to develop and test, and images of it give the impression of a professional and technically sophisticated industrial enterprise. The plant began to produce petroleum products of various kinds in 1941 but was destroyed by fire in November of that year, never reaching its “design capacity of 3000 barrels of bitumen per day,” attaining on average 400 barrels of oil per day in the summer of 1941, although it did prove extraction could be effective (Ferguson 204). Two key factors were common to both of these commercial ventures: “they followed paths beaten by government researchers” like Clark, and they required “advanced technical expertise and large sums of money if commercial development was to be successful” (Ferguson 94).

Faced with fuel shortages during World War II, at a time when Canada produced only five percent of the oil it consumed, the federal government decided to resurrect the failing Abasand project and started reconstruction in 1943. A number of federal investigators carried out a series of studies to identify problems with Ball’s engineering, plant design, and operations, and the technical changes needed to guarantee commercial...
IMAGINATIONS
IMAGINATIONS
IMAGINING THE TAR SANDS 1880-1967 AND BEYOND

Fig. 31. George Sherwood Hume, Abasand Plant alongside Horse River. Note cribs for waste sands.

Fig. 32. Aerial View of Provincial Government’s Pilot Plant for Extracting Oil from Northern Alberta Tar Sands, Bitumont, Alberta
potential of the tar sands, including the need to upscale the plant in size (Ferguson 93). The Federal Department of Mines, with Sydney Ells at the helm, took the lead financial role, although some private Canadian money remained in play. They moved the operation to a lease hold controlled by Ottawa (originally scouted by Ells) containing richer deposits of tar and expanded the project to 4,000 barrels of bitumen a day. Alberta was wary of the project, fearing a federal takeover of the resource. Various authors report the lack of collaboration between federal and provincial specialists and scientists, including Ells and Clark.

These Abasand images were photographed by geologist George Sherwood Hume (Fig. 29 and 30). He recorded many images of Abasand during a series of visits in the 1940s. Hume started work for the Geological Survey of Canada in 1921 and at the time of Abasand would have been considered the Canadian government expert on petroleum exploration and resources. During the Second World War he was advisor to the oil controller for Canada, and later he became chief of the Bureau of Geology in 1947. In 1949 he became director of the Mines, Forests, and Scientific Services branch of the Department of Mines and Resources and acting Deputy Minister of Mines.

Hume’s first two photographs (Fig. 29 and 30) provide a perspective that shows the scale of the industrial operation; its location on the edge of a wooded area, apart from, yet a part of, a landscape dominated by the surrounding boreal forest.

This third image (Fig. 31) shows the relationship of mining pit and extraction plants to the Horse River and includes one of the few images of early waste tailings ponds. The reliance on proximity to water for the separation processes is clear. The pipe crosses the river to outflow ponds that foreshadow contemporary waste tailings impacts on landscapes and ecosystems, but the scale of future projects remains unimaginable. In the end, the project was a spectacular failure, and again burned down in 1945. According to Chastko, “the simmering conflict between the two groups allowed the oilsands issue to become subsumed within the federal-provincial battleground over natural resource development” (54).

During the Abasand years leading up to and during World War II, growing fears of the scarcity of oil supply boosted government and public enthusiasm and support for tar sands research and development. That context of fear altered after a large conventional oil deposit was discovered at Leduc in 1947. The use of energy security discourses would re-appear in the 1970s during the first oil crisis, and once again in the contemporary post 9-11 era, the latter period infused with energy and political security alike (Davidson and Gismondi 159).

**Bitumont: Success at Last**

To maintain the interest of private investors in the tar sands, the Alberta government funded the building of Bitumont, a large-scale pilot separation plant in 1946 and 1947, near the site of the old Fitzsimmons plant (Fig. 32). It was re-designed by American engineers under the supervision of Karl Clark’s colleague Sydney Blair; its purpose once again to prove commercial viability. The plant operated for two seasons, beginning in the summer of 1948, and intermittently thereafter for another decade, at a total cost to Alberta taxpayers of about one million dollars over the lifetime of the plant. (In comparison, the entire 1953-54 Alberta budget was $53 million.) Employing Clark’s hot water method, it only produced 500 barrels of bitumen a day, but “proved viability of the separation process and bitumen production” (Ferguson 209–211).

The size of these plants is miniscule compared to today’s scales. But aerial images of professionally engineered production plants on the edge of the boreal wilderness instilled confidence in the progress by the state and corporations, especially when contrasted with early images of boiling pots of oil and slipshod systems of mining and separation. This 1949 photo of Karl Clark at the Bitumont plant depicts a gentleman scientist, in his comfortable old sweater, pipe in hand, standing in front of the fruits of his research (Fig. 33). Clark looks more like he has just risen from his easy chair beside a fireplace, providing a certain public reassurance that...
the tar sands have arrived, nature at last tamed by science and industriousness. Clark would attend the sod turning of the Great Canadian Oil Sands in 1965, but died some months before it went into operations. However, in contrast to the reassuring symbol his image represented, Mary Clark Sheppard would later write in her biography of her father that he had a deep respect for nature and, at the end of his life, was saddened to see the scale of mining and processing required at the GCOS plant (89). Nevertheless, today, visitors to Alberta can visit the Alberta Research Council on Dr. Karl Clark Road, Edmonton or the Dr. Karl Clark School in Fort McMurray.

In 1974, the Bitumont site, located 89 km north of Fort McMurray, was designated an Alberta historical site. The statement of historical significance by Alberta Historical Resources staff (“Bitumont Site,” Canada’s Historic Places) affirms:

The heritage value of Bitumont lies in its association with the attempts of the provincial government, private individuals, and oil companies to develop methods of profitably extracting oil from northern Alberta’s tar sands. The hot water separation process pioneered at Bitumont established the economic viability of the tar sands and laid the foundations for future exploitation of this valuable resource. Although Bitumont was abandoned in the late 1950s, the research and technology associated with the site has had an enduring impact upon Alberta’s oil industry. Through the efforts of government agencies and private companies at the site, the Athabasca oil sands were established as a viable commercial endeavour, paving the way for the creation of the massive Suncor and Syncrude oil sands plants.

The approval by the Alberta Government of Bitumont as a Provincial Heritage site did more than preserve some remnants of old industrial buildings; it filled the place with meaning, integrating the story of the industry into the official history of Alberta’s province building. Osborne argues that in the culture of nation-building, certain Canadian geographic landscapes have become symbolically invested (like civic monuments) with historical meaning, woven into social memory and, in our case, internalized as part of the Alberta identity.

Great Canadian Oil Sands Company 1967

If Karl Clark in his later years expressed alarm at the scale of destruction that ensued, his concern was easily drowned out by the ‘wow’ factor expressed by visuals of the massive machinery dwarfing humans and devouring landscapes (Fig. 34-35). Government and commercial promoters of the tar sands industry in the 1960s and 1970s would celebrate this immensity; images of giant bucket-wheels or draglines became selling features to the public, symbolizing the enormity of challenges overcome. As Berger says, “nothing is accidental in an image,” and visual depictions of the tar sands developments convey scale, perhaps more than any other message (Fig. 34-36). Photo-journalist shots of giant machines worked alongside of discourses about the immensity of the resource, the jobs, and the wealth to keep the scale of destruction at bay, displaced by the wonder of huge technologies. In No Caption Needed, Hariman and Lucaites argue that iconic images like the bucket wheel (Fig. 35-36) represent unspoken civic virtues associated with an historic event (109, 126, 129).

With the celebrations surrounding the success of the Great Canadian Oil Sands in Canada’s centennial year (1967), those civic virtues reached the world stage.
Ten years ago, through the purchase of Great Canadian Debentures, you and more than 100,000 other Albertans joined with The Great Canadian Oil Sands Limited and Sun Oil Company in the creation of the world’s first oil sand mine. You have helped pioneer a very difficult venture that today stands as a milestone in realizing the potential of this unique Alberta resource. In commemoration we have commissioned the special minting of an original medallion: Pioneering Energy Together—1975. We hope that you will value this medallion as a gift of our sincere appreciation of your faith and confidence in the Great Canadian Oil Sands. Your role has been an important one—Your participation Historic.

The wording reminded all Albertans of their connections to the industry as co-founders who had invested both dollars and certain amount of provincial pride.

According to Raento and Brunn stamps act like political messengers; illustrations that take images to a wider audience and perform much like social texts that offer ideological “readings” of a territory or project (145). Often overlooked as part of visual culture, stamps promote national identity with what Raento and Brunn call “banal nationalism.” In 1978 this stamp added a pleasing aesthetic and artistic quality to the bucketwheel at work, exhibiting enormity yet diminishing perceptions of environmental impacts. Today “Cyrus,” the 850 tonne bucketwheel excavator, has been retired to the outdoor museum at the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray, “one of the largest land based artifacts in Canada.” While the bucketwheels were surpassed by the giant truck and shovel technologies in the 1990s, Cyrus stands on guard as historical icon, both ‘live’ and on this social media photography website.

The Medallions appeared in a blue sleeve with this text: The Medallions appeared in a blue sleeve with this text: Ten years ago, through the purchase of Great Canadian Debentures, you and more than 100,000 other Albertans joined with The Great Canadian Oil Sands Limited and Sun Oil Company in the creation of the world’s first oil sand mine. You have helped pioneer a very difficult venture that today stands as a milestone in realizing the potential of this unique Alberta resource. In commemoration we have commissioned the special minting of an original medallion: Pioneering Energy Together—1975. We hope that you will value this medallion as a gift of our sincere appreciation of your faith and confidence in the Great Canadian Oil Sands. Your role has been an important one—Your participation Historic.

Continuities: Visual Threads, Ideological Mainstays
Images of the tar sands differ from the usual oil derricks, drilling rigs, and pump jacks associated with the global oil industry. Tar sands petroculture is non-conventional, just like the non-conventional oil it produces. The industry has had more in common with the massively destructive open-pit mining and smelting cultures of North America than the conventional Alberta oil industry (LeCain). In this paper we introduced a series of historical Athabasca tar sands images to illustrate how representations operated at various stages in the
growth of this speculative economic and technological undertaking by the Alberta state. We unearthed traces of scientism and technologism, of masculinity and frontierism, of nature and society dualism, of dominant and excluded gazes, of scale and invisibility, of iconic images and exhibitionary complexes, particular to the social construction of the historical imaginary of the industry well into the late 1980s. Our interest in doing so was neither antiquarian, nor purely historical. As global society faces peak oil and declining rates of supply of conventional oil, non-conventional oil is being looked to solve present and future energy shortages. The ecological, entropic and political contradictions of global expansion into non-conventional oil are the focus of a more complex critique in our work Challenging Legitimacy at the Precipice of Energy Calamity (2011). But what struck us in that work is that many of these older images and traditional messages (i.e. science can solve all problems, and problems in nature can be engineered away) attached to them circulate still today, used in new ways to represent and narrate 'past and present processes' of province building and the natural evolution of science, technology and discovery in the industry. Moving out from the archives, these images circulate in corporate and government oil sands publicity and Alberta heritage and culture sites; "the same photographs circulating in time and space, between historical document and formal experiment, from mass media to curated exhibition" (Gahara 140, 167). Others have become institutionalized in what Bennett called "exhibitionary complexes" like the Oil Sands Discovery Centre (OSDC, established and run by the Alberta Government since 1985), "vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power [...] throughout society." At the OSDC, trendy designers integrate hundreds of heritage images into displays of current mining and extraction practices to normalize the step by step growth of the industry, shown twice daily in films like "Pay Dirt -- Alberta's Oil Sands: Centuries to the Making," a 45-minute "documentary" viewed by thousands of school children and their families annually at the interpretive centre, complete with online teacher's guide. The scale of environmental consequences, while acknowledged, is resisted with appeals to that black and white history of corporate and government collaboration to find technological solutions.

Such overt legitimacy work has been called into question in part by a series of contemporary photographic compositions that broke through the controlled corporate and state images available, to offer seldom-seen views of the industrial impacts of tar sands extraction and development. Because of the circulating capacity of the Internet, a global flow of stills and videos of the extent of industrial operations and its ecological impacts now move at different political scales and among different publics—Van Houw's personal canoe journey down the Athabasca River in 2007; Louis Helbig's aerial photography shot from his own airplane as he flew above tar sands operations; the work of Magnum photographers Jonas Bendiksen and Alex Webb; Peter Essick's National Geographic shoot; or the industrial landscape photography of Edward Burynsky and his world-renowned study The End of Oil with wide scale images of Alberta's tar sands operations prominent in the exhibit. Available extensively on social media sites, these and other photographic and moving images inform worldwide critical oppositional discourses.

But the effectiveness of that critique for building a politics or movement of change, despite its global reach, is aggressively resisted by both the Alberta (and now the Canadian federal) state and the global oil industry. Local and national criticism, while at times strong in some progressive sectors, remains muted by a booming Alberta economy, and contemporary discourses about security of supply. One essential element ever present in the multi-layered strategies of supporters of the industry, is this complicated older set of cultural and heritage imaginaries of the industry, which comprise an enduring, if contested, element of subjectivity among Albertans and Canadians, including the social identity of the province. Like Canada's problematic national identity as a natural resource exporter, such images of heroic extraction linger, acting like "buried epistemologies" (Braun 3) that confuse and thwart current public thinking about ecological, ethical, and political alternatives to the tar sands.

Image Notes

Fig. 1 Dowling, G.B. Geological Survey of Canada; Tar Sands Athabasca River, Alta. 1892. Photograph. PA-038166, 1892. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 2. Robson Studio Hammersen's Oil Works. Oil and Gas Well, Athabasca District. 1905. Photograph. MIKAN 3524914. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 3. Von Hammerstein, Alfred. Tar Sands and Flooding Asphaltum in the Athabasca District, c1908. Photograph. PA-029259. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 4. Oil Sand Exposure Near Fort McMurray, N.d. Photograph. PA 77,178/22. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 5. Ells, Roy. Dr. Sidney Ells at Fort McMurray Tar Sands. 1928. Photograph. PAA A12023. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 6. Ells, Sidney. Bituminous Sand; Grand Rapids, Athabasca River District. 1913. Photograph. MIKAN 3373021. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 7 Ells, Sidney. Terrace Structure, Athabasca River. 1913. Photograph. MIKAN 3373027. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 8. Ells, Sidney. Steepbank River. 1923. Photograph. MIKAN 3373024. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 9. Clark, Karl. Paking dogs with Tar Sands, Ells River. c1925. Photograph. PAA A3560. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 10. Spence, H. S. Sydney Ells at Tar Sands Plant. 1931. Photograph. MIKAN 3215336. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 11. Ells, Sidney. Working Face of Bituminous Sands. 1927. Photograph. MIKAN 3193674. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 12. Oil Sands - 3/4 Mile North of Fort McMurray. 1921. Photograph. Photo A 3344. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 13. Oil Saturated Stones Examined by a Group of Edmonton Business Men. N.d. Photograph. PAA B1067. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.


Fig. 15 Group Examining Tar Sands, Fort McMurray, Alberta. 1927. Photograph. PD 356-311. Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

Fig. 16. Caley, Rutherford. Man Looking at Oil Flooing Freely from Tar Sands Exposed to Heat of Sun. N.d. Photograph. A12182 Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 17. Diver, Daniel. Interior of Shack with Sample of Tar Sands and Extractions. Fort McMurray, 1920. Photograph. NA-1142-6. Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

Fig. 18. McDermid Studios Edmonton. Dr. Karl Clark, University of Alberta, Tar Sands Department. 1929. Photograph. ND-3-4596c. Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

Fig. 19. Pasternack, D. S. Oil Sands Extraction Plants - Edmonton Dunvegan Yards. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton. Photograph. A11233, 1924-25.

Fig. 20. Pasternack, D. S. Oil Extraction Plant - Clearwater River Plant. c1930. Photograph. PAA 111223. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 21. Ells, Sidney. More Carrying Sacks of Bituminous Sands at Shipment Places Cascade Rapids, Athabasca River. 1923. Photograph. MIKAN 3524747. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
Fig. 22  Mc Dermid Studios Edmonton, Alberta Tar Sands Grand Trunk Pacific Rail Car. 1924. Photograph. ND-3-2684. Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

Fig. 23  Fitzsimmons, Robert. Experimental Pavement Laid with Alberta Bituminous Sand under Direction of Mines Branch, Department of Mines. c1930. Photograph. A3399. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 24  Elli, Sidney. Walkways at Jasper Park Lodge Surfaced with Bituminous Sand, Jasper, Alberta. 1927. Photograph. MIKAN 3524748. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 25  Fitzsimmons, Robert. Early Process of Liquefying Bitumen. 1930. Photograph. PAA A3383. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 26  Fitzsimmons, Robert. International Bitumen Company Limited. 1930. Photograph. PAA A3384. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 27  Fitzsimmons, Robert. Tar Sands Building Edmonton; View of Exterior of Building Located at 5318-126 Avenue in Edmonton, Alberta. N.d. Photograph. PAA A3364. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 28  Mackenzie Air Service. Aerial view looking north of Abasand Oils Ltd., Horse River, Fort McMurray, Alta. November, 1936. Photograph. MIKAN 3524916. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 29  Hume, George Sherwood. Abasand Plant. 1944/1945. Photograph. PA 574-1074. Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

Fig. 30  Hume, George Sherwood. Abasand Plant 1944/1945. Photograph. PA 574-1072. Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

Fig. 31  Hume, George Sherwood. Abasand Plant alongside Horse River. 1944/45. Photograph. PA 574-1073. Glenbow Archives, Calgary.


Fig. 33  Dr. Karl Clark Who Has Been in Charge of the Bituminous Sands Project Since 1920. Bitumont Plant. 1949. Photograph. PA 410.3. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 34  Heany Machinery Used at Athabasca Tar Sands. 1967. Photograph. s-229-21a.tif Glenbow Museum, Calgary.

Fig. 35  Fort McMurray—Great Canadian Tar Sands Project. June 27, 1967. Photograph. PAA J99. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.

Fig. 36  Heany Machinery Used at Athabasca Tar Sands. 1967. Photograph. S-220-21. Glenbow Archives, Calgary.


Fig. 38  Canada Post Corporation. Athabasca Tar Sands Stamp. 1978. MIKAN 2218481. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

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(Endnotes)
1. This paper advances on arguments from chapters 3 and 4 of Debra J. Davidson and Mike Gismondi, Chal-

Gismondi, Michael: Mike Gismondi is Professor of sociology and global studies at Athabasca University. His areas of teaching and research include the sociology of power and environmental issues. Together with Debra J. Davidson, with whom he shares an interest in interdisciplinary thinking about the transition to sustainability, he has co-authored Challenging Legitimacy at the Precipice of Energy Calamity (2011). This is one of very few sociological analyses of the Alberta tar sands.


Davidson, Debra J.: Debra J. Davidson is Associate Professor of environmental sociology in the Department of Resource Economics and Environmental Sociology at University of Alberta. Her areas of teaching and research include the social dimensions of energy and climate change. Together with Michael Gismondi, with whom she shares an interest in interdisciplinary thinking about the transition to sustainability, she has co-authored Challenging Legitimacy at the Precipice of Energy Calamity (2011). This is one of very few sociological analyses of the Alberta tar sands.

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This essay looks at a particularly galling phenomenon for environmentalism, the “green” globalization of an oil conglomerate. Rather than simply dismiss such gestures as corporate cynicism, the paper suggests that one might usefully pay attention to the narrative modes at stake in these initiatives which here connect the exploitation of modernity to a parabolic logic. BP’s going green is seen as an extension rather than a contravention of its social being and shows why, even after the Deepwater Horizon disaster, BP’s desire to move “beyond petroleum” means more rather than less oil exploitation.

Cet article examine un phénomène particulièrement irritant dans le domaine de l’environnementalisme, à savoir l’internationalisation « verte » d’un conglomérat pétrolier. Au lieu de rejeter ce type d’actions comme un cynisme d’entreprise, on suggère ici qu’il faut considérer les modèles narratifs en jeu dans ces initiatives qui établissent une connexion entre l’exploitation de la modernité et une logique parabolique. L’adoption par BP d’une perspective verte est perçue comme un développement plutôt qu’une infraction de son existence sociale; c’est la raison pour laquelle, même après le désastre de Deepwater Horizon, le désir de BP « d’aller au-delà du pétrole » [« Beyond Petroleum »] exige une extraction pétrolière encore plus considérable.

The truism and circular argument that global climate change is global nevertheless represents a significant challenge for environmental justice movements, whether they are confronting the prospect of massive environmental degradation in the exploitation of Alberta tar sands or laws on carbon emission that read like carbon omission when it comes to those most likely in need of legal sanction. The invocation of the planet against the globalisms of globalization does not interrupt or sublate the paradox of globality, but essentially renames its logical impasse for dominant modes of socialization. The pithiness of thinking global and acting local might seem to short-circuit the impossible demands of planetary activism, but simultaneously mimics the scalar practices of the average transnational corporation, although this is far from saying that either is constitutively ineffective. A sensitivity to scale means that globality must be radically particularized and that a politics and aesthetics of environmentalism undoes spurious appeals to the global while articulating a scale that would actually be at one with the planetary implications of sustainability as such. A certain dialectics at stake, but not one that assumes theoretical integrity or practical solutions in advance. This does not, for instance, negate an ethical incredulity when faced with a carbon capitalism inexorably ‘going green’ in the current conjuncture, but it does place a special emphasis on the nature of what is otherwise an obvious logical contradiction. On the one hand, we could say it is simply not a contradiction: those who exploit natural resources, for instance, can just as easily exploit their defense—their creed is exploitation not its object. On the other hand, the contradiction remains to the extent that the scale of exploitation in one act cannot be matched by the scale required by the other. Is it not just that sustainability cannot be placed in the hands of those who have facilitated its jeopardy, but going green would require an alternative logic of socialization that would dissolve the antinomy in which such a contradiction is manifest. Rather than resort to philosophical fiddling in the face of Roman fires, I want to suggest that the disjunct scales of green capitalism hold important lessons for how environmentalism is narrated. Indeed, the discursive limits of one overdetermine to a significant degree the narrative of change desired by the other.

Since my discussion is about narrative more than policy, aesthetics more than prescriptions, one might be forgiven for thinking that the hard work of activism is being bracketed for contemplation; but part of my point is that the ratio of oil exploitation by BP, the parabolic subject of the following critique, operates at the level of inertial rhetoric, a sustainable grammar, that both ruthlessly and elegantly orders the world as its conceptual pivot. According to this narrative frame, the problem of the environment is read as an extension of BP’s global logic, not as a confirmation of its limit. Environmentalism is the scene of engaging the world and because oil majors directly affect the environment (they are always already environmental) they are singularly equipped to consider the logical extent of its globality. Now of course, the idea a transnational oil conglomerate might pioneer the dissolution of its carbon-based ontology could not be more absurd yet it makes good sense from the position of the antinomy in its globalism, especially one in which principles of justice might seek compensation for its harmful reach. For capital, ‘going green’ is not just a cost of production or cynical gesture: it is also the survival of its modern matrix, a growth model consonant with its worldly pretensions. The scale of globality comes to rest on its rhetorical logic, one in which ‘sustainable development’ is calibrated to sustain the development of capitalist social relations (the modernization in modernity) not the development of a sustainability coterminous with the planet (which can no longer be capital intensive according to modernization’s standard model). Such scalar dissonance is most marked in the way oil is constituted as a global commodity so that all claims to its alternative must match the naturalized contours of its economic, energy, and political functions while asserting their subsumption. For BP in particular, the alternatives to petroleum it poses are often discussed as a hedge against its booked oil reserves and this has much to recommend it as a Best Practice. Indeed, if one wanted to measure the truth of Hubbert’s Peak Oil thesis one could usefully start by tracking the investment decisions of the oil majors, both announced and hidden in PR campaigns. The trouble is that when ‘green’ alternatives are articulated within an ideology of growth, oil extraction is more aggressively pursued, not less. The
emergence of one is tied to the intensive practices of the other, as if renouncing or denying environmentalism might actually leave the remaining vault of oil unlocked. Again, we laugh at such ridiculousness, but no more so than BP, who appears to understand the force of farce that globalization demands and the difference between a bell curve and a parabola in oil’s future.

It is often argued that BP’s environmentalism is a special case among the oil majors who by and large have strenuously resisted any and all legislation that takes seriously the environmental impact of their practices. Even then, one should remember, however, that as BP’s corporate narrative seemed to change course, particularly after 1997 (about which more below) it had previously lobbied as part of the Global Climate Coalition formed in 1989 to defend a climate for business against environmentalist demands. What I am suggesting is that BP’s stance is consistent with its understanding of transnational globalization, but that this position is itself riven with scalar disjunctions in its worldliness, dialectical contradictions that cast a pall over whether the rate of change in the dissolution of carbon capitalism can outpace the sustainabilty or real foundations of planetary life. The difference between the desired narrative and the actually existing story of modernity continues to be a political and theoretical challenge necessitating closer scrutiny of how an oil corporation can be, particularly when the persistence of its being seems otherwise tied to a terminal ontology (a being-towards-death, the death of species being itself). I will sketch the contours of BP’s identity as a machine of modern growth then read this into what I will elaborate as its parabolic logic which is not a strategy so much as a deterministic symptom of disjunct scaling, an aesthetic correlate to what Bellamy Foster et al. have described as a metabolic rift.

The basic elements of BP’s emergence in and through the oil industry are relatively well known, but offer some pertinent twists. BP traces its origins to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (AIOC) incorporated in 1909, a company led by William Knox D’Arcy, a former gold explorer who turned his hand to oil concessions (interestingly, D’Arcy’s first oil concession was formalized initially by the registration of an entry called First Exploration Company in 1903—in the days before PR companies were not quite so bashful). British Petroleum was the marketing name of a German distribution company (Europäische Petroleum Union, of Bremen) for Royal Dutch Shell that was seized as an enemy asset at the beginning of the First World War. After purchasing BP from within a government trust, AIOC kept this brand name for marketing and distribution (AIOC itself was a Glasgow-based subsidiary of Burmah Oil, whose most famous consultant was Winston Churchill, who in practice used government and military influence to secure its monopoly in the region). Yet since much of its oil reserves remained in West Asia (thanks to the D’Arcy Concession), the parent company remained Anglo-Persian until 1935, when Iran emerged as a nation state and the corporation was renamed Anglo-Iranian Oil (AIOC). In fact, while BP sometimes traces its “birth” to 1909 the parent company did not become BP until 1954, after the CIA-backed coup against Mossadegh in Iran placed the Shah in power and the corporation sought a more explicit and perhaps less controversial national affiliation (AIOC had already lost its Iraq oil concession in 1951 thanks to postcolonial nationalization). The nation hinge, while flying in the face of the realities of the global oil market, remains an important integer of oil’s complex relationship to sovereignty. Indeed, as much as we would like to believe BP and the other oil majors control the petroleum business, their booked reserves now represent only 10% of the whole with national oil companies continuing to dominate the industry. In the days before the oil embargo of 1973 the oil majors, then known as the Seven Sisters, used their control of oil surpluses to fix prices and contracts over as much as 85% of global supply. Yet OPEC’s formation in 1960 underlines that oil’s role in modernity cleaves closely to the nation-state idea as fundamental to modernization (and was a harbinger of its ‘eternal return’ to the oil market stage). The nationalization of oil industries is often read as protecting sovereign command over resources, but one of the notions it consolidates is the primacy of modernity’s project in which maximal resource exploitation is tied to the robust development of the state. For all of the scrambling among oil majors for market share the truth in their competition is dialectically bound by their negotiations with national oil conglomerates who can swallow or reappropriate their assets in ways far more demonstrable than mergers and acquisitions. From the outbreak of the First World War until the completion of Thatcherization privatization in the late 1980s, BP was fundamentally a national corporation. Indeed, the evolution of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company into British Petroleum elicits a strong fealty to the nation (at the time, a dying imperialism) even as capital demands accumulation beyond it. If the disjunction is obvious, however, it does not accurately explain the narrative logic of BP’s being within it.

Several factors are important here. The initial strength of AIOC was guaranteed by its dominance in West Asia coupled with its supply monopoly to the British war machine (aided by the aforementioned Churchill who had pushed the Royal Navy to diesel over coal-powered ships). While its BP subsidiary was distributing petrol to the new car industry (as ‘motor spirit’), AIOC’s control by the government assured that it would not be subject to the full vagaries of market prices. In the aftermath of the Second World War, however, AIOC’s profile faded like Britain’s and the switch to the BP brand confirmed its diminished status before the juggernaut of American oil hegemony. Unable to compete head to head with U.S. giants like Exxon, Mobil, and Chevron, BP diversified its business interests while keeping close to its domestic advantages in which North Sea contracts were pivotal. British government control turned out to be its best defense during the oil crisis of the 1970s (when Kuwait and Libya nationalized their oilfields), although further diversification ensued (into the mining and chemical industries). In the 1980s, however, with full government divestment by 1987, a new set of strategies emerged. First, BP would revert to its core businesses, principally oil exploration, production, and distribution (it halved its workforce by doing so). Second, it saw new opportunities through mergers and acquisitions. Third, building on the success of its Alaskan exploration, it turned next to partnerships in the former Soviet Union as crucial to its global expansion. Indeed, it is only during the 1990s that BP began to exude the brand power of its American competitors signaled most obviously by its merger with Amoco in 1998 (a legacy company of the old Standard Oil Trust) and its joint venture with THK in Russia initiated in 2003 (an endangered but profitable partnership that has allowed BP a foothold in the huge post-Soviet oil market). Finally, as a high profile global player in the oil business, BP announced in May, 1997 that its status required a public commitment to corporate social responsibility. In the words of John Browne, BP’s charismatic CEO at the time: “Governments, corporations and individual citizens have all had to redefine their roles in a society no longer divided by an Iron Curtain separating capitalism from communism. A new age demands a fresh perspective on the nature of society and responsibility. If we are all to take responsibility for the future of our planet, then it falls to us to begin to take precautionary action now” (“Where BP stands” Browne, 1997?) Like a cross to a vampire, this declaration was not exactly taken seriously by the oil industry who added to the environmentalist charge of hypocrisy the no less realist accusation of hypocrisy. Not every oil company cried foul, however: Shell, for instance, had already seen the public relations advantage in corporate social responsibility (“good corporate citizenship”) and made steps to push its own ethics and environmentalism agenda. Three years after the speech at his alma mater, Stanford, Browne solidified BP’s environmental credentials by rolling out its new corporate logo, a blossom of sun in yellow and green accompanied by an acronym which now meant ‘Beyond Petroleum’ (BP claims this is a slogan, not the company name but British Petroleum almost never appears alongside the new logo). Few waited for the Deepwater Horizon disaster to call the bluff on such brand bravado, but the speech and its implications for BP’s profile as a transnational corporation place a special stress on narrative logic that requires further comment.

Beyond the obvious pause one must feel before an oil behemoth declaring its commitment to fighting the deleterious effects of hydrocarbons the real question is how the aim is declared as reasonable and reasoned, as the episteme of non-contradiction delivered in a tone
There is indeed a parabolic dispute BP now represents.

The rhetoric of sustainability can certainly contribute to an innovative new space to describe the new space and process of responsibility, ‘the journey.’ The precautionary action as journey sounds particularly anodyne but in fact it radically reduces the promise of action to one route (something along the lines of ‘our way or/on the highway’). Browne explains that there are two possible courses of action, but only one effective journey because the other entails immediate and drastic reductions in carbon emissions and/or the banning of fossil fuels (necessitating the social exclusion of BP itself). Thus, the only way for the metaphor to be substantive is for the journey to include BP and for steps to be “balanced and gradual.” Again, one alternative is banished while the other, preserving BP, is perfectly reasonable. The cognitive dissonance here is symptomatic of the scalar disjunction capitalist globalization offers. Corporate social responsibility at this level means acknowledging specific courses of action are unsustainable (Brown’s term) because they would adversely affect the modernization efforts of developing nations. This is true, of course, but only if there is a prior determination not to redefine growth or redistribute social wealth globally. Instead, “we believe we can contribute to achievement of the right balance by ensuring that we apply the technical innovations we’re making on a common basis – everywhere in the world.” It is vital we understand the parabolic function of this claim because it appears rational and logical even when you add the silent conditional clause for those other members of the social invoked along this journey, “if you let us.” Here reason always seems to fall short of understanding, which is the truth of its action. In fact, we are closer to metonymy because the social as Delors, if anything, has been substituted by its putative parts. The responsible corporation, again, the antinomy is not wrong, but consistent with how BP must be global. If it has a Weltanschauung, a kind of worldly wisdom, it is yet discontinuous with the world as environment.

This is not simply the vulgar ideological cut between appearance and reality, as if this alone would be a measure of truth and falsehood. The appearance of tackling environmental degradation is the real of BP’s being, as a corporation, as an oil major. The journey forward cannot be imagined outside its crucial participation just as, after the events of 1989-1992, the truths of capitalist history are irrelevant. This part of the speech is very clear: we will take care of business rather than you taking care of us. We will monitor, measure, and reduce our carbon emissions and strive to “keep our house in order” so that you are not compelled to do so. In a statement remarkable for its gestural largesse, Browne declares, “Our overall goal is to not do neither the thing to avoid the scalar disjunction capitalist globalization problems. That is the natural business process.” In the oil business, especially drilling and exploration, there is no lower hanging fruit. If the price of oil is high enough, cost-intensive extraction is feasible, with the caveat that difficult and complex problems may emerge.

To put this in perspective, Browne’s speech comes
devour of either irony or self-abasement. Here I believe
to the extent of conjuring a parabolic aesthetic with the
extent demands of corporate social responsibility under
the sign of perceived globalism. While Umberto Eco’s interpretation of Thomas Aquinas (Eco’s first book, from his dissertation) offers a template for the parabolic, the intention here is not to reproduce parabola as the ward of thirteenth century hermeneutics, but to consider it as an epiphenomenon of reading the world today as necessarily post-ideological. For Aquinas, the parabolic was not a synonym for allegory, but a poetic sense in which the word and its meaning were inextricably linked. Here, appropriateness is a measure of scalar semiosis and dissonance. What could be read as blatantly false might nevertheless be appropriate to its scalar demands, which is more about the difference between fiction and truth in fiction. On this level, Browne’s perception of BP’s new mission is neither opportunistic nor hopelessly muddleheaded, but replete with the rhetorical conventions of worlding, a passionate admixture of nationalis nervosa and the perception that the corporation is indeed a global citizen. The parabolic rhetoric holds these elements in tension as a condition of narrative extension. Put another way, the parabola permits narrative sustainability as sustainability as such. The rhetoric of sustainability can certainly contribute to sustainable practices regarding renewable resources and alternative forms of energy, but its primary thrust is to sustain its rhetoric as a solution produced by the schisms between nation and the environment as a planetary concern. However contradictory, such parabolic rhetoric is crucially consistent with the predemands modernity has wrought.

When Browne delivered his speech he had already become something of a corporate star (the following year he would be knighted, and in 2001 he would become a Lord—Baron Browne of Madingley). The oil business is risk-centered and Browne took on risk with gusto (an enthusiasm that not surprisingly would lead to his being something of a corporate star). When Browne delivered his speech he had already become a man of narrative extension. Put another way, the parabola offers a template for developing nations. This is true, of course, but only if the voice deems itself as such is the ideology of deepest pedigree, but this is not the heart of the parabolic conundrum BP now represents.

“Social” for Browne means identifying BP interests with those of teachers and students (recall, he is speaking at Stanford), “business people with capital to invest” (a key portion of the audience), legislators (who might otherwise argue a reduction in BP’s power via taxes or regulation), voting citizens (whose democratic zeal must be considered at odds with the power of corporate donations) and finally consumers (those with the power of choice—determined by disposable income or access to debt). Overlaps between each category are acknowledged by Browne, but here social is assumed to be the space of agreement where, in the absence of ideology, a response to environmental crisis is mutually shared rather than fragmented by constritive contradictions and fundamentally antagonistic interests, like class. To this extent, Brown’s “social” is meant to fill the conceptual space produced by the basic Thatchertist maxim that there is no such thing as society. In neoliberal logic, “society” encourages socialism; “social,” parabolically, excludes it. Again, this kind of thinking (a shared ‘conviction’ that you do not know you have—ideology) is precisely permitted by the appeal to scale that the global environment represents. It is, moreover, a “thrown parallel” in which BP’s identification is posed as a plane consistent with the social as its axis. The invocation of a geometric parabola is perhaps most appropriate when thinking of modernity as not only an arc opening upward in terms of development and growth, but also as the curve of Galilean falling bodies that occurs as gravity pulls a projectile back to Earth. We might associate this rising and falling action with Aristotelian aesthetics yet we should also note its register in Aquinas: sub sensu litterali includitur parabolicus seu metaphoricus. The metaphor is parabolic to the extent that it curves back to a literal sense of word, a relationship that Aquinas distinguishes from its mystical or spiritual sense, which is further subdivided into allegorical, anagogical, or moral. I would suggest there is also a parabolic connection between the literal and mystical, which is the arc of ideology Browne must sensibly repress. Thus, social is a metaphor in Browne’s speech yet might also be posed as the solution to the impasse that metaphorization represents.

For his part, Browne introduces what he calls “an appropriate metaphor” to describe the new space of BP itself. Thus, the only way for the metaphor to be substantive is for the journey to include BP and for steps to be “balanced and gradual.” Again, one alternative is banished while the other, preserving BP, is perfectly reasonable. The cognitive dissonance here is symptomatic of the scalar disjunction capitalist globalization offers. Corporate social responsibility at this level means acknowledging specific courses of action are unsustainable (Brown’s term) because they would adversely affect the modernization efforts of developing nations. This is true, of course, but only if...
in a banner year of 104 recorded oil spills for BP. In 2000, BP paid the EPA a $10 million fine for sloppy management practices at its U.S. refineries that had raised the risk of greater environmental harm. In 2001 and 2003, BP was assessed by Multinational Monitor as one of the ten worst transnational corporations based on environmental and human rights records. It is true that by 2002 Lord Browne had declared global warming to be real, but BP’s fruit picking mentality could hardly claim to be addressing it.

Why then does Browne argue for BP’s environmental credentials? Rather than maintaining a relationship with the denialsists, Browne reads corporate responsibility as “showing willing” about fighting climate change. The strategy both attempts to set BP apart (a leviathan with a social conscience) while constructing a rather literal corporate sustainability model: “market based solutions are more likely to produce innovative and creative responses than an approach based on regulation alone.”

The market, and particularly technology, will roll back the threat of ecological catastrophe and part of what is meant by social responsibility is recognizing that fact. The concept here is that corporate nature, like environmental nature, is self-regulating. The corporation is organic enough to understand its metabolic function in the world and social enough to be as good a citizen as any other. The journey metaphor parabolically assumes our consent to its convention, which conveniently sees BP as a constituent in its narrative. This is corporate ontology as narcissism, in which the transnational oil company makes the world its dependent and is therefore indispensable to it as its sun.

Much is written about the anthropomorphization of the corporation whereby its rights are defined as not just social (citizens) but human. Corporations are not living, breathing organisms of course (they have bodies, corps (via proprietary imaging software and equipment):— seeing energy is a scale of power. The other side of anthropomorphization is the ontological aura such cognition provides, one shorn of basic psychology yet replete with all we associate with drives, Eros and Thanatos combined. BP wants Helios to simply represent power in its myriad forms, but it cannot escape the deep structure of its sign, the political and poetic unconscious of its very possibility. Gathering oil, like stories, has its own narratological compulsion and while a brand’s cultural symbolic is meant to stabilize or obfuscate any adverse elements associated with such pursuit the Helios in this example rich of oil connotes like BP, particularly after the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the more possibility will be created to limit the power of Big Oil and draw down the use of the commodity at its base. The value of oil supply under the sign of capital, however, structures the logic of its narrative hold; something as strong as power dependency and profit is not fatally undermined by rational explanation of its true costs. Indeed, the muckraker, like the oil producer, is calculating the costs of the narrative options she or he pursues according to the market will bear. Make no mistake, intense critique makes more than a living and can, for instance, those by Edwin Black and by Mike Magner provide scathing evidence of the company’s questionable business practices and environmental harm, but only by meeting the expectations of the genre, which is to say that a defense of Big Oil, while often proffered, does not sell as many books. Obviously, one hopes that the greater the critique, the more BP will talk the talk and walk the walk and that the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the more possibility will be created to limit the power of Big Oil and draw down the use of the commodity at its base. The value of oil supply under the sign of capital, however, structures the logic of its narrative hold; something as strong as power dependency and profit is not fatally undermined by rational explanation of its true costs. Indeed, the muckraker, like the oil producer, is calculating the costs of the narrative options she or he pursues according to the market will bear. Make no mistake, intense critique makes more than a living and can, for instance, embolden deeper and far-reaching sanction for the
excesses of the industry. Yet, such is the inertia in BP’s being that every public relations flasco, even one like Deepwater Horizon that has so far cost it over forty billion dollars in damages and compensation, is simply a business risk not a fatal flaw. It is already part of the business model, part of the ‘journey’ that BP sets itself. The “beyond” in “beyond petroleum” is not a lie, but a constitutive limit, an existential claim determined by oil in its value. To change this narrative one would have to change the value form of oil itself.

The scale of this value form also prescribes the context of BP’s going green,” irrespective of the cynical opportunism and outright falsehoods one may discern in its pronouncement. In Lefebvre’s terms, BP has a perceived space, a spatial practice that precisely shapes its relationship to people, other companies and states. I suggested earlier that oil’s consanguine ties to modernity give us the lineaments of a world, but one that cannot break free of sync with the planetary scale environmental change requires. It is not just that BP deals with those spaces in which oil and gas can be extracted and distributed, but that modernity’s logic of under and uneven development determines the force or resistance to “green” initiatives. The value form of oil produces a world at this scale and at this scale only. It is variable—new oil discoveries, new technologies of extraction, dried up wells, embargoes, accidents, wars, fluctuating demand, etc.—but it cannot, by definition, jump effectively to the planet as a global, homeostatic system. Surely, however, the scale of failure in BP’s narrative in its own scale. And without this planetary citizenship accentuates the impasse because the more it is the being at stake in the pronouncement, Cartesian, Hegelian, Heideggerian, Deleuzean?) Oil majors do not just exercise economic and political power, but actually shape the manner in which we conceive of global production and distribution can establish a being and consciousness of being an oil major, of maintaining a market share of available oil and gas output. Second, Deepwater Horizon did not necessarily negate BP’s environmental credentials; on the contrary, BP has used its robust response to the accident (which has much to do with legal enforcement) to massage its profile by claiming that its diligence in emergency response proves its commitment to ecological sustainability. Third, in BP’s post-Browne culture, there has been another marked turn to the industry’s core values: not only has BP backed off on its investment strategies in solar energy (the “beyond” part of “bp”), but its pursuit of oil exploration and commodity trading in oil itself has intensified. For those who thought that BP would blink at the prospect of high extraction costs and environmental risks of Alberta tar sands, for instance, the opposite has been the case (the first of its massive lease fields, “Sunrise”, will be operational in 2014). And the volatility of oil prices, while allowing for complex trade manipulations (in derivatives in particular) has meant an increase in risk positioning. As for the Gulf, BP continues to fight the legal fallout from Deepwater Horizon, but now operates more drilling rigs in the region than it did before the crisis. When Deepwater Horizon blew up and sank, some environmentalists saw this as a moment of decisive change that new legislation or court orders would sharply curtail high risk oil and gas extraction and that we would witness a credible turn to green in power production. There are many encouraging signs outside the oil industry, but the margins in oil production and distribution remain substantial and the demands of compressed modernization push oil prices high enough to justify ever more difficult extraction scenarios. Would it not be better if BP just said forget “beyond” and, like Exxon-Mobil, just focused on the petroleum at the heart of its being?

In the same way BP’s investment division can take positions against itself to hedge its exposure in the industry, so addressing rather than denying global warming, as Browne did in his Stanford speech, offers a green position against the reality of the oil market. The scale of this market is imbricated in the life of states and transnational commerce in such a way that corporate responsibility is better viewed as a niche market rather than as a paradigm shift, along a scale that follows the long fall of a parabola rather than the abrupt finitude of a bell curve (like Hubbert’s theory). More than this, however, the investment strategies of transnational corporations can make going green a flexible exploitation strategy. It is not a mask for the deleterious business of fossil fuels, but a complement of its productive logic. For instance, cognizant of a parallel compulsiveness between oil and coffee production, BP sought to garner increased credible responsibility by developing a sustainable coffee subsidiary, Wild Bean Café. As Starbucks has proved, the margins on specialty coffee are appreciable, but legitimate questions about the Arabicia industry have led major purveyors to stake claims for ethical production, sustainable agriculture, organic certification, fair trade practices and labor protections. Obviously, Wild Bean Café was meant to enhance revenue streams at gas stations while simultaneously offering a sustainable complement to the parent company’s oil practices. BP’s coffee is UTZ certified, but like rig safety, responsibility’s narrative form contains small print. The UTZ code of conduct leaves a lot open to interpretation and is particularly vague on environmental protection. Originally developed by the Dutch coffee conglomerate Melkbuurt, it has often been favored by similarly large corporations (Sara Lee, IKEA) looking for global citizenship. Crucially, it does not prohibit the use of chemicals in coffee production either as fertilizer or as insect control, compounds that can be produced for the coffee industry by sourcing BP’s petrochemical division. This is not a case of direct synergy but, like my other examples, underlines that BP’s green logic is hardly inconsistent with its oil ontology.

Clearly one can read BP in a number of different ways. Ecological critique can easily dissect the “greenwashing” of its environmental campaigns, but my point here has been to examine narrative aspects in the logical structure of BP’s being. (“We are BP” is its constant refrain, but what is the being at stake in the pronouncement, Cartesian, Hegelian, Heideggerian, Deleuzean?) Oil majors do not just encourage economic and political power, but actually shape the manner in which we conceive of global interaction. BP’s narrative or ‘journey’ articulates a scale that reveals both the shortcomings of an oil ontology, but also the conditions of its persistence. In part, parabolic logic merely returns us to the scene of ideology, in which governing ideas seem to paralyze logical alternatives; but more than this, it draws attention to the schism between state and corporate solutions and the scale of responsibility necessary for an end to oil. BP’s global citizenship accentuates the impasse because the more it claims to self-regulate the less a true alternative in power production and distribution can establish a being and narrative in its own scale. And without this planetary basis for being, there will be no beyond petroleum.
EVERYTHING’S GONE GREEN

ABSTRACT: Our fascination with the surveillance video of oil gushing from the British Petroleum Gulf Spill in 2010 expresses a paradox: our ultimate irrelevance to technological progress apparently undertaken for our benefit, in our name, and in response to our demand. These images present a visual model for all future disasters: here, something is happening but nothing is changing. This picture of disaster without progression and syntax has been witnessed before but only on stage, in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot and Endgame. Art has mustered only a weak rejoinder to the subdued shudder inspired by the BP video. Our fascination with the BP footage is echoed faintly in our response to Edward Burtynsky’s OIL. In his photographs of the petroleum industry, Burtynsky removes the human measuring stick, thereby triggering our sense of the enormity (both of the size and of the crime) of the petroleum industry. Yet unlike the BP video, these images recuperate our horror at the obscure scale of what they show us. Instead of recoiling from Burtynsky’s work, the viewer is placated through an appreciation for the artist’s control of his medium and its iconic language.

Notre fascination devant les images vidéos du déversement pétrolier causé par British Petroleum (BP) dans le Golfe du Mexique en 2010 exprime le paradoxe voulant que nous n’ayons aucun contrôle sur le progrès technologique entrepris en notre nom, et qui est apparemment mené dans notre intérêt et en fonction de notre demande. Ces images nous présentent un modèle pour les désastres de l’avenir : quelque chose a lieu sans que rien ne change. Ce portrait d’un désastre sans progression et sans syntaxe n’est pas quelque chose de nouveau; on l’a vu sur scène avec En attendant Godot et Fin de partie de Samuel Beckett. En dépit de cela, l’art n’a suscité qu’une faible réponse à la trépidation silencieuse causée par la vidéo BP. Une même fascination est présente dans notre réponse à OIL d’Edward Burtynsky. Dans son travail photographique sur l’industrie pétrolière, Burtynsky retranche la dimension humaine, nous montrant ainsi l’énormité seule (liée à la grandeur et au crime) de l’industrie. Pourtant, contrairement à la vidéo de BP, ces images aménisent notre horreur devant l’ampleur de ce qu’elles montrent. Au lieu de réagir à l’œuvre de Burtynsky, on s’apaise en appréciant le contrôle de l’artiste sur son milieu et sur son langage symbolique.
rising to the surface. This made it difficult for engineers using velocimetry to precisely measure the quantity of oil gushing from the pipe. BP purposely fed the first ROV images back into a computer in order to lower their resolution. (See, for example, this video from The Guardian for a deliberately imprecise image). The first footage released to the newsmedia had a deliberately smudged and blurry quality that made it impenetrable to experts and less incriminating to BP. BP conveniently circulated a ‘compressed’ file, one with compromised information that would facilitate its internet circulation. The confluence of two types of compression, both within and of the image, guaranteed simultaneously the quick circulation of the image and its indiscernibility. Its horrifying inscrutability became a part of its mesmerizing appeal.

We are hypnotized by the BP footage because we sense grave consequences to what we are seeing, yet we can’t fathom what these consequences may be. The BP images, on the news for three straight months, provide few clues. German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht once observed that ‘less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp’s works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations by massive industrial enterprise. In the footage of BP’s Macondo spill Brecht’s point is that though we sense their power, photographs ultimately are powerless to capture, express, or understand the reality forged by massive industrial enterprise. In the footage of BP’s Macondo spill Brecht’s point is both demonstrated and alarmingly escalated. The BP footage seems to divulge the dysfunctionality of industry, the breaking of a reality at home with the equipment of technological progress. It seems very different from Brecht’s example of a photograph of the functioning Krupp’s plant (an image we can easily imagine circulated by Krupp’s PR firm).

We are transfixed by the BP footage because the image excludes us. In the BP footage we witness a crisis from which we ourselves—and any intervention either by our critical awareness or by our government—have been absent and rendered irrelevant. Brecht could not have seen the extent to which reality remains inexplicit in the image of technological breakdown. Much of modern thought proposes that truth emerges when things stop working. Not only did the footage of the Deepwater Horizon spill not make the actual reality more legible to us or more accessible to critique (as hoped for by Brecht’s own effort to ‘expose the mechanism’ of theater) but it retained and even exceeded the fascination exercised by functioning industrial technology. The nightly image of oil gushing from a pipe provides an accelerated and perverted version of the hypnosis exerted by the aptly named ‘nodding donkey’ oil rig movement (the petroleum industry’s version of the swinging stopwatch). Our estrangement from the technologically mediated reality of the BP images is measured by the unarousal with which we register that they are pornographic images. Deeply illicit images that its maker, BP, could not want revealed or reviewed, the footage constitutes a peep show for the machines and for the whole technological apparatus behind global industry and the global environmental crisis, rather than for us. It is clear that we are seeing something we are not meant to see, something violent, and this is exciting. But unlike pornographic images intended for a human audience we do not understand the prohibition, the significance of this imagery or the bodies involved. Even the violence is more theoretical than actual. An interesting split occurred as the live feed continued over the course of three months: on the one hand, audiences staring at the image grew more silent and more inarticulate. Meanwhile the language wrought by the petroleum industry proliferated, devising terms such as ‘top kill’, ‘top hat’ (to cap the well), ‘relief well, ‘shot of mud slurry’, and ‘blowout preventer’. The technical language intended to re invoke control over the well became more salient to the image of the crisis than the language of analysis.
Without syntax or escalation, the Macondo footage has an alarmingly generic quality. (A generic image describes the family photograph of a family we do not know, for example.) Staring at the live feed we learn little about specific consequences of damage to the environment let alone about the web of human relations that constitute the reality of the oil industry and its relation to us. The footage lacks the direct emotional and formal impact of other iconic images (for example, Nick Ut’s 1972 photo of Kim Phuc, running with her arms outstretched, her back burned after a napalm attack during the Vietnam War). Nor does it display the compact narrative trajectory of recent catastrophic images: the twin towers falling on 9/11 or the arc of slowly dissipating smoke following the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. Lacking these traditional contours of an ‘event,’ the Macondo footage instantiates a new model for future disasters: one in which we are not sure what is taking place, a disaster without progression and that unfolds on-screen in such a way that it could in fact be looped (rather than live) footage. Part of our fascination derives from our desire to spot a shift, a sign of alteration or a change in rhythm that would satisfy our desire to ascertain whether the situation is worsening or improving, whether it is the same image or a new image that we see.¹ The footage is time-lapse photography without the lapse. It evokes the monumentally boring insistence of non-narrative experimental cinema. It most closely resembles Andy Warhol’s film Empire, an immobile eight hour long take on the Empire State Building over the course of a single evening. Both BP and Warhol document in extremis, and in the process the object loses its self-evidentiary status and outflanks our stare. The BP footage could aptly be renamed Empire.

The generic nature of the image—that something is happening yet nothing on the film appears to be changing—endows the film with a rawness uninterrupted by any conception we may muster to comprehend it. The BP video discloses how the Macondo break effectively suspends time. Many of us experience crisis as a kind of urgent and yet helpless waiting (for BP to do something, to admit its fault, to stop the flow of oil, for the government to intervene). We long for a swift and photogenic action to stop this image. We want to speed up time to when there is something for us to see, some kind of undersea action that we can comprehend. (It might even be possible that people militantly pressured BP and the government merely to introduce a new rhythm to this image.) This waiting suffuses our horror as we stare at the strange and continuous violence of oil we can extract but not stop. Though it is in the time-based medium of video, the BP footage gives us in fact a truer photograph of the catastrophe, an uncannily still image that captures the painful inertia lurking at the heart of crisis.

But why do we watch it when it—as an image—is no more compelling (at least to the untrained eye) than watching paint dry?² Nor is the BP video attractive merely as an index of disaster. Though melting ice caps are the index for an open-ended and undetermined process of global warming, we do not with trepidation watch the ice caps melting.

There are three distinct factors that made the BP footage different, that make these images worthy, and in fact a media event. First, exclusivity and branding: the BP footage was the unmistakable icon for the Gulf disaster. The remote isolation of the crime scene made it inaccessible to journalists and only BP submarine crews could survey the damage. Second, the placement of this footage alongside other less remote and more familiar video footage and visual and media assets, such as images of Tony Hayward and the BP brass, the coast guard, the herms duffily strung out to protect beaches and defeated oil booms washed ashore. Third, a distance or tension between this footage and other non-refiend, ‘human’ or ‘right-sized’ videographic attempts to come to terms with the spill. A complex network of images coalesced around the dark gravity of the video footage: ducks battling a mass of crude, fishermen using their shrimp boats to skim oil off the surface of the water, a group of volunteers gathering tar balls off a beach.

These photos helped us configure something we cannot glean from our ongoing view onto the scene of the crime (a view furnished by the perpetrators): the effects of the disaster. These effects are difficult to fathom from the BP footage alone but in their combination provide that image with visual power. Aftermath photos such as dead fish floating in an water the color of chocolate syrup, aerial images of refurbished shrimp boats skimming oil off the ocean surface, oil soaked pelicans seen first in the water and then scrubbed by technicians, and safety crews strolling incongruously past beachgoers, function as a kind of explanatory de-briefing of our protracted stare at the raw footage at the disaster’s source.

These three factors add up to a comment on what Brecht called the “functional” reality of the world. The image of the damaged well head spewing oil into the Gulf compels because it reveals what Brecht knew and we all know: that functional reality of massive industry—whether a Krupps plant or the high-tech oil extraction from the depths of the ocean—has leaped past our consciousness and awareness, and while it is done for us and for our cars and our furnaces, it ultimately excludes us. The BP footage is for video what the National Debt Clock is for number.³ The science of the extraction of resources through the oceans from the earth is so cutting edge that it is developed and technically understood essentially by the private group of specialists engaged in its extraction. The government and media’s attempt to understand and to deal with the situation, especially insofar as they focused on the ‘causes’ of the disaster, was at times ironic, at times even comical. CNN’s footage shifted between spokespeople for industry, environmental and political pundits, the dangers of oil dependence, threats of lawsuits, the whole complicated apparatus for the
The BP footager provides no agent of Warhol’s BP footage but unlike for the film of Warhol which has art and form of Warhol’s image. We are restless in the face of the BP film is not made for us and any restlessness we experience is not owned by us as it is in the Warhol movie. Instead our restlessness is a question of its resolution, of when it will stop. Our restlessness may express a desire to find someone who will explain the image to us, or, alternatively, verify our suspicion that such a person does not exist. One remarkable trajectory of the BP footage is the way it required an audience of experts to be deciphered. Activists who call for more government scrutiny, asking them to “MP a body that even if the government were in the possession of all the technical protocols it would still be unable to act.

TheBP video can perhaps be described as the clash between two idealized consciousnesses: a political or explicit consciousness and an industrial or implicit consciousness. Idealized political consciousness is moral. It creates and enforces the social contract. Political consciousness through government provides a stable ethos. It deals with the dilemmas of individual versus social will, with individual liberty and its alignment with society as a whole, with individual liberty, its rights and its limits. But industry and technology are aligned with something else: an explicit or human consciousness typically in the form of a human aggregate, as described by total demand or the market. For Martin Heidegger, technology becomes threatening when it “slips away from human control.” This happens when humans fail to “listen” to technology. It is only through this interaction between the two that technology determines its own truth rather than having that truth “revealed” by humans (Heidegger 17). Perhaps one way to think of this is that technology is itself, in its own revealing does not operate within any ethical sphere, which can only be unknown to it. Human listening is required for that revealing to remain as an instrument of human control. Of course, technological development can be constrained by depriving it of resources (either human or capital) and by its own laws of growth. The BP spill stages the drama of the relative powerlessness of the human or explicit consciousness in the face of the inexplicit gone wrong. Heidegger claims that
human control over technology depends on how the stored resource (Gestell) is utilized, whereby it can be used for “either destructive or peaceful purposes” (15). Accordingly, an unstoppable spouting of an oil well, unable even to become a Gestell, is technology divorced from a human means. The imagery of the drama, incomprehensible to anyone other than a board of experts, suggests that oil drilling in the Gulf accesses and defines reality in a way that seems to deny us and our explicit consciousness a role other than as abstract or theoretical victims.

**Burtynsky’s Photographs**

Edward Burtynsky’s photographs of the Gulf spill orchestrate our awe differently from the BP video. He took these images in early May, 2010. Working within parameters imposed on the news media by the Coast Guard and the Department of Homeland Security, Burtynsky was permitted to document the disaster only beyond 3000 ft above sea-level. Though Burtynsky unlike BP permitted his image to be of the highest quality, the media ‘ceiling’ ensured that aerial photographs would contain few revelatory details of what was happening. Burtynsky’s photos directly confront the distance separating the photographer (and the viewer) from the event. Like BP’s footage the viewer wants to squint in order to interpret the image. This is to no avail. Burtynsky focuses his lens on scenes in which it is nearly impossible for the eye to distinguish water, boat, sky and cloud. Strange depths seem to open up within the photograph. Burtynsky’s photo of the massively transfigured environment more closely resembles an oil painting than a document of a tiny boat trying desperately to contain a toxic oil plume.

War photographer Robert Capa famously observed, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough” (qtd. in Whelan 211). Capa proposes not only physical proximity but greater empathy between a photographer and his subject. Though it may apply to photographers in a war environment, Capa’s axiom is of no avail to efforts to document Macondo: images taken from the very source of the disaster by BP are as enigmatic and unresolved as Burtynsky’s images taken from a maximum distance.

Burtynsky’s photos of the Gulf spill are aesthetically balanced, and true to Walter Benjamin’s famous comment that the photograph aestheticizes poverty, these photographs beautify the spill and its aftermath. Though they are active, they do not suggest any particular urgency, efficacy or consequence. It does not seem to matter what these little boats are doing. The photograph is the visual equivalent of Joseph Conrad’s famous comment on colonialism in *Heart of Darkness* of the frigate “firing into a continent” (16). Burtynsky’s images work on us through their limitations and their indifference to traditional documentary function. We greet *Oil Spill #13* with subdued shock not because it meticulously records oil in the gulf but through our realization that the BP disaster has endowed the surface of the earth with the irreality of a canvas. Burtynsky’s photo *Ground Zero* induces similar afterthoughts in the viewer by means of an extreme reduction in scale:

> From a helicopter, Burtynsky records something truthful about the predication at ground/seas level. This truth is not in the image but rather in our impotence in front of it. In *Ground Zero*, Burtynsky photographs the fire on the rig, the floating relief well, and the accompanying ships as if they were rubber toys in a bath tub. Burtynsky’s image miniaturizes the enormous vessels so that they seem like playing pieces in a game whose rules, strategy, and tactics are perhaps obscure to us but presumably understood by the players, figures in this setting, obviously present but unseen. Burtynsky shows us the strategic effort to address a disaster without making us privy to its logic. From this distance, the exploded rig resembles a camp fire, yet one whose smoke has risen to the level of the helicopter. By giving literally more smoke, Burtynsky activates our curiosity to see more, to ponder the fire.

Burtynsky’s perspective on the Macondo well is informed by his other work on the subject, specifically by *OIL*, his photographic study of the petroleum industry which predates the BP spill by almost a decade. In Burtynsky’s *OIL* we discern what we merely suspect from his images of the BP spill: he makes of environmental disaster an art form. In discussing the inspiration that precipitated his decision to document the industry, Burtynsky describes a sudden awareness of how his early photographic work was utterly indebted to oil. He refers to this moment as his “oil epiphany” (Burtynsky i). An epiphany always transpires at the periphery of the sell, to the conscious I. Burtynsky describes this epiphany as both a reckoning with and revoking of his earlier photographic work. Dependent on the road, on his car, on having money for gas, Burtynsky claims to have realized that oil was an essential and enabling agent. He implies that oil even sustained his inner disposition towards the manufactured landscape, his “awe at what we as a species were up to” and, sounding a little like a Chevron representative, his conviction that “our achievements were a source of infinite possibilities” (i).

Like the photographs of the BP spill, Burtynsky’s photographs in *OIL* do not celebrate the petroleum industry and monumental grandeur of its products but they accept it by situating it in relation to the viewer’s consciousness and understanding. Seeking to withdraw the “awe” channelled through his earlier images, the work in *OIL* asks us to soberly reckon with the petroleum industry. In this sense, despite the large format in which his prints are exhibited in galleries and museums, they are right-sized to human consciousness. Burtynsky’s photographs, including those that document the petroleum industry’s impact on the environment, contain a serene calm of a world perhaps depopulated by people but still ‘beautiful’ and recognizable to us.

Burtynsky in this photograph hands us a grand receipt for our cultural dependency on oil. The image offers us no terra firma, in a way that perhaps befits a scene of ecological plunder. Burtynsky gives us a bird’s eye view but without its omniscience. His hovering and vertiginous viewpoints suggest the extinction of this bird whose eye once permitted knowing surveillance. In making his photographs, Burtynsky uses a mechanical crane and helicopter to access the angle from which to explore the
enormity of the petroleum industry: enormity, not only in the sense of largeness but in the sense of enormity of the crime. His images scrupulously delete anything in the landscape (a human figure, for example) that might help us assess the scale of what he documents. That is, Burtynsky aims for enormity without, however, being drawn in comparison to either man or his instruments. Appearing in galleries as oversized prints, Burtynsky’s images enforce a distinctly strange phenomenological response; they make us squint at what is right in front of us. Our efforts to distinguish road from dirt, oil from water, even a puddle from a lake, seem to evoke the work of a prospector shaking out his pan for something of value. Perhaps Burtynsky wants to show us that there is no valuable outcome to our excavation other than in the photograph that punctuates the final page of OIL; the image concludes the book because it successfully anchors our conceptions to the photograph rather than to the disaster it portends. Burtynsky does not want us to care that his workers, for example, do not own shoes while performing their toxic cleanup. Instead, this picture assuages us by filtering an array of images already familiar to us from footprints on the sand in greeting cards to the mark made by man’s first step on the moon. The photograph even literalizes the notion of the ‘carbon footprint.’ The image configures us from footprints filled, almost cast, with oil.

Though Burtynsky seeks to purvey enormity without awe, his work sometimes transfers this awe onto the photograph itself. The fields of oil rigs, the way an oil pipe cuts through a swath of forest in Cold Lake, Canada, the innumerable Choppers and Harleys of Parking Lot at a Kiss Concert, are recorded with such formal grandeur by Burtynsky’s large format camera that these images freeze up in our eyes like symptoms. They block any cultivation of either outrage or critical aftermath in the spectator. A strange dignity befalls even the lowest subjects of Burtynsky’s viewfinder. As one critic notes (seemingly in approval), “As we apprehend the magnitude of environmental degradation captured in Burtynsky’s images, we also experience an aesthetic thrill in looking at them” (Pauli 22).

Too often Burtynsky substitutes our response, our ‘thrill,’ to the image for our sense of the ‘environmental degradation’ it depicts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the photograph that configures the image of conquest has been reversed: man has made of the earth into something as desolate as the moon and steps not onto firm ground but into leftover crude. The photograph even literalizes the notion of the ‘carbon footprint.’ The image configures man’s legacy, something that can only be bequeathed by a deceased party. As it seems to resemble the first images of a man’s hand in the cases of Lascaux, the image also portends man’s disappearance. In his celebrated essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” André Bazin observes that photography “preserve the objects, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber” (14). Burtynsky’s image links the
medium of photograph not to amber but to something closer to the La Brea Tar Pits. Recycling #10 underscores not the preservational capacity of the photograph but rather the extinction of the creature whose trace it records. In this way Burtynsky creates a photograph in the future-perfect tense, where man’s footprint will have ensured his destruction, his proleptic fossilization.

This multitude of possible meanings to the image is precisely what makes us miss its content. Much of the work in OIL displays notable restraint before suggesting man as the measure of the oil industry. Yet the final image goes beyond this proportionality towards something that is more intimately measured to the human subject: the size of a foot. Burtynsky’s image assuages us with a vaguely archaic and anthropological image, leading us to appreciate his photograph instead of sensing the disaster within it.

As an artist, Burtynsky works on his medium and not only by means of it. Since his work is intensely about form and divides scale from our assessment (until this final image), critics frequently claim his photographs evoke the work of other photographers, and even sculptors and painters. The connections are sustained by the abstraction of Burtynsky’s work: they are all efforts at interpretation and these interpretations, in turn, encourage us to become art historians. By contrast the footage provided by BP baffles our aesthetic contemplation and questions the relevance of an ethical or human perception. Over the image of oil gushing boundlessly from the Macondo break we do not hallucinate the work of other artists. Rather we superimpose images borne by the generic quality of the BP footage: a smokestack belching fumes, an endlessly blowing lunch whistle, even (with the plankton and floating debris around the wellhead) a kind of infernal snow-globe one might find on the desk of a BP executive. Yet the BP footage also forces us to revoke each of these associations: the smokestack, for example, is an icon drawn from an earlier era of industrialization and has come to signify the triumph of technology over nature (a situation emphatically reversed in the BP footage). We cling to these associations to give some shape to the generic outlines of a drama we can watch but not evaluate; the endless murmur or stream of oil from the ground. The ‘free associations’ that we cobble together before the BP footage indicates in fact how the world is being transformed into an ink blot of catastrophic proportions, one that is visible from space. Unlike the traditional Rorschach test, this new one is formed by multiple plumes over the Gulf of Mexico, and does not inform us of our individual psyches, inclinations or private desires. Rather, this new Rorschach is a symptom detailing our dependence on technology and its horrific relation to the natural environment.

**Image Notes**

![Image](http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/jul/25/bp-oil-spill-sole-blame).

Fig. 1 “4:34 PM on 06/03/10.” [OilSpillHub.org](http://oilspillhub.org/video.cfm?video=10).


**Works Cited**


*(Endnotes)*

1. My thanks go to my colleague Kristina Bross for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and for inviting me to participate in an interdisciplinary panel on the BP footage, and to Steven Wereley, Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Purdue University, for his explanations about particle image velocimetry. I also want to thank editors Sheena Wilson and Andrew Pendakus, as well as the two anonymous reviewers, for their insightful suggestions.

2. “I remember seeing my first Carleton Watkins prints... they were remarkable, with an aliveness in the images that is hard to find in contemporary work...I’ve often thought that if I had been born in that era that would
have been the kind of photography I would have loved to do. Going out, and bringing back something the world had not seen before. The New West. It must have been an exhilarating time for photography, full of exploration and adventure” (qtd. in Torosian 46).

2. In spring of 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, killing 11 workers and damaging a wellhead four and a half miles below the surface of the water on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico. Despite various strategies, including the application of a cap, cutting off the pipe, pumping mud into the wellhead “top kill,” BP was unable to stop oil from seeping into the Gulf, and eventually gave up, resorting to depleting the wellhead by drilling a separate “relief” well. In the time it took BP to drill the relief well, almost 5 million gallons of oil was released into Gulf waters, the greatest environmental disaster in US history.

3. Velicometry is the measurement of the velocity of fluids. A frame by frame analysis of the BP footage allowed engineers to calculate the speed of clumps of oil gushing from the well. The BP footage therefore enabled them to estimate the total amount of oil released into the Gulf.


5. The word tabloid also pertains here. This term derives from late 19th century process of compressing medicines into digestible tablet form. This reduction-into-pill form later described popular newspapers that condensed news into sensational headlines. The compressed file is today’s version of the tabloid headline: the former is circulated via technology, in formats that “appeal” to the link between computers rather than word of mouth.

6. In both modern philosophy and psychoanalysis, the emergence of truth depends on access opened when something ceases to work. Heidegger says that only the broken radio shows us how it works (when we stop using it, we inquire into what went wrong; the interruption of functionality opens questioning), Similarly, Lacan describes how the mechanism of desire invites psychoanalysis once it stops “working” for the patient. The explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig only increases our fascination: technological dysfunctionality has become inseparable from its functionality.

7. Neither the ubiquity of these rigs nor the fascination they exert have been lost on artists. Artist Josephine Meckseer recently erected mock oil rigs in the garment district of Manhattan:

This sculpture suggests something retrograde about art’s response to the petroleum industry: it can only multiply the functional signs of that industry, suggesting a muted criticism about their ubiquity in our lives. What art hasn’t been able to do is to confront the fascination exerted by the broken oil pipe, the subterranean allure of oil’s disaster.

8. This suspended state of the disaster evokes people’s fascination with trapped miners. Recent mining accidents in Chile (2010) and Peru (2012) initiate an inaccessible kind of crisis, but also an extraordinary feat of human spirit. The BP footage does not provide such a drama. The BP footage was unable to stop oil from seeping into the Gulf, and eventually gave up, resorting to depleting the wellhead by drilling a separate “relief” well. In the time it took BP to drill the relief well, almost 5 million gallons of oil was released into Gulf waters, the greatest environmental disaster in US history.

9. The National Debt Clock is a constantly updated billboard display showing the current United States gross national debt. The clock is installed on South Avenue in New York City.

10. In a recent interview on NPR, Cameron discusses his motivation and his need to convince investors to fund the creation of a vehicle that could handle these extreme depths outfitted with cameras, lights, essentially a hybrid of Captain Nemo’s sub and a Hollywood studio, in order to glean pictures for a film.

11. There is more than one multimillionaire and billionaire involved in space launches. Paypal’s Elon Musk, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos and Virgin’s Richard Branson are among the best known.

12. The Flow Rate Technical Group, comprised of engineers including Steven Wereley of Purdue University, were the first to develop a formula for plume modeling. Using particle image velocimetry (using a frame by frame analysis of the video to estimate the size, distance, and rate with which a certain clump of oil would travel), the Flow Rate Technical Group was able to determine the fluid velocity and flow volume. Where BP originally estimated that 1,000 barrels of oil to be spilling out of the pipe daily, Wereley established the figure to be closer to 60,000 barrels daily.

13. Burtynsky documents piles of tires, those accessories to our automobile culture, in a way faintly reminiscent of the piles of human hair shorn from victims of the camps in Alain Resnais’ film Night and Fog. Both Resnais and Burtynsky absorb the photographic scale, in order to induce a spectatorial realization about the extremity of the crime. Burtynsky writes in his introduction to Oil, that his work can only suggest the “extended landscape of this thing we call oil,” i.e. something that exceeds his frame (i). With no scale to measure the geometry of what is happening, we in fact are pushed towards relying on a different scale of judgment in our response to it.

14. In his essay “Form Versus Portent: Edward Burtynsky’s Endangered Landscapes,” Kenneth Baker writes, “The grid patterns of coloured squares recall, to anyone who knows them, the chance-ordered grids of colour in abstract paintings by Ellsworth Kelly and Gerhardt Richter. Burtynsky may make unusually frequent acknowledgment of abstract painting because he recognizes photography as a medium that necessarily abstracts” (43). Reviewers have also compared Burtynsky’s work to the sculptures of Richard Serra and the paintings of Jackson Pollock.

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Hegemonic discourse often portrays as “normal” or desirable the use of fossil fuels, despite the devastation brought through accessing those fuels. Currently, some of the worst examples of this devastation result from the petroleum industry. However, efforts to challenge its practices—and its hegemonic power—in fact reinforce other forms of hegemonic power. This article examines some of those instances.

This article analyzes filmmaker Joe Berlinger’s 2009 documentary Crude. Crude features the lawsuit filed by 30,000 Ecuadorian people against Chevron. Interestingly, Crude shows how Western upper-class privilege is invoked to solve the Ecuadorians’ problems. We can infer their resistance to one hegemonic power—i.e., the multinational petroleum corporation—with a multinational petroleum corporation is only possible through using other hegemonic power like white, male, upper-class privilege. This article draws upon Gayatri Spivak’s canonical text “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Louis Althusser’s concept of ideological apparatuses to support this claim.

Fans of Star Trek: The Next Generation will recognize this article title’s allusion to the Borg. For those not familiar with the series or the characters, the Borg are a race of cybernetic beings who subsume the interstellar species they encounter into their vast collective mind. Most living organisms encountering the Borg are doomed; as the Borg forearm prior to their organic takeover: “Resistance is futile; you will be assimilated.”

I thought of the Borg while I watched filmmaker Joe Berlinger’s 2009 documentary Crude, which portrays the circumstances surrounding one of the largest environmental lawsuits in the world. Thirty thousand ‘systemic infrastructures’ initially calls to mind what the Ecuadorians, largely those from indigenous populations, filed the suit Aguinda vs. Chevron against the oil giant. My mental leap from the documentary to the single-minded entity intent on domination reminded me of the petroleum industry itself, that vast multinational force whose world-wide omnipresence seems as diffuse as the Borg’s in the galaxy’s Delta Quadrant.

That is, it seems almost impossible to believe a marginalized population could succeed against a global-capitalistic industry with billions of dollars at its disposal. Those oppressed by such power structures often have no choice but to participate in them, akin to being taken over through Borgian transformation. After all, as world-systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein writes, “[historical capitalism] is that social system in which those who have operated by such rules [of endless accumulation] have had such great impact on the whole as to create conditions wherein the others have been forced to conform to the patterns or to suffer the consequences”, an either/or scenario that all but guarantees capitalist assimilation (Wallerstein 18). Further, as I watched events unfold throughout the film, it occurred to me that while the Ecuadorians fight petro-capitalism’s hegemonic power, they often are forced to use—and thus reinforce—other hegemonic structures to do so. The question I then considered was whether true resistance to hegemonic power is ever possible for the subaltern figure.

What follows is my attempt to address this question, demonstrated by the film’s events and framed by petro-ideological structures currently in place. In the twenty-first century, it is difficult to name a topic that offers more pressing social, economic, and political concerns than energy. The oil and gas industry has been particularly implicated in matters of human rights, social justice and environmental exploitation in locations the world over. As noted by watch groups, NGOs, academics, and others, petroleum-based corporate power runs largely unchecked, aided by systemic infrastructure reinforcing its neo-liberal interests and agenda. For me, the term petroculture expresses the conditions that allowed its production in the first place. Althusser builds upon Karl Marx’s theory that for a social formation to survive, it must reproduce the conditions that allowed its production in the first place. Hegemonic discourse often portrays as “normal” or desirable the use of fossil fuels, despite the devastation brought through accessing those fuels. Currently, some of the worst examples of this devastation result from the petroleum industry. However, efforts to challenge its practices—and its hegemonic power—in fact reinforce other forms of hegemonic power. This article examines some of those instances. This article analyzes filmmaker Joe Berlinger’s 2009 documentary Crude. Crude features the lawsuit filed by 30,000 Ecuadorian people against Chevron. Interestingly, Crude shows how Western upper-class privilege is invoked to solve the Ecuadorians’ problems. We can infer their resistance to one hegemonic power—i.e., the multinational petroleum corporation—with a multinational petroleum corporation is only possible through using other hegemonic power like white, male, upper-class privilege. This article draws upon Gayatri Spivak’s canonical text “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Louis Althusser’s concept of ideological apparatuses to support this claim.
marginal to its structures. For instance, the indigenous plaintiffs claim that for thirty years Texaco (now Chevron since its 2001 merger) contaminated the air and land of the rainforest where they live. The oil industry’s effects on water may even be more critical than the claims already made about air and land, as the Ecuadorians use local waterways for canoe traveling, drinking, washing and bathing. The Amazonian area overall has experienced rates of cancer, miscarriages, skin diseases, and other ailments comparable to those experienced in the aftermath of Chernobyl. On January 4, 2011, an Ecuadorian appellate court upheld an $18 billion judgment against Chevron, finding the company liable for the vast contamination it caused. However, this lawsuit remains unsettled and related cases, such as those filed against Joe Berlinger himself, have been brought by Chevron.

While the consequences of rampant petro-power to the global South subaltern often go unnoticed by the global northern viewer, they can come to his/her attention through alternative “image-derived realities” such as Crude. Crude and similar documentaries become a site of resistance to petro-ideology; hence, the image serves as an arena where “the real power relations that control society and the ideologies that prevent society from realizing social and political freedom” and those forces opposed to them do battle (Kul-Want and Piero 18). Cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek argues that understanding the existing power relations and ideologies means getting at “the truth” that people are not free (Kul-Want and Piero 22). Given the limitations to social and political power created by these hegemonic structures, we can deduce that one limitation imposed on the subaltern is access to voice.

Gayatri Spivak, in her canonical essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, is critical of Foucaultian-Deleuzian analyses, as well as postcolonial critiques, that are situation is not ameliorated even by members of the hegemonic class, like academics, who think they are helping and who believe “they know the ‘other’ and can place it in the context of the narrative of the oppressed” (Maggio 420). Spivak argues the postcolonial scholar/critic assumes a formed solidarity with the subalterns and, believing himself to be so allied with this population, speaks on their behalf instead of allowing them to speak for themselves. When this occurs, the subaltern remains subordinated and the critic maintains a privileged position.

While the subaltern remains subordinated, the other danger here, Spivak warns, is that the Western dominant figure frequently conceives of the subaltern as a homogeneous, or essentialized, group. The Subaltern Studies project, a group of historians led by Ranajit Guha, had the “explicit aim of expanding and enriching Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern” by “conced[ing] on the diversity, heterogeneity and overlapping nature of subaltern groups” (Galfarsoro). My interest in raising Guha’s inclusive definition here is that it serves as a way of framing instances of subaltern silence in Crude. In these cases, the subaltern subject shifts. It may be an Ecuadorian or a European woman; it may be a child or an indigenous protestor. In each, though, a countervailing hegemonic power is strengthened. After offering an analysis of this pattern in Berlinger’s film, I return to my original question about whether the subaltern figure can ever speak to power without reinforcing its hegemony, and what socio-cultural structures could be required if that is to be possible.

Some scholars, such as those who discuss the subaltern’s subaltern, believe that the subaltern can never speak to power without reinforcing it. This is problematic for Spivak, who argues that the subaltern can speak to power and that this is possible. However, the subaltern remains subordinated and the critic maintains a privileged position.

The Subaltern, Interrupted

Crude opens with a Cofán woman explaining what has befallen her people since Texaco’s arrival in their region in the 1970s. In addition to discussing the loss of her culture, she describes the erosion of Cofán cultural identity as the people became ashamed to wear their traditional dress and decorations around company employees. And, she says, most of the tribe’s women no longer sing their traditional songs.

As a message to the film’s viewers, she sings one of those songs. It is part lament and part plea. She asks, “What will happen to the children? What will become of my people?” Overall, she says, her point is “to tell the world so that the world can know what has been done” (Crude). The woman is not faceless to viewers, but she does remain nameless. As her song fades, the film cuts to a news clip from a San Francisco television channel. It features Ecuadoran lawyer Pablo Fajardo and his colleague Luis Yanza receiving the 2008 Goldman Environmental Prize.

According to Berlinger’s “Director’s Statement” once posted on the Crude website, Fajardo’s rise from humble labourer in the oil fields to lead attorney in the lawsuit to internationally recognized activist made him a “compelling central character” upon whom to hang the narrative arc. While the woman remains unidentified and her voice is replaced by that of a white, male, American media personality, Fajardo becomes the prominent face and voice of the movement due to his cultural heritage, his activism, and his legal education. Admittedly, logistics dictate that someone must speak on behalf of the 30,000 Ecuadorans—who call themselves los afectados, or “the affected ones”—as it would be virtually impossible for each member to speak for himself or herself in every venue. Yet, like the Cofán woman, in myriad ways throughout the film the subaltern figure is rendered silent.

Crude frequently exemplifies this tendency even though Berlinger and Steven Donziger, the American environmental lawyer who takes up the Ecuadorians’ cause in the U.S., may not intend this. For example, in his posted article entitled “Crude Realities,” Berlinger says that by making the film he brings “a much-needed portrait of human suffering to a wider audience.” Certainly he does this, and Crude won an impressive list of awards, including the 2010 Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival.
of awards as a result, including the National Board of Review’s “Best Documentary of the Year” and Cinema for Peace’s “International Green Film Award.” *Crude* is a compelling film and it is able to bring “an audience into a world they probably have never seen before” (“Statement”). Furthermore, Berlinger explicitly raises Marxist and postcolonial theoretical issues, stating:

There are deeper, more nuanced and complex themes that resonate far beyond this particular case. What are the roles of corporate power, government, the media and big money in cases such as this, with a lot of history and potentially enormous consequences? What does it take to tackle an environmental and human rights problem of this magnitude? How has the white man’s historically appalling treatment of indigenous people in the Americas over the past five centuries played a role in the history—and outcome—of this case? (ibid.)

Yet as Spivak points out, answering these sorts of questions becomes the subaltern’s burden. Any audience that has not seen the South American context presented by *Crude* is provided a visual, Westernized narrative representation through which to access the Cofán. The voice the audience eventually transposes for a Western media-consuming public not only translates language, but visually reinvents and on film moulding and coaching Ecuadoran subjects to meet Ecuadoran subjects in their own context. The film to speak A’ingae or Spanish (another colonial language) to the shareholders the next day. For example, Donziger listens while Emergildo Criollo rehearse in Spanish his brief speech. Criollo ends his discourse with the query, “I want to ask Chevron, are you ever going to clean up or offer compensation to the Amazon? While Donziger tells Criollo in Spanish, “That was good,” he separately in English tells his assistant, Kevin, “I don’t think his speech was good.” He rattles off a list of ideas and phrases he wants Criollo to present to the shareholders the next day. For example, Donziger anticipates the company will try to quash or interrupt Criollo’s presentation; if that happens he wants Criollo prepared to say, “You spent twenty-eight years in my territory—I can spend three minutes in your territory.” He also includes an appeal to Chevron’s “ethical and moral obligations” to the people left within a few years the Cofán nation ceases to exist. Donziger tells Kevin, who will work with Criollo to learn these statements, “You have to control this guy and get him up to speed.”

He also reminds Kevin that Criollo “is relying on you. He’s in our land right now.” Donziger’s substitution of Criollo’s words with his own in this instance makes a certain sense. After all, Criollo is confronting a Western hegemonic force on its own turf, and Donziger recognizes Criollo must wield the logic and rhetoric of Western hegemony in order to be effective against it. What makes this situation lamentable is that, as Spivak reminds us, it is incumbent upon the subaltern to speak to power in that power’s language. In the act of resisting a given power, the oppressed must accommodate it, which reinforces that power’s privileged position. At the same time, the hegemonic force itself feels no sense of obligation to hear the subaltern’s voice on the subaltern’s terms. Its power is so great it can dismiss or ignore any other paradigm or ideology. Of greater concern are the instances where the elite figure replaces the subaltern’s words with his own. Donziger does this a number of times throughout the film. As an international lawyer, Donziger is captured on film moulding and coaching Ecuadoran subjects to represent themselves in conformity with Western legal conventions and cultural norms, a practice reproduced on the level of the film itself. For example, when preparing two Ecuadorans to testify before a Chevron shareholder meeting, Donziger listens while Emergildo Criollo rehearse in Spanish his brief speech. Criollo ends his discourse with the query, “I want to ask Chevron, are you ever going to clean up or offer compensation to the Amazon? While Donziger tells Criollo in Spanish, “That was good,” he separately in English tells his assistant, Kevin, “I don’t think his speech was good.” He rattles off a list of ideas and phrases he wants Criollo to present to the shareholders the next day. For example, Donziger anticipates the company will try to quash or interrupt Criollo’s presentation; if that happens he wants Criollo prepared to say, “You spent twenty-eight years in my territory—I can spend three minutes in your territory.” He also includes an appeal to Chevron’s “ethical and moral obligations” to the people left within a few years the Cofán nation ceases to exist. Donziger tells Kevin, who will work with Criollo to learn these statements, “You have to control this guy and get him up to speed.”

It begins with *Crude* itself. According to Berlinger, Donziger approached him in 2005 “looking for a filmmaker to be [the plaintiffs]” with a particular viewpoint (ibid.). Yet upon taking Donziger’s suggestion to travel to Ecuador and after seeing the “shocking ecological disaster” for himself, he decided to make *Crude*, which subsequently took three years to complete. As a film, television, and commercial director, Berlinger, like Donziger, recognizes media’s power to shape culture. After his initial trip to the Amazon, he felt urged to “shine a light” on the situation. He maintains the film still presents both sides of the story fairly enough for viewers to draw their own conclusion regarding the issue. At the same time, he expresses surprise at the otherwise “scant press coverage this story received in the U.S.”

That changes when the public relations firm Donziger employs tells him the Ecuadorans’ struggle could be a key feature in a forthcoming special issue of *Vanity Fair* dedicated to the environment. Donziger says, “Through the years, we’ve gotten a fair amount of press but we have never broken through to the consciousness of the American people in a significant way” (*Crude*).
Vanity Fair does pursue the story, and the article entitled “Jungle Law” appears in its May 2007 issue. Journalist William Langewiesche nicely details the case’s complexity and addresses the “emotional battle in a makeshift jungle courtroom”. He focuses the story largely on Fajardo, and this triggers a sequence of events that propels Fajardo and the Amazonians’ cause into the international spotlight.

Fajardo becomes the film and lawsuit’s heroic figure for good reason. As the Vanity Fair article reports, he worked as a labourer for years, beginning at age fourteen clearing jungle growth with a machete. When he was seventeen, his parents separated and then left, leaving him in charge of caring for his many siblings. At that age, he also helped found a local human-rights group to fight corporate exploitation. Fajardo says the palm-grove company he had been working for sent spies after him, and he was fired as a subversive and labour unionist. He then went to work as a labourer for an oil company while completing his secondary education in night school and his law degree via correspondence. He worked as a labourer for years, beginning at age fourteen clearing jungle growth with a machete. When he was seventeen, his parents separated and then left, leaving him in charge of caring for his many siblings. At that age, he also helped found a local human-rights group to fight corporate exploitation. Fajardo says the palm-grove company he had been working for sent spies after him, and he was fired as a subversive and labour unionist. He then went to work as a labourer for an oil company while completing his secondary education in night school and his law degree via correspondence. He had only

He lives humbly despite Chevron’s accusations that he is only in this lawsuit for the payout. He faces such accusations gravely, remarking in the film, “I have never felt inferior to any of the Texaco lawyers because when I say something, they have to think one thousand times to come up with a lie in order to counter my truth” (Crude). Even upon seeing the several-page spread in Vanity Fair, which features his picture several times, Fajardo is self-effacing. He wishes they would have focused less on him and more on “this one sick family” because “they are the very expression of the problem.”

Yet the light shining on Fajardo sometimes leaves others in the shadows. Luis Yanzá shares the 2008 Goldman Environmental Prize with Fajardo because it was his organization that first filed suit against Texaco in 1993 (Goldman). However, Yanzá appears only in a few scenes in Crude and warrants only four sentences in the “Jungle Law” article. While it devotes several pages to Fajardo’s past and history of activism, no such detail emerges about Yanzá. Early in the article, however, are some revealing clues as to the reasons for this elision. Langewiesche’s early mention of Fajardo describes him as a “mestizo,” while his first mention of Yanzá points out his “features that are purely Inca.” Little is said of what he argues in the judge’s office except that he “bluntly challenged Chevron’s legal tactics”. The privileging of Fajardo’s discourse and role in the trial may represent racially encoded socio-cultural hierarchies linked to the history of colonialism. Thus, even though we have a great many words from the mestizo activist, we read none from the one who is explicitly indexed as classically (even paradigmatically), “purely” indigenous. At the end of this section of the article, Langewiesche paraphrases the judge before whom this heated exchange has occurred. He tells the reporter the lawsuit is a fight not just about oil companies in the jungle but about “500 years of South American history”. Unwittingly, and likely as a result of five hundred years of embedded ideology, the colonial mindset still permeates these media forms, silencing a subaltern because of his visible difference from the global northern viewer witnessing this story.

Despite these colonial echoes, the Vanity Fair article does succeed in bringing the activists’ cause to a broader international audience. Amazon Watch and Donziger organize a press conference on the steps of San Francisco’s city hall about the lawsuit, bringing Fajardo and another Ecuadorian as representative as guest speakers; they capitalize on the Vanity Fair article, telling local media outlets of the magazine’s coverage and pitching the story to the local press as “jungle guy comes to big city”. Later, back in Ecuador, President Correa does visit the contaminated sites for himself, and he carries the issue of Vanity Fair with him. Viewers are not sure if the organization was able to bring Correa through a successful plan it might have eventually worked out on its own or if the added attention by the magazine convinced him of the situation’s severity. Nonetheless, upon his visit Correa states, “The world needs to know about this.” After all, he rightly points out, this devastation is more damaging than the Exxon Valdez spill, yet the latter occurred in the U.S. “so this doesn’t matter”.

As Sáenzazar earlier notes and Correa’s comments reflect, it’s difficult for the global South to make the global North aware of the damage in their area wrought by petroleum corporations. Donziger intends to make northern audiences aware of these injustices, and he intentionally seeks celebrity affiliation to do so. The film depicts him as he heads to London to meet Trudie Styler, wife of musician Sting and co-founder with him of the Rainforest Foundation. Donziger wants Styler to promote the Ecuadorians’ cause and visit the contaminated sites in person; she agrees to do so.

In Ecuador, Styler attends a large meeting of the Cotán, they are trying to determine how much to demand in the lawsuit, although as Donziger admits it is difficult to put a price tag on what has been lost. As he reports, the Cotán population has dwindled in the thirty years since Texaco’s arrival from 15,000 to just a few hundred people. Styler tells the meeting attendees she “stands in solidarity” with them and will take their message back to England and to the U.S. She says she considers them “fights our as well.” Here, Styler eerily epitomizes Spivak’s argument about the postcolonial figure’s identification with the oppressed members’ cause and subsequent appropriation of their voice.

Styler and Sting’s Rainforest Foundation do provide local community members with large barrel so they can catch rainwater, which Styler acknowledges serves only as a temporary and insufficient solution to a larger problem. Aside from this practical assistance, she telephones Fajardo at his office to inform him she has been “telling [his] story to so many people.” She invites him to New York City to attend the Live Earth concert where her husband will perform with his band. In perhaps the film’s most telling moment of subaltern access to voice, Fajardo admits to one New York interviewer he has never heard of the rock band The Police before, yet says with a grin, “but now I’m with Sting.”

Truth to Power

In various ways—as depicted in Crude and through the conditions leading to the lawsuit itself—the subalterns’ power is limited or appropriated. Through the Ecuadorans’ efforts to resist petro-hegemonic power, they must tap other channels of hegemonic power. As the film portrays, this culminates in Fajardo’s association with an internationally renowned, white, affluent Western male. It seems when they try to speak, the Ecuadorans are silenced by various structures that maintain their subordinate position.

Crude therefore is a valuable cultural text because it points out instances where global Northerners reify their hegemonic power even when their purported intention is to do otherwise. They may do so unwittingly, which means that changing these power dynamics requires raising awareness of instances of subaltern quieting. In fact, I must apply such awareness to this very article. That is, while critiquing the forms of subaltern silencing Crude depicts, am I in fact speaking for the subalterns? Do they even want to speak? Is my defending their voice a form of meta-appropriation? Even the film admits fault in this regard, saying, “I think it is important to acknowledge our complicity in the muting,
in order precisely to be more effective in the long run” (qtd. in Maggio 428). From this theoretical position, we can begin to question the structures reinforcing the subalterns’ silence and consider some solutions.

We can take a cue from Marx about how next to proceed. Just as he tried to get workers to think of themselves as agents of production and as not victims of capitalism, we should reconsider the subaltern as agent of hegemonic change and not as victim of corporate exploitation. Such a perspective frames the subaltern with activity, not passivity. Seeing the subaltern as active agents in their own right means letting go of our hegemonic impulse to speak on their behalf.

Yet I am left with more questions than answers. What are we to make, for example, of the Amazon tribes’ success even though silenced? What is the difference between being able to speak and being heard? How can we balance the world’s need to be heard? How can we benefit from working outside our paradigm? What could we gain by doing so?

Duty to listen? Last, how can we benefit from working out of our paradigm-shifting (Fig. 1 “Crude—Song of the Amazon.” Web. 26 Oct. 2007. Web. 5 June 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcFtxZm1DBw).

Works Cited


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Image Notes

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“Reframing the Canadian Oil Sands” is a collaborative exchange between photographer Andriko Lozowy and cultural geographer Merle Patchett that engages photography and photographic theory to evoke a more critical and politically meaningful visual engagement with the world’s largest capital oil project. Since the appearance of Edward Burtynsky’s aerial and abstracted photographic mappings of the region, capturing the scale of the Oil Sands from ‘on high’ has become the dominant visual imaginary. As a result, the dominant visual culture of Fort McMurray oil production is one of nullification or an erasure of representation. For the past five years Lozowy has been engaged in a photographic project—entitled Where is Fort McMurray?—which aims to explore and work with this sense of erasure by attempting to capture the shifting (and shifted) landscapes of the Alberta Oil Sands from the roadside. For this special issue of Imaginations on “Sighting Oil”, Patchett and Lozowy have curated a set of Lozowy’s photographs to present an alternative, on-the-ground, view of Oil Sands production sites. Through both Lozowy’s images and Patchett’s framing curatorial essay, they explore the disruptive potential of the image and the capacity of photography to both neutralize and energize political engagement with the Canadian Oil Sands.”

From ‘On-High’ to the Roadside: Scalar Aesthetics and the Canadian Oil Sands

Growing up in the Scottish coastal city of Aberdeen—the ‘oil capital of Europe’—I was keenly aware that oil and water can be a volatile mix. Aberdeen became the centre of the European oil industry during the North Sea oil boom of the 1970s. The international oil crisis of the same decade had led to a huge rise in worldwide oil prices and this made extracting oil from the North Sea an attractive opportunity for multi-national oil companies like BP, AMOCO and Shell. Although drilling platforms were stationed 100 miles off the coast in the North Sea, the spectre of oil pervaded the city: from the emergence of Europe’s busiest heliport which supplied the rigs with workers, to the mammoth oil service vessels docked in Aberdeen harbour, to the expansion of the city itself through new housing, offices and schools.

However the spectre of offshore production was rudely and radically illuminated on the night of July 6, 1988. In a series of explosions the Piper Alpha oil rig, located 120 miles offshore, was obliterated in a blaze of fire, killing 165 of the 226 men on board. Two crewmen operating a rescue vessel were also killed, bringing the death toll to 167 men on “the night the sea caught fire” (Matsen 27).

In the disaster’s aftermath the Cullen Inquiry, which began in January 1989 and lasted 13 months, established the causes of the tragedy and made recommendations for future safety regimes offshore. Those affected by the tragedy were left questioning why it took a multi-fatality event for an evaluation of the oil and gas regulatory system to take place and why the rig owner—Occidental Petroleum—were yet to be prosecuted. The victims of the disaster set up
the Piper Alpha Families and Survivors Association to campaign to bring Occidental to justice. Although the Cullen Report (made public on November 12, 1990) was highly critical of Occidental’s safety program on Piper Alpha prior to the disaster, Lord Fraser, the Lord Advocate and Scotland’s chief legal officer, concluded that there was not enough evidence for a conviction. As Lord Advocate for Scotland, his analysis could not be questioned and Occidental suffered no penalty for their negligence in the Piper Alpha disaster. The lack of corporate accountability was a huge blow for the Piper Alpha Families and Survivors Association. In 1991, the association erected a memorial sculpture in Hazlehead Park, Aberdeen to ensure that those who perished, many whose bodies were never recovered, were at least publically and individually accounted for. The park is just a short walk from my family home. Engraved on a pink granite plinth, topped by a larger than life-size bronze sculpture of three oil workers, are the names of the dead. Their ages at death are also given. With the youngest 19 and the eldest 65 the dead span three generations.

Piper Alpha remains the world’s deadliest offshore oil disaster and is an event that woke, not just Aberdonians, but the world itself to the human cost of investing in an oil economy. Revisiting the Piper Alpha memorial as an adult now living in Edmonton, Alberta—Canada’s ‘Oil City’—I am keenly aware that our continued dependency on oil as an energy source guarantees further fatalities and environmental damage because oil exploration, capture, refining and transportation are inherently dangerous and destructive processes. Yet, I am also aware my presence in Alberta is due to the relative economic stability and job security afforded by Alberta’s oil economy. This is the dirty truth any Albertan has to reconcile with. Oil was first discovered in Alberta in 1902, and its production continues to fuel the province: oil and gas royalty revenues make up 30% of the Government of Alberta’s total revenue (Nikiforuk). 1947 saw the drilling of the first successful conventional well at Leduc, just South of Edmonton and overnight Canada went from being “oil poor” to “oil rich” (McRory 82). Today, 1 in 15 Alberta jobs are related to energy and Alberta’s per capita GDP is higher than all other Canadian provinces and US states (Levant).

Before moving to Edmonton, all I knew about the province was that it was home to the controversial ‘Tar Sands’ project, the largest surfaced-mined reservoir of crude bitumen in the world. Situated North East of Edmonton, roughly centered on the boomtown Fort McMurray, the Athabasca ‘Oil Sands’ is the world’s largest Capital Oil Project, currently producing 1.3 million barrels of oil a day (see Fig. 1). Commercial production began in 1967 and the total area of exploitable reserves covers 140,000 km²—an area larger than England (Levant 2011). Oils Sands are naturally occurring mixtures of sand, clay, water, and an extremely dense and viscous form of petroleum technically referred to as bitumen. The primary methods of extraction are surface mining or in-situ drilling and the three main operating companies are Suncor Energy, Syncrude and Shell Canada. About two tons of oil sand must be dug up, moved and processed to produce one barrel of synthetic crude oil, and up to 5 barrels of water are consumed for every barrel of oil produced, making the Oil Sands Capital Project the world’s most carbon and water intensive oil production process. The Oil Sands Capital Project is also one of the world’s most environmentally destructive industrial projects. For example, in order to surface mine the bitumen large swathes of Canada’s Boreal Forest are being deforested to the point where the project is slated to have the second fastest rate of deforestation on the planet after the Amazon Rainforest Basin (Nikiforuk). The process of turning the oil sand into crude oil also produces numerous toxic byproducts. The water used to strip the bitumen from the sand, for example, is discharged afterwards as contaminated water into “tailings” ponds. The leftover “tailings” are a mixture of dirty water, clay, silt and sand but can also contain copper, zinc, iron, residual bitumen, mercury, arsenic, naphthenic acids and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH). Alberta’s inventory of tailings ponds is now 720 million cubic meters, which cover an area of about 130 square
photographing it from on high. Since the appearance of Edward Burtynsky’s aerial photographic-mappings of the region in 2007, aerial perspectives of the Canadian Oil Sands—capturing the scale of the oil sands industry from above—has become the dominant photographic approach. This ‘scalar aesthetic’ is, according to Imre Szeman, “an obvious approach to a site like the Alberta Oil Sands, which are estimated to be the size of Florida and include numerous surface mining sites and vast tailings ponds that permit a direct visualization of environmental destruction” (435-6). Other notable examples of this approach include Peter Essick’s 2009 photographic series that accompanies Robert Kunz’s National Geographic article “Scraping the Bottom: The Canadian Oil Boom” and aerial photographer Louis Helling’s 2010 touring exhibition Beautiful Destruction. This scalar aesthetic has also been mobilized cinematically in Peter Mettler’s 2009 Petropolis, a film that consists entirely of aerial panning shots to emphasize the size and scope of the Oil Sands.

These aerial views of the Oil Sands have helped to shape and polarize perceptions of the world’s most colossal industrial site, including my own. So, when I was presented with an opportunity to visit Fort McMurray and the Tar Sands, I jumped at the chance to see this site with my own eyes. Andríko Lozowy, a colleague at the University of Alberta, had invited me to join him on a planned research trip to the region. Lozowy was engaged in a photographic project led by the provocation “Where is Fort McMurray?” This question was in part a response to the lack of geographical specificity offered by the dominant elevated perspectives that promoted a visual culture of Fort McMurray that stressed nullification or an erasure of representation. For part of this project, Lozowy had invited a group of Fort McMurray high school students to offer their response to this question through the practice of photography. Through a collaborative exchange, Lozowy offered the students the opportunity of learning the basics of photographic techniques while engaging the students to create images that would offer a different visual narrative to the one found in the dominant visual imagery depicting the region. Before elaborating further on this project, it is pertinent to explore the scalar aesthetic, originating in Edward Burtynsky’s photographs, that the students were attempting to work against.

Death from Above
Burtynsky’s large-scale aerial perspectives of surface mines, refineries, and tailings ponds in his series depicting the Oil Sands industry in Fort McMurray offer disturbingly sublime depictions of a landscape degraded by petroleum production. Equally at home on the office wall of a CEO of an oil company or the campaign materials of environmental lobbyists, his images of the Oil Sands have been critiqued for their aestheticization of the toxic byproducts of oil sands production, like tailings ponds and sulphur pyramids. Jennifer Peeples introduces the concept of the “toxic sublime” as a means of analyzing the tensions arising from visual representations of environmental contamination like those found in Burtynsky’s Oil Sands series, where the beauty of the images “obfuscates the health and environmental risk of the polluted sites they photograph” (Peeples 373). For example, in Alberta Oil Sands #10 Burtynsky produces an alchemical conversion of toxic tailings ponds into one of sublimity (Fig. 3). Although depicting a tailings pond, the viewer could easily mistake the vista for a river delta or estuary, where the intention of the photographer was to catch the light of a setting sky reflecting off the river channels and pools.

Burtynsky’s painterly preoccupation with composition and light in his Oil Sands images resonates with the aesthetic registers of the picturesque and the sublime. In landscape painting, the sublime has traditionally been defined as the awe or anxiety felt in the face of nature’s power over humankind (Flaworth-Booth). Inversely, Burtynsky seeks to provoke the awe felt when witnessing the grandeur and horror of human-altered landscapes by capturing their scale (Burtynsky, Manufactured Landscapes). His method of using large-format cameras and reproducing the images as large-format (up to 100cm x 150cm) pictures is an intentional strategy to evoke the Kantian mathematical sublime where sheer scale produces awe. However, Burtynsky’s strategy of capturing the toxic landscapes of the Tar Sands from on high (usually from the vantage afforded by a helicopter) provoke a crisis of vision, as the aerial perspective flattens the landscape, disorientating any sense of measurable scale. This flattening of the landscape presents a visual argument between foreground and background, magnitude and insignificance, the known and the unknown (Deleth 120). While this strategy makes his images visually and aesthetically compelling, and thus more in tune with Kant’s dynamical sublime, Burtynsky’s aerial mappings have been criticized for evoking the abstraction of remote sensing and setting up an aesthetic encounter of “disinterested contemplation” (Lang 425). By maintaining a studied ambiguity, aesthetic and ideological, about the epic scale and grandeur of bitumen extraction and its waste sites, Burtynsky, according to Mike Crang, “plays around with the balance between questions of beauty (the awe) and questions of ethics (the awful)” (Crang 1094).

Jennifer Peeples argues that the horror of the toxic...

Where is Fort McMurray?
The Greenpeace image introduced a worldwide online audience to the environmental hazards associated with Oil Sands mining in Alberta (see Fig. 2). It also introduced the same audience to the dominant aesthetic with Oil Sands mining in Alberta (see Fig. 2). It also introduced the audience to the environmental hazards associated with Oil Sands mining in Alberta (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 3 Greenpeace activists enter Syncrude’s Aurora North oil sands operation and suspend a banner that reads “World’s Dirtiest Oil: Stop the Tar Sands.”

Fig. 4 Edward Burtynsky, Alberta Oil Sands #10, Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, 2007.
sublime—awe at the immensity of human-made environmental degradation—can call into question the personal, social and environmental ethics that allow places of contamination like tailings ponds to exist. However, the scalar aesthetics deployed by Burtynsky in his Oil Sands series can leave one feeling a sense of bewilderment and inertia at the thought of rectifying a problem that exceeds our comprehension. While Burtynsky’s compositional choices render his images fraught with tensions that require thought and contemplation, which can lead to contradictory sensations of horror and wonder, this does not necessarily provide the impetus for attitudinal change. His scalar aesthetic, for example, confronts two major barriers to the impetus necessary to mobilize action on the part of the viewer. First, Burtynsky’s high-angled perspective presents his subject matter of tailings ponds and open pit mines as transcending the scope of the frame, setting up a visual argument between magnitude and insignificance thereby resisting any meaningful visual representation. In other words, while Burtynsky’s perspective indicates the massive scale of production of the Oil Sands, what is not clear is the magnitude of environmental degradation. Second, the high vertical angle summons questions of enormity and thus feelings of impotence, which can leave the viewer “unclear what action one could take, even if one wanted to.” (Szeman 437).

Burtynsky’s own lack of an overt critical positioning on the Oils Sands has left him open to the criticism of being a cosmopolitan privileged viewer who “floats free” from the environmental degradation and human labour depicted (Crag 1098). Furthermore, while Burtynsky has felt free to focus his lens on the human labour behind the landscapes of industrial mega-projects in China and Bangladesh in his 2000 Shipbreaking series, he has chosen to steer away from explicitly depicting the human labour involved in the manufacture of the Alberta Oil Sands. This could be because Burtynsky, aware of the polarization of the Oil Sands in both political and public discourse, feels the power of these images resides in their ambiguity. More cynically, with so many Canadians making a living from, or living comfortably because of the Oil Sands, perhaps it is also in the ambiguity of the images that they maintain their largest audience and marketplace appeal. Burtynsky’s limited captions describing the images have also been a point of contention for some critics. His captions for his Alberta Oil Sands series merely state the number of the photograph in the series, the location (“Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada”), and the date. For example, in a photograph from the series which depicts immense acid-yellow sulphur stockpiles with Syncrude’s main processing plant in the background, the caption notes only “Alberta Oil Sands #6 Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, 2007.” Burtynsky’s reticence to name operating companies or their toxic by-products, could be a preservation strategy employed in order to ensure his own continued access to the world’s most colossal industrial sites. Yet, by partitioning the Oil Sands operating companies and their environmental contaminants from full view, Burtynsky also represses connections not only between the viewer and viewed, but between the Oil Sands and its broader geopolitical context.

In an article written for The Walrus, Burtynsky attempts to dispel some of the uncertainly around his environmental views and particularly his reticence to directly critique resource extraction in his own country (Burtynsky, “Extraction”). In the article, he calls for the Canadian government to mandate sustainable practices in the extraction and sale of Canada’s natural resources, including the Alberta Oil Sands. However, his detractors see this as mere tokenism: a letter to the editor sharply noted that, despite his undisputed talent as a master photographer, “Alas, as an environmental activist, he is a failure” (Vincent). As one commentator summed up, “while Burtynsky’s photographs of Canadian industry make for great art, they operate within the Canadian political mainstream and do little to shake up the consciousness of a public content to keep looking away from the social and environmental degradation that is taking place in its own backyard” (Nickerson).
Reclamation

Andriko Lozowy has not had the luxury of being able to look away from the ‘dark specter’ of oil production actually taking place in his backyard. Lozowy grew up in Sherwood Park, Edmonton, in the shadow of ‘Refinery Row’, industrial home to the largest oil refinery facilities in Western Canada. Since a teenager, Lozowy has found photography a useful tool for investigating and making sense of the built environment of oil production that has dominated his neighbourhood skyline. Although fenced in and highly patrolled, the camera’s zoom offered a means of interloping into industrial sites deemed out of bounds. Of course, pushing the boundaries or railing against the establishment is the prerogative of the teenager, something Lozowy recognized later in life when engaging the group of Fort McMurray youth to respond to the question “Where is Fort McMurray?”. Teaching the students the techniques of digital photography, Lozowy hoped to empower them by equipping them with the tools to create an alternative view of their own backyard. While Burtynsky’s images have certainly helped to bring the Oil Sands and Fort McMurray international attention, the reproduction of his scalar aesthetic has meant that the dominant optics in this case has become one of partitioning the Oil Sands as an active and place-based industrial site from view. By asking “Where is Fort McMurray?”, Lozowy seeks to address this loss of geographical specificity and dislocation by bringing us back down to earth, or rather in this case bitumen. Through the project, Lozowy and his student participants therefore sought to overturn the dominant scopic regime by offering a point of view in, rather than on Fort McMurray.

A series of images from the venture was collaboratively curated by Lozowy and the student participants to form an online exhibit also entitled ‘Where is Fort McMurray?’ (Lozowy, Where). The images offer a perspective of Fort McMurray from the vantage point of local youth: the regular repeated lines of suburban rooftops, the blur of a fast car, the overgrown tracks of a disused railway line, the lush greenery framing a winding river valley, and the cramped yet colourfully-decorated confines of a shared bedroom (see Fig. 4). These are windows into Fort McMurray at the human scale.

Lozowy has similarly taken a more on-the-ground approach in his own photographic practice when responding to the provocation “Where is Fort McMurray?”. In contrast to Burtynsky’s aerial mappings of immense ungraspable scenes, Lozowy’s approach is more modest: to see what you can document of the world’s largest industrial site from the public access roads running through it.

What answers do they offer to the question “Where is Fort McMurray?” Where his students, by nature of their age, were limited to directing their lenses on the town site of Fort McMurray, Lozowy was compelled to follow the 24/7 circular flow traffic heading north on Highway 63 to the town’s industrial heart: the Oil Sands. Highway 63 passes through the Oil Sands between Fort McMurray and Fort MacKay and offers a ‘public’ point of view for the committed (some may say foolhardy) photographer onto the private sites of industrial production. I say committed since stopping or merely slowing down on this highway—one of the most dangerous roads in Canada—is a risky endeavour. This is something I discovered when accompanying Lozowy on one of his photographic field trips.

Touring the Tar Sands

Until 1970, Highway 63 did not even appear on a map. Since then the 240-kilometre-long, two-lane highway has become the critical artery in and out of Fort McMurray (see Fig. 5). Drivers in the know call it “Hell’s Highway,” or the “Highway of Death”. When Lozowy and I drove north to Fort McMurray from Edmonton along Highway 63, it was not hard to imagine why it had earned these monikers. On any given day, thousands of logging trucks, SUVs, semi-trailers, buses and tanker trucks form a frantic parade to and from Fort McMurray and the Oil Sands bitumen mine sites. Often a dozen different convoys of extra-wide loads carrying tires, turbines, and cockers the size of houses completely dominate the ridiculously inadequate two lane highway. Known as one of the provinces deadliest highways, forty-six people died in crashes on the road between 2005 and 2009, with another 310 people injured in the same period. On the day that we traveled Highway 63 it was mid-winter, making the already hazardous conditions seriously treacherous, a fact evidenced by the recurrent appearance of wrecked and abandoned vehicles along the hard shoulder of the highway. The four and a half hour drive north to ‘Fort Mac’ was the longest, most drawn-out white-knuckle ride of my life.

After such a journey, the sight of ‘Fort Mac’ does little to convince that it was worth the risks. Of course, for those working at the Oil Sands the economic rewards to be had there far outweigh the dangers of the drive and the numbing dullness of the town itself. To the tourist, Fort McMurray appears makeshift: a ramshackle grid of functional building blocks that define a boomtown: a place to sleep and eat. Yet the town itself never sleeps. As the urban service centre for the region, it serves the 24/7 production of the Oil Sands. The constant hum of traffic and the repetitive approach, stop, idle and depart at the chartered bus stops which run workers back and forth to the mines make Fort Mac a difficult place to get some sleep for the uninitiated.

The next morning, bleary-eyed Lozowy and I joined the procession heading across the reinforced bridge above the Athabasca River north to the Oil Sands. Two oil-town kids, we shared an interest in exploring the oil...
Understanding the active role photography has played in the processes by which people have come to articulate their assumptions about land and land use in Canada, Lozowy has recognized the power of displacing Hime’s ‘prairie aesthetic’ to the flattened and cleared lands north of Fort McMurray on the roads cutting through the Oil Sands mining sites. Here treelessness becomes a monument to the significant clearing of Boreal forest and the resulting disturbance this has on the animal species and aboriginal communities that depend upon this ecosystem. Thus, instead of surveying an empty stage for the projections/imaginings of Canadian expansionists, Lozowy documents the actual landscapings of what some have instead of surveying an empty stage for the projections/imaginings of Canadian expansionists and British imperialists” (969).

The traditional assumption is that photography is an inert form of visual representation that freezes and captures discrete moments in time and space. Having made many return visits to this area, Lozowy’s aim is to document the changeable nature of this manufactured landscape. Trees are felled, tons of soil and sand are dug up and moved, tailings ponds fill and are then drained, filled in, contoured, and planted. This landscape is far from static. Of course, the traditional tourist snapshot can be thought of as technology dealing only in the ‘frozen moment’ (Henning 138). For example, Burtynsky’s framed aerial snap-shots of the Athabasca Oil Sands, touring worldwide as part of his Oil exhibition, offer audiences a vision of this industrial landscape in aspic. Although taken several years ago, the ideological authority of Burtynsky’s mappings presents a static understanding of the landscapes of Oil Sands production, resonating with Barthes’ notion of the camera’s ability to “embalm” the living world (Barthes 14). Furthermore, within the context of OIL, which narrates the story of oil from extraction and refinement to transportation and the end of oil, the Alberta Oil Sands become buried within the scale of oil that Burtnysky seeks to emphasise. Ranging from NASCAR rallies in the United States, to gigantic parking lots of Volkswagen cars in China, to fields of abandoned oil derricks in Baku, Burtnysky’s OIL images underline the global permeations of oil on humanity and the environment. Yet, by doing so they also work to further erase the Oil Sands from view as they become enmeshed within an even greater scalar aesthetic.

Lozowy, by comparison, seeks to explore this sense of the Oil Sands industry falling away from view. Moreover, by working with rather than against this sense of erasure, he also seeks to resist the inertia and stasis found in Burtnysky’s images in order to capture the shifting (and shifted) nature of the Oil Sands. It is Debbie Lisle’s view that, far from being static, there is inherent mobility in photography and by extension the photograph, and this has an important antecedent at the level of production. Lisle’s point is that the act of clicking the camera’s shutter is never an isolated moment: “rather, it is punctured by all the previous clicks and moments leading up to it” (Lisle 3). As such, the photographer’s contact sheet or computer file becomes a “visual travelogue of discrete moments that bleed into one another.” (3) This is certainly the case in Lozowy’s series Looking Left at Syncrude, a digital archive of photographs Lozowy took from his car window while driving around one of Syncrude’s tailings ponds (Lozowy, “Looking Left”).

Taken at close intervals, the photographs contained in this online archive act almost as a praxioskope: one image bleeds into the next, capturing the fluctuations of land, sky and dust the moving car affairs around the perimeter of the pond (see Fig. 7). Here, it becomes clear that it was Lozowy’s movement prior to clicking the camera’s shutter that shaped and determined the photograph’s content. Lisle goes one step further than this to argue that all photographs, no matter what they depict, are saturated with “the potential mobility of the world’s materials” and so in this sense are never still: “indeed, the world of flux out of which the image is extracted includes the image itself, and in this sense, an image can never be isolated from the world in which it was derived” (Lisle 4). Following this, Lisle argues
that a photograph should be read counter-intuitively, “not as an arrest of movement or a freezing of time, but as a collection of signs that is always potentially mobile”. This relates to Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the movement-image, where the movement-image reflects dynamic features and characteristics of an in-between spatio-temporal frame. A moment of contemplation, a ‘working through’ of the creative process rather than a conceptual context aimed to integration or closure: the ‘delay’ and ‘detour’ are unforeseen. Coupled with this for Lozowy is a resistance to integration or closure: the ‘delay’ and ‘détour’ are characteristic of an in-between spatio-temporal frame. By taking photographs on-the-move, often out the window of a moving or idling car, underlines the fact that one is not encouraged to stop and take in the view on the roads that intersect and frame Oil Sands production areas. For example, beyond the Crane Lake Reclamation Area stop, which is marketed as a Nature Reserve with a designated car park and connecting nature trails, there are no more parking stops between the Reserve with a designated car park and connecting nature trails, there are no more parking stops between the Reserve and the Oil Sands mining sites. Attempting to stop your car along this stretch of Highway 63 is a dangerous business, as I found out when Lozowy stopped on the hard shoulder during our road trip. As soon as Lozowy stopped the car, the gargantuan trucks buffeting past us honked their horns in protest to our slowing their baseline to the mines and refineries. On the passenger side, I learnt very quickly that opening the door had to be timed carefully to coincide with a break in the traffic, as the almost constant stream of over-sized vehicles stopped for no one.

By comparison, I found Lozowy to be quite the expert in roadside stealth. Even when a newly erected fence occluded a previously open view onto one of the tailings ponds, Lozowy climbed atop the stationary station wagon (from the starting position of his car seat) and managed to take several shots, even though both he and the wagon were being buffeted by the force of the trucks driving past. As such, Lozowy’s method produces a seeing body that is able to respond to contingencies and accidents en route (Dubow 268). For Walter Benjamin, it is only amidst the drought and delay that critical practice can begin. Following Benjamin, one could argue that Lozowy’s d休ours from the expected drive opened us up to experiencing particular types of encounters—the unplanned, the contingent, and the unforeseen. Coupled with this for Lozowy is a resistance to integration or closure: the ‘delay’ and ‘détour’ are characteristic of an in-between spatio-temporal frame. A moment of contemplation, a ‘working through’ of the creative process rather than a conceptual context aimed at fixing the objects of landscape in time and space.

Working in this way, Lozowy produces an alternative view, one that encounters the contingent as it folds in and out of the path of observation. By taking us with him on his tour amidst the drought and delay through the Oil Sands epicenter, we become his passenger and the car window our frame. This strategy, of offering a point of view in, rather than on the Oil Sands, reconnects the viewer with the viewed and relocates the Oil Sands in placed-based experience. This rescaling of the Oil Sands actualizes rather than the other way round. She bases this understanding with Benjamin’s concept of the dialectic image, where “what has come together with the now” to constitute what Benjamin calls “dialectics at standstill” (Benjamin 463). Yet, rather than read Benjamin’s concept of standstill as turning the world to stone, Lisle promotes an understanding of Benjamin’s conception of stillness as “something fizzing and pulsating with political electricity” (Buck-Morss qtd in Lisle 219). Photographs for Lisle, just like the dialectic image, are charged with an “affective punch” that is fizzing with political electricity (219).

Here, Lisle extends agency to the photograph by arguing that it is the photograph itself that shapes the emotive and affective experience of the viewer: i.e. it is the photograph that demands something of the viewer, rather than the other way round. She bases this understanding on Deleuze’s dispersed account of agency in the act of perception: For Deleuze, a work of art—for our purposes, a photograph—is not an inert or still document, but rather a ‘block of sensations’ (Deleuze 31). It is not a finished product produced by an autonomous viewer; rather, it is a combination of percepts (initial perceptions) and affects (physical intensities) that...
passes through all subjects at the point of visual perception. This kind of relational encounter with an image not only deconstructs Modernity’s foundational distinction between the subject and the object, it also opens up an affective connection between all subjects engaged in the act of looking; in this case, the photographer, the subjects and objects within the photograph and the viewer. (Lisle 5)

It is, therefore, Lisle’s contention that taking account of the affective level of perception (i.e. the pre-interpretive moment when images reach out to grab us) changes our traditional understanding of how a photograph ‘moves’ us.

The “affective punch” of Lozowy’s images resides in their ability to conjure the past and present together in a flash. Take, for example, Lozowy’s image of an Oil Sands refinery at night (Fig. 8). For me, this photograph initiates an awakening to the burning rays of a past light that lit up the North Sea on the night of July 6, 1988. That night my dad, a BBC cameraman, had taken me and my sister to the swimming baths, but before we got into the pool my dad was paged and asked to cover a news story: the Piper Alpha oil platform was on fire. With the aid of a helicopter, my dad was the first news cameraman to the scene and the first to capture the towering inferno that had engulfed the rig, its crew and lit up the surrounding sea.

In Benjamin’s terminology, this is the shock effect of the dialectic “at a standstill”: the sudden spark, the profane flash that lights up a dark thought and allows it to make itself felt in the present (Benjamin 462). The image for me lights up a night when a culture that kept the oil flowing at all costs set the scene for the destruction of an oil platform and the deaths of 167 men. It also portends the health and environmental risk of the polluted sites surrounding the sands, as production continues. The image for me lit up a night when a culture that kept the oil flowing at all costs set the scene for the destruction of an oil platform and the deaths of 167 men. It also portends the health and environmental risk of the polluted sites surrounding the sands, as production continues.

Not long after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Burtynsky was unsurprisingly back in his helicopter, taking aerial photographs to capture the scale of the spill, 50 miles off the Louisiana coastline in the Gulf of Mexico. Many of Burtynsky’s pictures from this day are aesthetic masterpieces. His aerial vistas depicting the lustrous and painterly gestures of oil slicks emulsifying into the cobalt blue gulf, much like his images of Oil Sands tailings ponds, produce a toxic sublime. The aesthetic pleasure to be found when encountering these images is impossible to forestall, the context notwithstanding. This again underlines the risks of invoking the toxic sublime. The beauty of Burtynsky’s images “obfuscates the health and environmental risk of the polluted sites they photograph”, which in this case happens to be an oil spill of epic proportions (Peeples 373). Similarly, his use of an aerial perspective to capture the epic proportions of the spill reproduces the same problems associated with the scalar aesthetics deployed in his Oil Sands series. The view from on-high summons questions of omnipotence and thus feelings of impotence, leaving one feeling a sense of bewilderment and inertia at the thought of rectifying a problem that exceeds both the frame and comprehension. While Burtynsky’s compositional choices render his images fraught with tensions that elicit contradictory sensations of attraction and repulsion, his images ultimately, to my mind, do not provide the impetus for attitudinal, never mind behavioural, change.

To conclude, Burtynsky’s scalar aesthetics has trained us to see and aestheticize the Canadian Oil Sands in limited and troubling ways. By offering the viewer a point of view in, rather than on the Oil Sands, Lozowy’s photographic project Where is Fort McMurray? disrupts the dominant obfuscatory aerial imaginaries, enabling a more critical and politically meaningful photographic engagement with this oil project. Similarly, by reworking the Prairie aesthetic to reflect modern times, Lozowy is able to relocate the Alberta Oil Sands in place-based experience. Thus even for those of you who have not, and may never, visit the Oil Sands, or who never grew up with landscapes of oil production in your backyard, living in a time of peak oil, its dark spectre will permeate your lives. This is why Lozowy’s following tour of the Alberta Oil Sands may provoke emotive and affective experiences to awaken your attention to its crude realities.
In my hands the camera becomes active, an apparatus of production, creating objects of a certain order; images. As such, I consider the etymology of ‘image’, which comes from the French image (c.1200), or artificial representation and imagier (late 1300s), meaning “to form a mental picture.” Imagination, as a noun follows to refer to “a faculty of the mind that forms and manipulates images” (OED).

I also consider the production of images and photography itself in a manner that is similar to Vilem Flusser’s (1920-1991), although transposed into a contemporary twenty-first century context. In Towards a Philosophy of Photography, Flusser argued that images signify material elements in time and space that are made comprehensible to us as abstractions, a reduction of dimensions (8). In order to render images out of space and time, the precondition of imagination must be in play so that we may encode phenomena into two dimensional symbols and be able to read these symbols (ibid). Flusser illustrates a kind of underpainting of normalized image uses. In order to read images, we apply our collected and collective knowledge as we gaze.

Working in the early 1980s, Flusser followed his publication of Towards a Philosophy of Photography with Into the Universe of Technical Images, where many of the undertones of the initial text are taken up and ordered into a linear and pragmatic approach. Flusser insists on a dialogical system logic. Like Innis, Barthes, McLuhan, and Baudrillard, Flusser is often categorized as a media theorist concerned with the interdependence and relationships of humans as social actors in relation to technology. In Flusser’s view, contemporary societies need to embrace the visual’s multi-dimensionality and relinquish long held linear texts of reductive abstraction. Flusser passed away in 1991, and if we may appropriate his thinking to the present day then we can think into the ways in which information exerts a decisive influence on our lives, images as flowing streams: photographs, films, videos, computers, all operating in a profoundly different way than linear writing. Images have mutated our modes of behavior, our perceptions, our values (Flusser 5) and as such Flusser makes the point that what it means to publish is “to put a subjective observation into the symbols of a social code” (2011, 1985: 12).

Perhaps this is precisely the point at which fate has brought together the geographer and the sociologist. On the one hand, we can think of these two disciplines as each occupying a clearly defined epistemological position and establish an approximate stance on how macro or micro, or how small or large the scale and scope of vision ought to be. Indeed, both approaches seem to align their trajectories, at least as broadly defined, around an impetus to broad vision, and it seems to us, that in each case, the depth of vision is often pursued by the sub-disciplines, those seeking some manner of spatial or cultural specificity from which one could gain insight.

If we consider Max Weber and the aim of sociology, then we should note that the goal is clearly outlined as concerned with understanding the cultural conditions and meanings of society (Weber qtd in Burri 46). Regula Valerie Burri keenly points out, that classical sociologists have mostly neglected the understanding that such analysis must include “the visual” (Burri 46). Geography, although an historically ‘visual’ discipline has been criticized for not properly theorizing how and why it is visual and what kind of power relations are at play until Gilliam Rose’s famous intervention in 2003.

The work of Flusser and Burri both emphasize the importance of considered and critical analysis of the scope of the visual. On the one hand, Burri works to persuade her audience that “the visual,” is a kind of matter in which we live (Jenks). On the other hand, Flusser insists that we must take note of the cultural mutation afoot, from linear text to another kind of image world entirely. Burri and Flusser press upon us that we ought to consider the ways in which three dimensions, plus time, are working as interdependent systems, in dialogue, interacting, reflecting, refracting, and all the while we need to be diligent as scholars to take note of the ways in which humans interact, change the dimensions, and are shaped by them.

In short, the geographer and the sociologist emerge as social-geographers, cultural geographers, human-geographers. Through collaboration Patchett and I stand to resist the notion that text alone is the beholder of an “objective” truth (Daston and Galison). The goal here, by publishing, writing, editing, and thereby shaping the now muddied waters of a given discipline, is to press upon the thinking faculties of our dear readers to apply self-analysis of individual notions of how ideas, images,
Camera in hand I consider the ways in which photography as action, as process, as performance, can be an embodied manipulation towards a synthesis of specific techno-logical and scientific/mathematical constraints. The camera compresses, reduces, takes note of light, and fuses together all manner of the photographer’s aesthetic, cultural, social, sign+signifed concepts and, in a flash, captures a reduced form of a world ‘out there.’ Out there, becomes, here, and here, quickly turns to join again with out there.

My methods are syncopatic, and tangential, in order to approach a given subject I find that immersion, and fresh eyes lead me towards planes of vision requesting their capture. I follow black-top thorough fares and laneways towards zones beyond my usual traversals. In the region of Wood Buffalo that contains the municipality of Fort McMurray, there are many fences and signs that clearly mark spaces as private, no trespassing allowed. In Calgary, at the tops of office towers, neos signs bearing the names of ‘Suncor’ and ‘Syncrude’ beam brightly, myths, become known, how they work to change thought, and how thought is transmitted as imaginaries.

Frames for Reading the Image Series
Whatever the aesthetic merits, every representation of landscape is also a record of human values and actions imposed on the land over time. What stake do landscape photographers have in constructing such representations? A large one, I believe. Whatever the photographer’s claims, landscapes as subject matter in photography can be analyzed as documents extending beyond the formally aesthetic or personally expressive. Even formal and personal choices do not emerge sui generis, but instead reflect collective interests and influences, whether philosophical, political, economic, or otherwise. (Deborah Bright 126)
As a photographer, I engage with photography from the point of view of public lands as points/spaces of access that allow me to direct my gaze and camera at—or into—or upon private sites of production. Images speak as evidence of the strangeness, the sublime, the uncanny topographical features that arise in a place where boreal forests stood untouched by human force just a short time ago.

Even before I visited this landscape, I knew that I needed to go and see for myself. At first gaze I was struck with a sense of horror and a deep sense of loss and tragedy. Two terms to help describe the psychological perplexities and emotions that arise: one is Saudade, which is a deep longing for that which is gone and may never return. This sense of loss developed as a form of Solistalgia (Albrecht), which is the loss felt by environmental change, the feeling one may have when returning to a place after a long time has passed—like New Orleans after Katrina. Following on these two terms, Saudade and Solistalgia, the question of why photograph can be

whereas in Fort McMurray these same signifiers rest on humble placards mounted to wooden fence posts. Their message is clear; private property, danger, keep out!

The highway resembles a long stage, automobiles press their rubber tires into the surface. The highway provides a false sense of security. Highway 63 serves a primary purpose, to guide workers to the Oil Sands operations. The highway is public, but on either side is private property—it is bordered on all sides by the subject, objects of order in space.

To me, Highway 63 represents an access route to visit places that magnify the views of oil refineries near my birthplace in Edmonton, Alberta. In other words, visiting the Oil Sands is like coming to the well.

So why come and photograph? I travel as an explorer, a researcher, a photographer—these are my points of reference. This triad of actions is a process, a motif, a way of seeing the world. Photography underscores and supports my larger research project that is academically based and geographically rooted in the town of Fort McMurray. As traveller, I move from Edmonton to Fort McMurray and beyond in order to work with others, and what exists outside, out there.

As a photographer, I engage with photography from the point of view of public lands as points/spaces of access that allow me to direct my gaze and camera at—or into—or upon private sites of production. Images speak as evidence of the strangeness, the sublime, the uncanny topographical features that arise in a place where boreal forests stood untouched by human force just a short time ago.
answered by a single word: duty, a service to memory, to public perception, to landscape changes. It is a duty to document, to provide evidence and artefacts for hard dialogues and discussions.

Since 2009, I continue to return, to travel, to ask with a researcher’s critical eye, and to bring into focus using a camera as production apparatus and creator of representation.

Even if the images are just for myself, I find value in this endeavor as an active process. More recently I have been asked to share—colleagues and friends say, “you’ve been there, can we see your photographs?”. And in these instances the duty becomes clear. My responsibility is to share these photographic images that compress and obscure time and space.

I work to express photographically the imaginary of subject as place. In this instance, the imaginary is the story of place transformed through the distribution of photograph as objects and artefacts. Rather than obscure the relationship between image and object, my mode has been to re-enter the image of place: photograph again and again, and establish a visual dialogue of communication that intends to move beyond the rigid constraints of singularity; I ask, what would the land, and the landscape itself reveal if it was shown the objects of our perusal?
Image Notes:

Figures that are unmarked. Reproduced with Permission of Photographer. Lozowy, Andriko.

Fig. 1 Image of the Piper Alpha ablaze taken by a crew member operating one of the rescue vessels. Image © Cardiff University Engineering Department.


Fig. 6 Lozowy, Andriko. Highway 63. 2011 Unpublished. Reproduced with Permission of Photographer.

Fig. 7 Hime, Humphrey Lloyd. The Prairie, Looking South. 1858. Photograph. 1936-273C-018694. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Fig. 8 Lozowy, Andriko. Image 19. 2011 Unpublished. Reproduced with Permission of the Photographer.

Works Cited

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(Endnotes)
1. While Lord Fraser stated that “public interest would not be served by a prosecution,” this attitude was the very opposite of the public interest at the time. This attitude may have reflected Lord Fraser’s own interests, however. Fraser served as Scotland’s minister of energy and also had a number of ties to Big Oil. Fraser served the oil industry in a variety of capacities including: 1) Nonexecutive chairman, JKX Oil and Gas plc, an oil and gas exploration and production company with license interests in the Ukraine, the United States, Italy, and the Caspian Sea. 2) Nonexecutive chairman of “theoilsite.com,” which specializes in e-tendering solutions for the oil and gas industry worldwide. 3) Nonexecutive director, International Petroleum Exchange, Europe’s largest energy market, best known for its futures contracts in North Sea Brent crude oil. 4) Nonexecutive chairman of “theoilsite.com,” which specializes in e-tendering solutions for the oil and gas industry worldwide. 5) Nonexecutive director, International Petroleum Exchange, Europe’s largest energy market, best known for its futures contracts in North Sea Brent crude oil. 4) Nonexecutive director of Ram-energy Ltd, an independent exploration and production company that operates primarily in the United States. 5) Nonexecutive director of TotalFina

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Elf Upstream UK Ltd, one of the world’s largest oil conglomerates.

2. Oil companies have reverted to using the geological classification of “oil sands” over “tar sands” in a bid to move away from the ‘dirty oil’ smear suggested by tar sands. I will be referring to the Athabasca Oil Sands as the “Oil Sands” to encompass its status as the world’s largest Capital Project.

3. Production of bitumen continues to grow in Alberta, accounting for more than 72 per cent of Alberta’s total crude oil and raw bitumen output. Total bitumen production in Alberta is about 544 million barrels (86.4 million cubic metres), of which 55 per cent is from mining operations and the remainder is from in situ methods. The ERCB expects Alberta’s annual bitumen production to increase to around 1 billion barrels (160 million cubic meters) by 2019. To view the outcomes of this trip, both photographic (www.fashioningfeathers.ca/ottawacityhallea.html) and Louis Helbig’s “Beautiful nationalgeographic.com/2009/03/canadian-oil-sands/” (2010), a Greenpeace documentary film by Peter Mettler and Petropolis (2009) are high profile photography series include Peter Essick’s National Geographic photos (http://ngm. nationalgeographic.com/2009/03/canadian-oil-sands/ essick-photography) and Louis Helbig’s “Beautiful production in Alberta is about 544 million barrels (86.4 million cubic metres), of which 55 per cent is from mining operations and the remainder is from in situ methods. The ERCB expects Alberta’s annual bitumen production to increase to around 1 billion barrels (160 million cubic meters) by 2019. To view the outcomes of this trip, both photographic (www.fashioningfeathers.ca/ottawacityhallea.html) and Louis Helbig’s “Beautiful nationalgeographic.com/2009/03/canadian-oil-sands/” (2010), a Greenpeace documentary film by Peter Mettler and Petropolis (2009) are high profile photography series include Peter Essick’s National Geographic photos (http://ngm. nationalgeographic.com/2009/03/canadian-oil-sands/ essick-photography) and Louis Helbig’s “Beautiful

4. Other high profile photography series include Peter Essick’s National Geographic photos (http://ngm. nationalgeographic.com/2009/03/canadian-oil-sands/ essick-photography) and Louis Helbig’s “Beautiful

5. To view the outcomes of this trip, both photographic and sound recording go to: http://changeableplaces.wordpress.com/2011/03/17/rights-and-sounds-of-bitumen-extraction-in-alberta-canada/ and sound recording go to: http://changeableplaces.wordpress.com/2011/03/17/rights-and-sounds-of-bitumen-extraction-in-alberta-canada/

6. Theodore Adorno has famously interpreted benjamin’s concept of stillness as turning the world to stone (see Adorno 227-42).

7. These photographs are available through his website, edwardburtynsky.com; the Oil Spill Series is collected under the title “Gulf of Mexico,” in his “Water” works.

8. The leak amounted to about 4.9 million barrels (780,000 m3) of oil, exceeding the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill as the largest ever to originate in U.S. controlled waters and the 1979 Ixtoc I oil spill as the largest spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

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Introduction: Reframing the Debate

In 2010 a coalition of activist environmental groups working under the banner Rethink Alberta, a group ostensibly concerned with adding 'facts' to the debate about the so-called 'oil sands,' launched a multimedia ad campaign. The goal was to dissuade international tourists from visiting Alberta by presenting images of the industrial extraction of oil from the bituminous sands around Fort McMurray. Referring to bitumen extraction as the “other oil disaster” (Fig. 1), on par with the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion and resulting spill into the Gulf of Mexico, and juxtaposing images of oil-soaked pelicans with oil-soaked ducks, seeks to provoke an emotional response to bitumen and oil in general. Both images are negative and disturbing: they are employed to push the viewer away. The combination of the images with the title—“Alberta: the Other Oil Disaster”—functions as a metonymy, with the oil-soaked duck standing in for Alberta as a whole. The viewer is not just repelled by the images, but by Alberta itself, or so the campaign intends. As part of this campaign, the group produced the billboard shown below, a Facebook page, and a video, which generated responses in newspapers, on television, and online. Among the dozens of virulent responses posted on YouTube to the video, asing940 writes, “You don’t think that this US group has a bias too? Let’s see—worst oil disaster EVER just happened in the US. This is an ad campaign, but it isn’t designed to trigger interest, it is designed to point the finger somewhere else.”

What is the current state of discourse about bitumen and how might it be changed? Philosopher Harry Frankfurt defines “bullshit” as any attempt at persuasion that is “unconnected to a concern with the truth” (Frankfurt). By looking at a variety of recent examples from the debates over bitumen extraction, “Rethinking Bitumen” argues that these debates have many of the characteristics that Frankfurt ascribes to “bullshit.” It is argued further that the debate’s disconnect from a concern with truth is rooted in what Bruno Latour calls “matters of fact” (“Critique” 226). Attempts to persuade are built on “matters of fact”—which can be debunked by both sides as ideological—when they should be founded on the ecological consciousness of what Latour calls “matters of concern” (ibid.). Literature offers one means of effecting this transition from “matters of fact” to “matters of concern.” This article considers Marc Prescott’s play Fort Mac as one example of a literary text that creates an opportunity for engaging in ecological thinking about bitumen and for deploying affect and sensation to change the prevailing values about it, to see bitumen as a “matter of concern.”

Quel est le discours actuel sur le bitume et comment pourrait-il être changé? Le philosophe Harry Frankfurt définit comme « connerie » toute tentative de persuader qui « n’a aucun lien à la vérité » [Notre Traduction] (Frankfurt). Dans cet article, je soutiens que les débats récents sur l’extraction du bitume ont beaucoup à voir avec ce que Frankfurt associe aux « conneries ». De plus, j’entends montrer que la rupture de ces débats avec la question de la vérité trouve son origine dans ce que Bruno Latour appelle des « états de fait » [Notre Traduction] (« Critique » 226). Des tentatives de persuader se construisent sur ces « états de fait » – on peut déboulonner celles-ci comme idéologiques sur tous les fronts-, alors que c’est la conscience écologique de ce que Latour appelle des « états d’inquiétude » qui devrait constituer le fondement de l’argument. Cet article examine la pièce de théâtre Fort Mac de Marc Prescott comme exemple d’une œuvre littéraire qui crée l’occasion de comprendre le bitume du point de vue écologique afin de partager des inquiétudes liées à cette dimension, puis de changer les valeurs en jeu et parvenir enfin à concevoir le bitume comme un « états d’inquiétude ».
ethicaloil.org was launched to highlight the differences between “conflict oil” from Venezuela, Libya, Sudan, the Middle East, etc. and “ethical oil” from Canada. It focuses on the ways in which bitumen extraction creates good jobs and promotes social justice within a Canadian regime of environmental responsibility. While Figure 1 juxtaposes oil soaked birds to equate bitumen extraction with the Gulf oil spill, Figure 2 uses the same visual strategy of side-by-side photos to establish a clear moral hierarchy. While the caption of the left-hand picture—“Sudan’s Oil Fields: Indigenous Peoples Killed”—implies that the bones in the foreground are those of an indigenous person, the right-hand picture offers the smiling, optimistic face of, presumably, an Aboriginal woman. Rather than equating two negatives, as with the Rethink Alberta billboard, the choice is less obvious. Ezra Levant claims, in his book as in the Rethink Alberta billboard, the choice is less straightforward. If the question is about deciding where that oil comes from, that does not mean there is a simple answer (as Levant’s framing of the question implies). Reading bitumen as a matter of concern can help bring the complexity, even the impossibility, of an answer into focus.

Latour defines a matter of concern as “what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole semiotics, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theater” (“What is the Style?” 39). In attempting to follow Latour’s suggestion, this article shifts between the text of Manitoban Marc Prescott’s 2007 play *Fort Mac*, statements made by various participants in debates over bitumen, and theories of discourse and rhetoric. While it is impossible in an article such as this to focus one’s attention on all of the factors involved in the discourse surrounding bitumen, just as it would be impossible to focus on the whole machinery of a theatre at one time, this essay presents one attempt at contextualizing the shortcomings of the current debate about bitumen and pointing towards the (im)possibility of an alternative conversation, a conversation that might consider the ecological view that we need, in Meloy’s phrase, to “try to live here [Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, Earth] as if there is no other place and it must last forever” (qtd. in Chisholm 586).

Just the Facts, Please! Objectivity, Control, and “Bullshit”

In Prescott’s play, Jaypee, his girlfriend Mimi, and her sister Kiki head to northern Alberta from Quebec in a dilapidated camper to find the land where it rains jobs. Jaypee is unable to find work because, even though he can fix engines—in his words he “connaiss ça des moteurs” (24)—he is not a certified mechanic, and, when he runs afoul of Murdock, a local tough, things quickly become very complicated. Mimi takes a job as an exotic dancer even as she tries to keep her linguistic and kineric (“Mason”). Though literature too, like any other discourse, may be debunked and dismissed as rhetorical, I argue that it is harder to do this for literature than for the Rethink Alberta video or the Ethical Oil campaign because literature, as such, can not so easily be dismissed as “interested.” Of course, propagandist literature exists, but that does not mean literature as such can be reduced to propaganda. Jean-Luc Nancy claims that literature creates a “circulation [that] goes in all directions at once,” and it is in this sense that I want to use the term (3). Literature does not push us towards any of the options in an impossible choice, but seeks to persuade, is something more than rhetoric. It allows us to dwell, temporarily, in a present impossibility, the impossibility of choosing between forms of sacrifice. Dianne Chisholm argues in “The Art of Ecological Thinking” that, “there is an art of ecological thinking which is distinct from ecological science. Science may recognize ecology as a discipline but it does not therefore follow that ecological thinking is properly scientific” (570). There is, she argues, thinking particular to “literacy ecology” and, in the example she addresses—Ellen Meloy’s *The Last Cheat’s Waltz*—this thinking “deplays affect and sensation in expressive refrains to enact a transvaluation of values” (572). This article will consider Marc Prescott’s play *Fort Mac* as one example of a literary text that creates an opportunity for recognizing the impossible choice presented by bitumen, an opportunity for engaging in ecological thinking, and for deploying affect and sensation to change the prevailing values about bitumen, to see it as a “matter of concern.”

Ethicaloil.org, by contrast to the play, claims that we have a clear choice to make between sources of oil: when the choice is framed as one between a place that kills indigenous peoples and a place that employs them, it seems straightforward. However, if it is framed as one between oil-soaked pelicans and oil-soaked ducks as in the Rethink Alberta billboard, the choice is less obvious. Ezra Levant claims, in his book *Ethical Oil*, which inspired the website, that “The question is not whether we should use oil sands oil instead of some perfect fantasy fuel that hasn’t been invented yet […] the question is whether we should use oil from the oil sands or oil from the other places in the world that takes it” (7). Let us put aside for the moment debates about alternative energy sources and accept Levant’s premise that the world needs oil. If the question is about deciding where that oil comes from, that does not mean there is a simple answer (as Levant’s framing of the question implies). Reading bitumen as a matter of concern can help bring the complexity, even the impossibility, of an answer into focus.

The public debate about bitumen occurs within a highly polarized context in which it often seems there is no common ground. This article considers how approaching bitumen as what Bruno Latour calls a “matter of concern” can interrupt the rhetorical warfare being engaged in by all sides, and, in that temporary interruption, provide a shift in perspective.

Latour proposes “an entirely different attitude than the critical one, […] a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence” (Latour, “Critique” 245). Literature also has a role to play. As Travis Mason has noted in a reading of Don McKay’s poetry, “That Latour neglects to include poetry, or the arts for that matter, in his project of bringing the sciences into democracy, speaks volumes of the continuing need for sharing ecological consciousness in social spheres that are plural: both public and private, both literary and scientific, both
germane to the enterprise of describing reality” (“On Bullshit”). Much of the response to Rethink Alberta has been precisely focused on showing how their facts and statistics do not describe reality. While Rethink Alberta points out “The Tar Sands are the largest contributor to the growth of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada” (Rethink Alberta), Levant, for instance, replies “The oil sands combined emit just 5 percent of Canada’s total greenhouse gases—less than, for example, the emissions from all of Canada’s cattle and pigs” (6). While Nikiforuk argues “Bitumen development […] will eventually destroy or industrialize a forest the size of Florida” (4), Levant replies, “The oil sands do cover an area the size of Florida. But only 2 per cent of that area will ever be mined” (4). As far as I can tell, all of these claims are true. However, they point in very different directions. Various individuals and groups would chart a course of action for bitumen based on the ‘truth,’ but others dismiss these truths as just so much “bullshit” and chart different courses based on different truths.

Slavoj Žižek argues that in the dominant ideological formation today, “a ‘politics of truth’ [is] dismissed as totalitarian” because, in the postmodern world, truth is unknowable (“Defence 340). However, believing that truth is unknowable serves the interests of the status quo. As William Corlett writes in interpreting Derrida, “[i]n a world where everything is neutralized, the status quo wins” (197). This, perhaps paradoxically, seems to be the result of increasingly partisan, divisive, and extremist rhetoric: increasing the volume of the debate where the various participants are already more or less dogmatic adherents to their positions. Indeed, every attempted truth-claim generates a flurry of opposition activity to debunk it and perpetuate relativist doubt. This doubt serves the status quo. Shifting the debate from facts to concern does not mean abandoning facts or accepting relativism, but putting the facts in a larger context, a context in which the facts appear differently, from which we judge them differently.

For philosopher Harry Frankfurt, “bullshit” is black and white choice between those who would help build future prosperity and those who, for their own political reasons, want to prevent this. Oliver concludes, “Our regulatory system must be fair, independent, consider different viewpoints including those of Aboriginal communities, review the evidence dispassionately and then make an objective determination. It must be based on science and the facts.” Nathan Lempthers, Oilsands Technical and Policy Analyst for the Pembina Institute, writes in response to Oliver’s call for a ‘dispassionate’ and ‘objective’ approach and his government’s blatant political interference in the process. Remember the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico last summer? The fact is, such a disastrous spill could easily happen here, too” (“Open for Business” emphasis added). While agreeing with Oliver about the need to base decisions on science, Lempthers then shifts his appeal to the threat of an oil spill, a “fact” that Oliver would surely dispute.

Such exchanges are precisely the problem with the debate currently occurring around bitumen: all sides lay claim to the ‘objective facts’ and defend their positions based on these claims. Change in the debate, let alone government policy or industry actions, will not proceed from more or better facts; we cannot expect some pronouncement from on high that will chart the way forward. Despite what Joe Oliver or Ezra Levant or David Schindler or Andrew Nikiforuk knows, any particular statement of ‘fact’ exists within the context of an ongoing discourse where the various participants are already more or less dogmatic adherents to their positions. Indeed, every attempted truth-claim generates a flurry of opposition activity to debunk it and perpetuate relativist doubt. This doubt serves the status quo. Shifting the debate from facts to concern does not mean abandoning facts or accepting relativism, but putting the facts in a larger context, a context in which the facts appear differently, from which we judge them differently.

In developing the concept of matters of concern, Latour quotes a Republican strategist from a New York Times piece regarding the debate over climate change; “Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled,” the Republican writes, “their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue” (“Critique” 226). This leads Latour to worry: I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show “the lack of scientific certainty” inherent in the construction of facts. I too made it a “primary issue” call it. Was I foolishly mistaken? Have things changed so fast? In which case the danger would no longer be coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact—as we have learned to combat so efficiently in the past—but from an excessive distrust of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases! (“Critique” 227) Things are a little more complicated with bitumen. As, on the one hand, this strategy of creating distrust of facts is employed for any negative science, but, on the other, scientific certainty is asserted about the potential for continuous improvements in extraction processes. Levant provides examples of both of these strategies: he writes, for the first, “It’s true, there is oil seeping into the rivers north of Fort McMurray and sometimes the air smells like sulphur and the water is bitter. And that’s how it’s been forever” (4), and, for the second, “Oil sands technology continues to improve—to produce one barrel of oil sands oil takes 38 percent less [Greenhouse Gas] emissions now than it did in 1990” (6). In this way any doubts about the negatives that remain after the industry spin-machine is finished with them are deferred into a utopian future. With matters of concern, though, it is the same world, and yet, everything looks different. Matters of fact were indisputable, obstinate, simply there; matters of concern are disputable, and their obstinacy seems to be of an entirely different sort: they move, they carry you away and, yet, they too matter. The amazing thing with matters of fact was that, although they were material, they did not matter a bit, even though they were immediately used to enter into some sort of polemic. (Latour, “What is the Style?” 39)
The NEB hearings into Northern Gateway should, ideally, provide one opportunity for a conversation that moves beyond the polemic of matters of fact, but it is also in danger of being hijacked by paternalistic claims to transparent access to universal Truth by government and industry, and, indeed, by environmentalists as well. If we accept that the starting point for debate is "science and the facts," as Joe Oliver asserts and Nathan Lemphers accepts, then the terms of that debate are dangerously narrowed ("Open Letter.").

In "Canada and Postcolonialism: Questions, Inventories, Futures," Diana Brydon argues that postcolonialism depends on recognition of the following: all truths are complicated and contingent; while there may be many truths rather than a single Truth, that does not absolve an individual or a community from distinguishing among them nor from establishing priorities, nor indeed from seeking consensus through discussion and compromise; and that Eurocentric forms of truth have masqueraded as the universal under a hijacked form of humanism; but that it remains necessary to search for ways to create a renewed definition of the human, beyond the commodification of identity under capitalism. (73) When Oliver writes that the regulatory process must "consider different viewpoints including those of Aboriginal communities," but then asserts that, "It must be based on science and the facts," while clearly implying that the pipeline should be built, he repeats a colonialist disavowal of Indigenous knowledge and concerns. A conversation about the various complicated and contingent truths at play in bitumen development, while various participants struggle to establish fixed points by which they can move the world's understanding of bitumen and debunk opponents' claims, this strategy has not succeeded in changing the status quo. As water ecologist David Schindler, and others, have pointed out, there has been, and continues to be, a tremendous lack of environmental monitoring in the region, and what monitoring does occur is largely done by industry. Further, the critique of debunking is so firmly entrenched that it is very difficult to know which points are truly fixed. Thus, when 99kokanee writes in response to Rethink Alberta, "do you deny the fact that the oil is naturally seeping into the river causing the toxins. do [sic] you deny the fact that water sampling and testing has shown no increase in toxins in the last 50 years" (emphasis added), it is impossible, at least for most ordinary citizens, to definitively dispute this claim. Despite Schindler's research, published in the prestigious Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, which shows that "not all toxic metals in the river are from natural sources," and federal and provincial government promises to increase monitoring, the conflicting narratives about the impacts of bitumen extraction have so far preserved the status quo, which privileges development over conservation (Brooymans B4). Schindler's facts have not gained more traction than those of industry or government. If it is a fixed point that industry is deposing deleterious substances into the Athabasca River, in contravention of the Fisheries Act, this has not changed industry practices or reframed the debate. While Schindler does receive media attention, and his views are taken seriously by some, he remains one voice among many. His warnings about current pollution and future dangers have not punctured industry's balloon, inflated by jobs, taxes, funding for arts and culture, and promises of continued prosperity and improved environmental performance.

If the goal is to change the debate, then a strategy to explore is not only to search out more or better facts but also to seek out voices that enable the status quo as a way of trying to see how they operate together. TheMountainDude8, who writes in the same vein as 99kokanee, states, "The oil companies in Alberta are smart enough to do something about it. They are investing millions in research and working with local researchers at the Universities to find better ways of extracting the oil, minimizing the footprint, and sequestering CO2 in old depleted wells." An opponent may well respond that the open pit mining by which the vast majority of bitumen is currently being extracted does not use wells, that in situ extraction still requires huge amounts or water and fragments habitats, that carbon capture and sequestration is not being done on a commercial scale anywhere, that serious doubts about its feasibility remain, and that the technology is unsuitable for use in the bitumen region. My main interest in 99kokanee's statement is the rhetorical effect of the ambiguous pronoun "it." He or she does not say explicitly what the oil companies are smart enough to do something about. The sentence that follows suggests that "it" is the environmental damage wrought by bitumen extraction, but we might also read "it" as the perception that bitumen extraction is environmentally destructive: the oil companies are smart enough to do something about the negative perceptions associated with their industry. A cynic might suggest that all of the efforts 99kokanee lists are targeted toward this perception as much as, or more than, the destruction. As Schindler himself put it, "I guess what really rankles me is we have this foolish propaganda going on to make people think everything is OK and therefore support the tarsands," but "If people know what's really going on and they still support the tarsands, well, I can grit my teeth, but that's democracy. What's going on now is not democracy" (McLean and Brooymans A2). The challenge for a position like Schindler's, though, is dealing with the counter-rhetorical pincer move of dismissing such a claim to know "what's really going on" as totalitarian on the one hand and falling back on industry's "objective claims" to improvement on the other. We need to supplement efforts to describe what's "really going on."

Propaganda and an Attentive, Affectionate Alternative

We can see the type of propaganda Schindler criticizes at work in a piece Dave Collyer, president of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), wrote for the Edmonton Journal on 11 August 2011 titled "Oil, gas industry is making environmental progress." He writes that, "The Canadian oil and gas industry [...] is focused on the three 'E's'—energy security and reliability, economic growth and environmental performance." This would seem to indicate that these can all be focused on at the same time, that a balance can be achieved. Collyer articulates precisely a "need" for "balanced solutions—responsibly developing Alberta's valuable resources within a reasonable regulatory framework that recognizes economic benefits and the need for practical environmental protection." Further, "In addition to focusing on environmental performance improvement, we must continue to improve our engagement and communication with customers and the Canadian public," but "Unfortunately, we also understand responsible environmental performance and objective communications won't satisfy the activists who oppose oil sands development."

This type of ad hominem attack has been extended in the federal government intervention in the debate over the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline. Joe Oliver's attack on "radical" environmentalists and "jet-setting celebrities" who seek to "undermine Canada's national economic interest" attempts to marginalize anyone with doubts over the project. Oliver has also stated in an interview that, "There have been very few
It is the humanity of the characters that makes it impossible to discount the play as a piece of rhetorical propaganda. As Cournoyer describes them, “to forget the past and reinvent themselves. […] Crawling out of your old self: That's a story everyone understands” (Nichollis). The way that the play catalogues the failure of the characters to achieve this re-creation in Fort McMurray, the failure of Fort McMurray to enable this re-creation, casts doubts on Joe Oliver’s certainty in bitumen development and pipeline building to generate a better future.

Canadian conservative philosopher and critic of technological society, George Grant states that “the retirement of many from the public realm […] raises questions about the heart of liberalism: whether the omnipresence of contract in the public realm produces a world so arid that most human beings are unable to inhabit it, except for dashes in followed by dashes out” (Mac9). Fort McMurray is often seen as a place people dash in to, profit from, and dash out of again. In the play this seems, indeed, to be a necessary survival strategy. As Gauthier notes, Kiki is the only character to believe in something other than money—“Kiki, en vigie Marie des temps modernes, prie, en vain. Elle est bien la seule à croire en autre chose qu’en l’argent”—and, because no one else shares this belief, she dies in the end.

Kiki begins the play “sur un pont” (9) contemplating suicide, but decides not to kill herself because she feels her death will not have any meaning. “Si je meurs maintenant ma mort aurait pas de sens!” (14). Instead she attempts to build a life of mutual benefit for herself and those around her, trying to help in any way, however ineffectual, whenever she can. She says, after finding work at Tim Hortons, that making people happy is her reason for being: “J'ai trouvé ma raison d'être. Je vais rendre les gens heureux!” (15). Ultimately, even though she offers herself as a sacrifice to pay the debts of those she cares for, it seems unlikely that she has made anyone happy. Gauthier describes how Kiki represents the dangers of human greed: “Kiki est la seule à reconstituer les dangers de l'exploitation des sables bitumineux, invoquant souvent Dame Nature. Mais elle représente surtout les dangers humains liés à l’appréciation de la nature” (84), ecological and communal consequences arise when it becomes impossible to imagine both living and working in a single location, improbable to imagine living with the consequences of your work. Kiki dies as a result of prostituting herself in a work camp in an attempt to earn enough money to pay off Jaypee's debts. Her death illustrates a breakdown of the sustaining harmony of a community in Fort McMurray. In the first “Intermède,” a series of soliloquies that separate the “Scènes,” Kiki asserts an etymological connection between “nature” and “naissance” before arguing, “Si Dame Nature voyait ce que passait ici à Fort McMurray, elle pleurerait son océan de larmes. Mais là que j’y pense… Elle n’a pas besoin de le voir—elle le sent, elle le sait. Mon Dieu… Elle doit le sentir!” (16). The breakdown of that sustaining support leads to her death. Despite the help of the well-intentioned Maurice, the franco-Albertan from Plamondon who has come to Fort McMurray to escape the small town pity and gossip that followed his wife leaving him, Kiki is not able to create community in Fort McMurray.

The Rhetoric of Bitumen Extraction and its Limits

The representation of Kiki’s sacrifice pushes beyond the rhetorical battle, the “war of words” (A15), as CAPP president Dave Collyer has characterized it, in which, while there may be some fixed point somewhere that the committed citizen can uncover if given the resources, for the average observer it all comes to resemble so much “bullshit.” That is, all participants seem to be concerned with persuasion “unconnected to a concern with the truth”; the whole conversation is “not germane to the enterprise of describing reality” (Frankfurt). Regardless of the intentions of the sender of the message, which are more or less unknowable, this is how it appears to the receiver. Revealingly, numerous posters declare that the Rethink Alberta video is “bullshit.” Indeed, many posters then instruct others to “get educated” about bitumen development and turn to “facts,” such as KakeC13, who writes, “Do some research and you will find out that the Province counter acts [sic] everything, they take down trees, we plant them.” The ambiguous pronouns they and we create an interesting opposition, since the oil companies are responsible both for taking down the trees and planting new ones, KakeC13 us vs. them dichotomy makes industry both us and them, appropriately both self and other since all Albertans, Canadians, North Americans are implicated in the environmental degradation required to extract bitumen

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and the costs of its regeneration. Frankfurt argues that, “Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic are more excessive than his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic.” I don’t mean to demonize the YouTube posters, or simply expose their ignorance. Talking about bullshit, perhaps talking about the environment in any capacity, requires talking without knowing what we are talking about (we are not omniscient and this is one reason perpetuation of doubt proves such an effective strategy). There is, certainly, good reason to take issue with the manipulative way that “facts” are used in both the Rethink Alberta video and the Ethical Oil campaign, as I have tried to suggest above. My point, rather, is that despite the proliferation of statistics marshaled by all sides in the debate, there is a lack of fixed points about the consequences of bitumen development, and this is the situation we need to come to terms with, the circumstance we need to learn to live within. We do not and cannot know what the results will be. In such a situation, rather than trying to exclude everything that does not provide an indisputable matter of fact from the conversation, as Oliver claims we must, we can “follow the poets in their quest for reality” (Latour, “What is the Style?” 23), which I take to mean that poetic (or literary) descriptions of reality get beyond matters of fact.17

When some premises are suppressed or assumed by both sides in a debate, appeals to logos reach a limit. As Aristotle notes, in situations “where precision is impossible and two views can be maintained,” the logical appeal must give way to the ethical—the perceived character of the speaker—as we “sooner believe reasonable men [sic]” (75). This helps explain why responses to criticism about bitumen development have focused so heavily on public relations, and perhaps suggests the opportunity that the current debate over Northern Gateway offers.

The Alberta Government, for example, famously took out an advertisement in New York’s Times Square, which stated that, “a good neighbour lends you a cup of sugar. A great neighbour provides you with 1.4 million barrels of oil per day.” The tagline for the campaign was “Tell it like it is.” This line asks the reader to fill in the premises and, thereby, cooperate in creating its persuasive effect. Reading this line with one set of premises would give, “Tell bitumen’s story accurately (not as environmentalists tell it); it is being done properly by a neighbour of strong moral character and is beneficial for all. The ambiguity of the pronoun referent—the “it” of the tagline—creates space for counter-discursive responses as well, but the effectiveness of such responses depends on recognition of what Slavoj Žižek (following Donald Rumsfeld) has called “unknown knowns,” the “disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not aware of adhering to ourselves […] which in the case of ecol…y […] prevent us from really believing in the possibility of a disaster” (Defense 457). The ambiguity of the pronoun referent—the “it” of the tagline—creates space for counter-discursive responses, such as Chris Turner’s “Paradigm Shift,” a letter to the next Premier of Alberta, which claims that the reality is that “The tar sands will be a curse if not managed properly. It can also be a great gift to Canada and Albertans” (32). The government’s approach tends to be effective nonetheless, because, in asking readers to fill in the blanks, it appeals to the cultural dominant and reestablishes the status quo. Literature, by contrast, though it calls on readers to create the meaning of texts in similar ways, can interrupt the operation of that status quo, at least temporarily.

Kenneth Burke describes the “characteristic invitation to rhetoric” this way: when partners “collaborate in an enterprise […] who is to say […] just where ‘cooperation’ ends and one partner’s ‘exploitation’ of the other begins?” (25). Alternatives to the status quo emerge when we recognize the beliefs whose disavowal allows us to represent our exploitation of nature as cooperation. The heavy-handed intervention of the federal government in the Northern Gateway debate may enable this recognition through its failure to appeal to the ethos of those who do not consider themselves ‘radical environmentalists’ and yet have doubts about running a pipeline through one of the world’s largest intact temperate rainforests or about tanker traffic off the treacherous B.C. coast. Campaigns such as Rethink Alberta and Ethical Oil are so polarizing thus, that they only reinforce the positions of those who already hold them. They fill in the premises of the syllogism with a predetermined script: bitumen development is either a disaster or an ethical good. There is no middle ground. I would not suggest that literature seeks such a middle ground, but it can present an alternative view of reality, one that people with various views might recognize as having a place in the conversation.

This recognition can help to counter the general lack of fixed points. Indeed, among the specifications Latour offers for a project based in matters of concern is that they “have to be liked” (“Style” 47). This suggests that, for one, in making decisions about bitumen development or pipeline building we should listen carefully to the people who are affected, and like, the places affected. This may be difficult for Joe Oliver who seems to think the land holding the bitumen deposits, “is uninhabitable… uh… by human beings. So, you know, no community is being disrupted” (Paris). It is shocking that the colonialist view of terra nullius could be maintained by anyone, let alone a government minister, today, and not even to describe the past but to describe the present situation in Northern Alberta. This may offer an example where critical debunking still has a role to play. Nevertheless, by considering Fort Mac we can see how moving out of the realm of facts temporarily, and into that of the values that language can only intimate, might help us change our minds about what our relationship to bitumen should be.

Kiki explains her difficulty in understanding how men can dominate nature when recognition of the beautiful otherness of nature makes us human. J’ai jamais compris le besoin qu’on les hommes de vouloir détruire ce qui est beau. Je comprends juste pas. Peut-être ils n’ont pas la beauté qui les entoure—mais je refuse de croire que ces hommes peuvent pas voir la beauté parce que c’est ça ce qui nous rend humain. Pis je crois pas que ces hommes sont pas humains. Ils se sentiront peut-être à part—détenus par les autres ou supérieurs à la nature. La nature est seulement une force à dompter—à dominer—à exploiter. (67) Jaypee shows himself to be precisely such an exploiter as he encourages Mimi to take a job as an exotic dancer, convinces her to prostitute herself to Murdock, and, as soon as Mimi has left to try to save Jaypee from Murdock, he tries to force himself on Kiki. When she asks him what he wants from her—“Qu’est-ce que tu veux de moi?”—she states, “Je veux ton innocence. Ta lumière. Ta beauté. Ta bonté” (98). However, when she does not resist, saying, “Si tu me veux, prends-moi,” she is unable to rape her, saying under his breath, “fuck… Je peux pas foutre la Sainte Vierge, est-il?” (98). Those like Jaypee—and the more malevolent, and successful, Murdock (who never appears on stage)—who see all forms of otherness as potential to dominate and profit from—are certain in their own knowledge regardless of any evidence to the contrary. Throughout the play, whenever Jaypee requires support for some claim he is making he will say, “J’ai raison, j’ai pas raison?” and then he will wait for Mimi or Kiki to reply “T’a raison” before concluding with “J’ai raison, carrière” (22). As the play moves on, however, and he gets further in debt and more drug-addled, the support from others is no longer forthcoming, but this does not cause him to question his certainty in his own reason. He simply waits a moment before declaring, as usual, “J’ai raison, carrière” (97). Jaypee’s certainty in his own reason is easy to dismiss as flawed. There is very little appeal in his ethos to come to his defense when the limits of his reason are reached.
When Patrick Moore, co-founder of Greenpeace, however, campaigns for CAPP on behalf of Northern Gateway, describing post-mining restoration as “the best reclamation I’ve seen,” his ethos provides more support. In a recent op-ed, Moore wrote, “the world needs oil now and we’ll need it for the foreseeable future—so it matters greatly where that oil comes from. If any oil is to be labeled ‘dirty,’ shouldn’t it be the oil coming from dictatorial regimes […]?” (A19). However, despite such efforts to show the superiority of bitumen, both logos and ethos reach their limits in moments when particular horrors cannot be repressed, dismissed, or marginalized. It does matter greatly where oil comes from: we may even decide that bitumen is the best source of oil; but the extraction of bitumen does require moments of sacrifice that cannot be compensated for.26 The conclusion to Prescott’s play offers one such moment, as does the death of the ducks that Rethink Alberta attempted to capitalize on. Such moments do not prescribe a course of action or attempt to move forward, their value is in the way they raise the question of what should be done, of whether anything will be done in response to such tragedy. Continuing with the status quo is a possibility, probably the most likely possibility, but Kiki’s death makes us either choose the status quo again or choose something else.

Conclusion: Choosing to Pay Attention to Ambiguity

In the final Intermède, Maurice describes the abuse of nature by humans: “Dame nature est fatiguée, aussi. Elle s’est offerte a nous avec toutes ses bontés pis on la remercie en profitant d’elle. On prend avantage d’elle, Elle s’est offerte a nous avec toutes ses bontés pis on la remercie en profitant d’elle. On prend avantage d’elle, on l’abuse... On la viole” (114). We can read Kiki as a representative of nature. Maurice stands on the stage waiting for recognition of her sacrifice—“pour marquer son départ, sa souffrance, son sacrifice” (114)—but a sign is not forthcoming from nature and he must mark her departure himself: before the stage goes dark, “Il lance des pétale de roses en bas du pont” (115). It may be a literary-critical commonplace to point out that the ambiguity of this conclusion leaves the possible truths of the play open to the interpretations of the audience members. Nevertheless, that openness is important and the type of response it requires—debate, discussion, and compromise—to make whatever sense it will make needs to be extended to the conversation about bitumen in general. Such a debate, one that considers all of the competing truths before establishing a set of priorities through a process of discussion and compromise, would characterize an understanding of bitumen as a matter of concern.

Today, however, instead of engaging in the type of collaborative debate required for textual analysis, battle lines are being drawn. As mentioned, the federal government has taken an aggressive line against foreign influence in the anti-pipeline movement and has taken steps in its budget implementation bill to restrict the opportunities for charities to undertake political activities. The editorial in The Edmonton Journal of 10 January 2012 questions this tactic: by using assaults on the legitimacy and credibility of opponents instead of engaging with adult politeness, the government has given a clear signal which way it is leaning before the independent panel gives the first formal testimony a respectful hearing. Even worse, it has undermined its credibility by being inconsistent, if not outright hypocritical, on the subject of foreign participation in the debate. After all, the foreign money being poured into the anti-pipeline fight is pocket change compared to the billions that French, American, Norwegian, and Chinese business people have invested in the oil sands. (“Foreign Influence” A12).

The editorial concludes by declaring that “name-calling won’t solve the problems of the world, but it isn’t how you win this argument; on the contrary it’s a surefire way of getting your opponents even more committed to doing battle” (A12). Indeed, rather than helping to win, name-calling might help to create the conditions for losing the argument if it helps to undermine the pro-bitumen side’s ethos. If we “sooner believe reasonable men,” continued evidence that defenders of the status quo are not more reasonable than their interlocutors might create the conditions for change. As Žižek argues, “Words are never ‘only words’; they matter because they define the contours of what we can do” (First as Tragedy 109). Literature is one place where the definitions of words can be changed, where the contours of what we can do can be changed. In Fort Mac, Prescott’s attention to the multiple sacrifices required by bitumen extraction, and the connection between human and non-human sacrifice in the character of Kiki, provide one opportunity to change the debate from one that currently starts and ends with scientific facts into something broader. It is easier in a play to argue at a remove from immediate factuality and necessity, and that remove enables a type of assessment that is not valid in other realms, that might simply be dismissed as sentimentalism or utopianism or parochialism. And, of course, these charges can be leveled at literature too. However, in recognition of the supplement literature provides to social discourse (Angenot 219), our view of that social discourse may change; we may read the social discourse differently. When a country’s federal government engages in schoolyard name-calling regarding a review process that approves over 99% of applications, their purported focus on scientific facts begins to seem like an attempt at persuasion unconnected from a concern with the truth; it mostly suggests that we have heard up to now has been mostly “bullshit” and it is time to talk about matters of concern.

Works Cited


composing a vision of what is otherwise imperceptible and unthinkable” (572). In my reading of Fort Mac the use of “Dame Nature” works to generate affect, despite the problematic associations of that phrase.

16. “If Mother Nature saw what was happening here in Fort McMurray, she would cry an ocean of tears. But now that I think of it ... She does not need to see it—she feels it, she knows it. My God ... She must feel it.”

17. Given more time I would like to connect Chisholm’s reading of Meloy’s vision of the desert—“Such a vision deterritorializes the State’s deterritorialization of the desert as void or as so ‘empty’ of natural and human resources as to be ideal for atomic bombing without consequence (29)” (583)—with a history of viewing the North American prairie as empty and deficient and, therefore, ripe for industrialization (see Frances W. Kaye’s Good Lands: A Meditation and History on the Great Plains for an elaboration of this view), which, following settlement and the development of an industrial agricultural economy is pushed northward onto the bituminous sands and boreal forest, which are similarly constructed as deficient, empty and available for industrial development. Meloy’s vision of the desert connects with the history of bitumen extraction via Project Plowshare and plans, never enacted, to detonate nuclear bombs in order to extract oil from sand (see Marsden, Stupid to the Last Drop and Nikiforuk, Tar Sands for versions of this story).

18. I never understood the need of men to want to destroy what is beautiful. I just do not understand. Maybe they do not see the beauty that surrounds them—but I refuse to believe that these men can not see beauty because that’s what makes us human. Worse I don’t believe that these men are not human. They feel perhaps set-apart—detached or superior to nature. Nature is only a force to subdue, to dominate, to exploit.

19. “what is it that you want from me?”


21. “If you want me, take me”

22. “Fuck... I cannot fuck the Holy Virgin, estie!”

23. “I have reason. Do I not have reason?”

24. “You have reason”

25. “I certainly have reason”

26. See Nancy, “The Unsacrificeable.”

27. Mother Nature is tired, too. She has provided us with all her bounty, and we thank her by profiting from her. We take advantage of her, abuse her ... We violate her.” Some ecofeminists criticize the anthropomorphism involved in the construction “Mother Nature.” I do not have space to outline this debate here, but will simply suggest that despite flaws and limitations it still has capacity to help us -composing a vision of what is otherwise imperceptible and unthinkable—into understanding the ways in which nature and gender are wielded as discursive constructs, to investigate the ways in which the oppression of women and the domination of nature are imbricated in a whole host of destructive relations and practices, and to create an oppositional framework capable of addressing their interrelations” (xviii).

28. “to mark her departure, her suffering, her sacrifice“

29. “He throws the rose petals below the bridge”
Edward Burtynsky’s aesthetic and the New Topographic aesthetic from which it derives, I argue, should not be seen as apolitical but rather as traces of an empire in ruins and a sociability to come; that is, by employing a post-anarchist analysis, I demonstrate how Burtynsky’s photographs in his recent collection Oil, and Mitch Epstein’s images from American Power, produce an aesthetic of what Yves Abrioux calls “intensive landscaping,” or “landscaping as style, as the promise of a social spacing yet to come” (264). What Burtynsky and Epstein accomplish in their photographs related to energy in particular is “to invent relations, rather than assert ideological or cultural control” (ibid.); the place of energy extraction and transport becomes not as a self-contained striation of ecological degradation, but a “place of passage,” to use Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, a depiction of wildness and civilization in contact, assembled and reformulating the landscape into something new. The aesthetic under consideration has much in common with Timothy Morton’s “dark ecology” and Stephanie LeManager’s “feeling ecological,” theories that attempt to understand the affective connections between the infrastructure of oil capitalism and ecology (“Petro-Melancholia” 27).

Je propose dans cet article que l’esthétique d’Edward Burtynsky, de même que la nouvelle esthétique topographique dont elle est issue, sont des traces d’un empire en ruine qui invite à un nouveau type de sociabilité plutôt qu’à une lecture apolitique. À l’aide d’une approche analytique post-anarchiste, je démontre la manière dont son recent recueil de photos Oi, de même que les images de Mitch Epstein dans American Power, produisent une esthétique de ce que Yves Abrioux appelle « l’aménagement paysager intensif », c’est-à-dire « l’aménagement paysager comme style, comme plan d’espace social de l’avenir » [Notre Traduction] (264). Burtynsky et Epstein réussissent ainsi à « inventer des relations, au lieu d’affirmer un contrôle idéologique ou culturel » [Notre Traduction]. Par conséquent, l’importance de l’extraction énergétique et du transport se trouve dans leur capacité d’être des « endroits du passage » (term en emprunté à Deleuze et Guattari), les endroits d’une rencontre entre la sauvagerie et la civilisation qui transforment le paysage en quelque chose d’autre. L’esthétique que j’emprunte ici a beaucoup à voir avec les théories de « l’écologie obscure » de Timothy Morton et avec le « sentiment écologique » de Stephanie LeManager. En effet les deux tentent de comprendre les connections affectives entre l’infrastructure du capitalisme pétrolier et l’écologie (“Petro-Melancholia” 27).

The New Topographics

The New Topographics movement in photography—made famous by the New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape exhibit at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York in October 1975—broke with the traditional landscape photography of Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter to frame the post-war industrialization of America in aesthetic terms “marked by repetition and isolation,” the disappearance of community “in an atmosphere of vacant alienation” defined by suburban sprawl, and a “celebration of directness, emotional remove, and attentiveness to humanity’s shaping of the land” (Rohrbach xiv). Curator William Jenkins included in the famous exhibit (reproduced in 2009) photographers Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel, Jr. Decades after the seminal exhibit, the New Topographics aesthetic is being reassessed by scholars, and the aesthetic itself remains seminal. For example, the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago hosted an exhibit called “Public Works,” which examined contemporary built infrastructure, in the summer of 2011. Above all, and perhaps concomitant with post-1968 cultural theorists who emphasized the micropolitics of everyday life, the New Topographies photographers demonstrated an appreciation for “the altered environments of daily life,” something Fina Dunaway sees as “contributing to ecological citizenship by encouraging viewers to form attachments to a broader continuum of sites” (Dunaway 42).

Contrary to earlier forms of landscape photography that situated nature as pristine and untouched by human development, the New Topographies engaged American landscapes as the scarred and decaying byproducts of capitalist exploitation, often vacant spaces for automobility such as parking lots, highways, or gas stations, as in the work of Robert Adams, indicating “the new West’s utter dependence upon petroleum and private transportation” (Dunaway 27). The Rochester exhibit’s “juxtaposition of abandoned, new, and incomplete structures instills the human-altered landscape with a sense of built-in obsolescence and distinguishes its rapid growth from the natural environment in which it is situated” (Foster-Rice 53). Whether borrowing aesthetic inspiration from commercial real estate photography (Salvesen 81) or aerial photography (Sichel 87), the New Topographies was a photographic style commonly interpreted as apolitical, due to its “flatness, dehumanization, and deception of scale” (Sichel 94). The same complaint has been levied against Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, whose manufactured landscapes seem to avoid explicit commentary on the industrial alterations they depict, and often seem to beautify industrial waste and human devastation.

In her review of Burtynsky’s Manufacturing Landscapes, Nadia Bozak writes, “Because Burtynsky systematically aestheticizes industrial civilization’s environmental incursions, his images are marked with an almost sentient detachment and lack of critical positioning that can be troubling” (68). Jonathan Bordo asks, “Does beautification soothe irreparable loss by making human interventions appear like inevitable natural facts?” (94). This essential tension between ecological catastrophe and aesthetic beauty becomes the central dilemma for most viewers of Burtynsky’s photographs, what Bordo characterizes as “an ambiguous situation of pondering pictures of ecological devastation while beholding dazzling visual surfaces” (91). Burtynsky’s aesthetic and the New Topographic aesthetic from which it derives, I argue, should not be seen as apolitical, but rather as traces of an empire in ruins and a sociability to come; that is, by employing a post-anarchist analysis, I demonstrate how Burtynsky’s photographs in his
and its ossified understanding of nature as a static, the death of conventional landscape photography.

The ambivalence provoked by these photos signifies its nature and magnitude—unprecedented in the revolution, after all, “fuelled by coal, oil and gas has resulted in a level of landscape change that is—in the industrial empire, post-capital, and post-natural; the industrial relations, rather than assert ideological or cultural control” (Abrioux 264). In Burtynsky specifically, the place of energy extraction and transport becomes not a self-contained striation of ecological degradation, but a “place of passage,” to use Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, a depiction of wildness and civilization in contact, assembled and reformulating the landscape into something other. Burtynsky himself described the ambivalence of his images:

“I think that’s the duality. I think that’s what makes the images unstable. I think that’s what makes them interesting that they’re not kind of used as instruments. A meaning is not fixed and I think in most really interesting art which does touch upon political bends or whatever. Fixing the meaning then also takes that work and locates it directly in a particular time and so it really doesn’t migrate very well into the future once that is considered no longer a threat or an issue, so dies the work. (“Thoughts on Oil?”)

It is obvious to observers of Burtynsky’s photographs that they catalogue ecological devastation. What is often perceived as a beauteousion of this devastation might also be considered a rhizomatic depiction of an always-incomplete process of becoming post-emprise, post-capital, and post-natural; the industrial revolution, after all, “fuelled by coal, oil and gas has resulted in a level of landscape change that is—in both its nature and magnitude—unprecedented in the history of humankind” (Nadaï and van der Horst 144). The ambivalence provoked by these photos signifies the death of conventional landscape photography and its ossified understanding of nature as a static, pristine construct, a representational form passing into something else. Burtynsky and Epstein depict a post-anarchist associationism in place of State modalities of capture and striation, while foregrounding the energy relationships that shape landscapes as the sun sets on the suicidal State.

What is especially compelling about Burtynsky’s vision of State capture and striation is that it perceives this passage from the “distant vision” of a State, unlike some “environmentalist” framing of ecological devastation, which often sees “apparatuses of capture” from the vantage of what Deleuze and Guattari call the “close-range” (492) vision of smooth space. That is, Burtynsky’s photographs see State modalities “like a State,” like the cadastral maps that produced the “synoptic view of the state” (Scott 39), and this perspective is unnerving for many viewers, especially those who do not identify with the optical space of the State. Absent are the intimate portraits of oil-soaked birds, dislocated indigenous communities, or tattered corpses that normally signify the indignant observer, Burtynsky complicates the observer’s relationship to agency in the Age of Oil by foregrounding the scale, technological complexity, and almost mythical ubiquity of petroculture. Absent is the bilateralism of earnest environmental portraiture, the simplistic agential dualism that pits “people” against Big Oil. Instead, Burtynsky offers a vision of a distributed agency, in which the “unstable cascade” (Bennett 457) of intentionalities resists a linear cause and effect in favour of depicting objects produced by flows of energy, material combinations, and “the conjoined effect of a variety of kinds of bodies” (454), an ontological reality that seems particularly noteworthy for industrial nations built on vast and complex technological infrastructures with extensive historical, political and environmental legacies.

State Infrastructure
The modern State form evolved with the material capacities of infrastructure, massive hydraulic processes that could generate and transfer electricity, evacuate waste, and couple mobility with communication. “Between 1880 and 1950 modern nation states emerged as great territorial ‘containers’ with growing powers over many domains,” note Graham and Marvin (73). Within this context, infrastructure was widely perceived as the cohesive assemblage for a sense of national identity, and “infrastructure policies were the central way in which national states engaged in shaping capitalist territorial organization” (74). Some of the most notable infrastructure projects of this period include “the Nazis’ Autobahn network, the electrification of the Ukraine and the Soviet Union, the New Deal regional projects of the Tennessee Valley and the national highway programme in the United States” (77). These historical touchstones conform to Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of State territorialization:

one of the fundamental tasks of the State is to strip the space over which it reigns, or to utilize smooth spaces as a means of communication in the service of striated space. It is a vital concern of every State not only to vanquish nomadism but to control migrations and, more generally, to establish a zone of rights over an entire “exterior,” over all the flows traversing the ecumener. If it can help it, the State does not dissociate itself from a process of capture of flows of all kinds, populations, commodities or commerce, money or capital, etc. There is still a need for fixed paths in well-defined directions, which restrict speed, regulate circulation, relativise movement, and measure in detail the relative movements of subjects and objects. (Deleuze and Guattari 385-386)

James C. Scott traces this striation of space in early modern Europe primarily in the form of cadastral maps used for the segregation and taxation of land, among other State functions, in his book Seeing Like A State. Beginning with German scientific forestry, in which the “uniform forest was intended to facilitate management and extraction” (18), Scott demonstrates the translation of the State’s synoptic vision from forestry to other forms of striation including taxation.

For the purposes of taxation and conscription, and in conjunction with the emergence of the modern State, cadastral maps translated the complexity of phenomenal flows into simplistic abstractions, becoming, to use Mark Halsey’s phrase from another context, “a machine of axiomisation,” something that “expunges the world of pre-formed things, the world of haecceities, the world composed only of rhythms and of bodies without organs, and in its place substitutes the certainties of Royal science and (d)ilogics of capital” (Halsey para. 12). Scott writes:

The crowning artifact of this almighty simplification is the cadastral map. Created by trained surveyors and mapped to a given scale, the cadastral map is a more or less complete and accurate survey of all landholdings…. The cadastral map and property register are to the taxation of land as the maps of tables of the scientific forester were to the fiscal exploitation of the forest. (Scott 36)

The cadastral map, this “machine of axiomisation” or modality of State capture, not only “signifies a mapping lying outside its sharply defined field of vision” (Scott 47), it also produced a specific aesthetic: “The visual sign of the well-managed forest, in Germany and in the many settings where German scientific forestry took hold, came to be the regularity and neatness of its appearance” (18). Similar to the symmetry and synthetic appearance of the managed forest, landscapes under the synoptic vision of cadastral maps exhibit a quilted calculus primarily visible from an elevated vantage, “a God’s-eye view, or the view of an absolute ruler” (57). The reconstruction of Paris by Baron Hausmann from 1853 to 1869 exhibited the same logic as the scientific management of old-growth forests, and in the city “the aboveground order… facilitates its underground order in the layout of water pipes, storm drains, sewers, electric cables, natural gas lines, and subways—an order no less important to the administration of a city” (56-57). Thus, submersed infrastructure functions as a supplementary force of relations with ‘aboveground’ striations, the repressed material strata of the flaneur.

Edward Burtynsky’s OIL
I began to think about oil itself: as both the source of energy that makes everything possible, and as a
source of dread, for its ongoing endangerment of our habitat. (Burtynsky, OIL)

“The cadastral map is very much like a still photograph of the current in a river,” writes Scott (46), using a simile that effectively expresses the paradox of Burtynsky’s photography about oil. The cadastral map captures innumerable social processes in a state of effect, in which the latticework of oil infrastructure is married with architecture, mobility, and landscape, a blending of landscape and infrastructure: “Once the entire apparatus of oil extraction, refinement, and distribution perfectly encapsulates the hydraulic science of the State, its hierarchical, arborescent thought that captures flows in a constant struggle with rhizomatic, non-human agencies in “petromodernity” (LeManager, “The Aesthetics of Petroleum” 60), we can better recognize the shifting intensities of petrocultural assemblages.

The juxtaposition of the forest and the pipelines in OIL #22 recalls what Deleuze and Guattari famously described as the rhizomatic multiplicity that contrasted with the hierarchical structure of the tree, associated with what they called arborescent thought—“thought, which like a tree, judges the world from one fixed point (roots, Descartean rationality), or requires that thinking proceed in only one direction (scientifically, dialectically)” (Halsey para. 1). Burtynsky’s collection OIL, thus begins with an image of trees, a metaphor used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe arborescent thought. However, the structure of the pipeline system has also been compared with a tree:

The pipeline system is organized like a tree. Small collector pipelines in the oil field, called flow lines, are the fine roots of the system. They gather crude oil from many wells and bring it to the field processing station. Somewhat larger pipes carry the oil to the terminus of a main-line pipeline, which supplies refineries hundreds of miles away; this is the trunk of the tree. The products of the refinery are then distributed through another system of main-line pipes, which divide into smaller and smaller branches until they reach distribution depots—the leaves of the tree. (Hayes 162)

The entire apparatus of oil extraction, refinement, and distribution perfectly encapsulates the hydraulic science of the State, its hierarchical, arborescent thought that captures flows in a constant struggle with rhizomatic, open multiplicities. Burtynsky’s OIL begins not with an image of oil extraction or combustion, but with an image of trees and a tree-like system of pipelines, the image of Royal science, arborescent thought.

To “reduce marginalization and segregation” sounds equally egalitarian and possessed of the same sameness that drives the administering arm of the synoptic State. “Landscape and infrastructure merge and movement corridors are (re)worked as new vessels of collective life,” in the words of Shanon and Smets (9). An image such as OIL #22 seems to take this approach to the oil pipelines, at least in the absence of more obvious indicators of critique, and one could therefore imagine this picture on the wall of an oil industry executive’s office, as easy as one could imagine it hanging in the same room as the most ardent Greenpeace activists.

The stasis of the oil delivery apparatus and its river-like curvature connote ambivalence about what is really happening, an ambivalence registered above by the reviewers of Burtynsky’s work. We could note, for example, that the more than 370,000 km of pipelines in Alberta present a number of significant threats to the provincial environment: potential contamination of land and water from spills; loss and fragmentation of wildlife habitat and natural vegetation; loss and compaction of soils; reduced availability of agricultural, pristine and forested areas; loss of historical resources such as archeological sites; and stream sedimentation (Government of Alberta). At the same time, oil is implicated in a host of social benefits (medical advances, certain forms of mobility, warmth, agricultural production, etc.) and devastation (militarism, pollution, toxification of water and soil, agriculture—again, etc.), and complex, distributed forms of agency make it difficult to create a binary division of sinners and saints, malevolent demand and benevolent supply, those who are solely responsible for the petrocultural apparatus and those stand entirely outside of it. Most notably absent from Burtynsky’s oil images, and yet most aggressively affected by capitalist resource extraction, are the First Nations communities of Northern Alberta. This absence contributes to the ambivalent tone of his photographs, by visually displacing the most obviously aggrieved subjects of oil capitalism; their presence would make it easier for viewers to identify a political trajectory of accusation. But such a trajectory would also ignore the distribution of complicity with the atrocities of oil capitalism. By expanding our understanding of distributed human and non-human agencies in “petromodernity” (LeManager, “The Aesthetics of Petroleum” 60), we can better recognize the shifting intensities of petrocultural assemblages.

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The rows of “nodding donkey” oil wells in Belridge, California, depicted from an oblique angle in Burtynsky’s Oil Fields #19a (Fig. 3), could easily be mistaken for an abandoned oil patch, if not for the two devices in the foreground visibly blurred because they are operating. Much like the pipelines in Oil Fields #22, the wells depicted in Oil Fields #19a encode the ambiguous agencies of modern industrial infrastructure. The oblique angle separates the image from the conventional geometry of the cadastral map, but only the two wells in the foreground appear to be moving. No humans are visible. Is this a dried-up oil patch, or the beating heart of the industrial society? Burtynsky allows the viewer to contemplate the space of passage between the two, between the dying empire and the vision of sociality to come, by isolating the materiality of petroculture from a detached and distant perspective. Instead of bisecting geology of the cadastral map, but only the two wells and the horizon destabilizes our topographic expectations. The horizon contrasts of striated and smooth space, the centre of the frame, and in the background lie rolling hills. While the horizon fades to the distance like a road, the highway that runs parallel with it stretches toward the horizon in a seemingly endless bisection of the frame and the built landscape. The horizon becomes a feature of undomesticated objects, contrasts casually as it drifts toward the horizon; this curvature, like the pipelines in Oil Fields #22, the highway bends casually as it drifts toward the horizon; this curvature, again a feature of undomesticated objects, contrasts with the cadastral strips of habitation on either side. Instead of bisecting a forest, which might commonly connote forms of biodiversity, the wells depicted here are located in the desert, a landscape frequently associated with hostility to life, and, in the context of oil, with the crude oil deposits of the Middle East. A combination of elements in this image suggests psychological tension and alienation: the oblique angle, god’s-eye view, desert setting, and absence of human activity. Burtynsky’s familiar use of the horizon intimates a mythological scale of production. But where are the people who use the oil, and to what ends do they use it? Is this particular situation of oil wells and transformers, pipes and storage tanks, the beginning or the end of agency, the source of combustible mobility, long distance communication, and petroleum-based cultural products, or the mechanical moans and sighs of an empire reaching exhaustion? Burtynsky does not tell us. Burtynsky described this picture to the CBC, in terms that reflect the associationalist perspective for which I have been arguing: “It’s a mosquito drawing blood. It’s like we have these pipes into the ground sucking it out and we never really get a chance to see very much of the material itself, but each one of us is almost using it every day” (“Thoughts on Oil”).

To understand the materiality of agency in Burtynsky’s photography, we can summon the observations of the “new materialisms” of political theorists such as Jane Bennett, Diana Coole, and Timothy W. Luke, and of critical urbanists including Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin. Prominent strands of materialist cultural studies and urban studies employ the concept of “assemblage” (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; McFarlane 2011) in order to understand the distributed agency of urban infrastructure, which is often obscured either by its relative invisibility or by the anthropocentrism of cultural theory. As Jane Bennett writes, “There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interwoven network of humanity and nonhumanity. What is perhaps different today is that the higher degree of infrastructural and technological complexity has rendered this harder to deny” (463). Oil pipeline or well assemblages, in this context, should not be studied as just the material product of oil company intentions, nor should their construction be understood as either the victory of an oil company or the loss of community resistance (the popular media framing of pipeline debates). Rather, cultural critics need to examine the “unstable cascade” (Bennett 457) of intentionalities, flows of energy, material combinations, and “the conjoined effect of a variety of kinds of bodies” (454) that are contained within the mass structures of petrocultural landscapes. Assessing the distributed agency of petrocultural assemblages is not an act of becoming an apologist for environmental degradation or colonial racism, but instead recognizes that individuals are “simply incapable of bearing full responsibility for their effects” (463). Burtynsky’s photography, I wish to suggest, is particularly useful for encouraging a discussion of agency in this manner.

Oil pipelines are but one aspect of oil extraction, transport and use, but they connect the environmental, cultural and health impacts of oil exploration, drilling and extraction with the assemblages of oil transport, refining, and consumption. The spillage of oil is not always the most devastating effect of this process: “The physical alteration of environments from exploration, drilling, and extraction can be greater than from a large oil spill!” (O’Rourke and Connolly 594). Oil refineries, such as the one from Texas depicted in Burtynsky’s Oil Refineries #34 (Fig. 4), “produce huge volumes of air, water, solid, and hazardous waste, including toxic substances such as benzene, heavy metals, hydrogen sulfide, acid gases, mercury, and dioxygen” (603). The oil and gas industry in the United States creates more solid and liquid waste “than all other categories of municipal, agricultural, mining, and industrial wastes combined” (594). The transport of oil from its place of extraction occurs by super tankers, barges, trucks, and pipelines; there are now “more miles of oil pipelines in the world than railroads” (598). Typically, these pipelines have “caused disproportionate impacts on low-income and minority communities in the United States and been connected to human rights violations around the world” (602). In other words, perhaps we could view what often lies within Burtynsky’s frame as an invitation to contemplate the many associations beyond the frame; in the case of his photographs about oil, the pipelines, wells, and refineries represent passages, connections, transfers of energy beyond the frame. Burtynsky’s images do not neglect social, psychological and environmental devastation, so much as they invite consideration of an agency that is multiple and beyond arborescent capture. Therefore, when we see an image such as Highway #5 (Figure 5), we might see in this image an aesthetic parallel with Oil Fields #22.

In Highway #5, tributary lanes of traffic converge into a river of asphalt that extends to the horizon in a seemingly endless bisection of the frame and the built landscape. Like the pipelines in Oil Fields #22, the highway bends casually as it drifts toward the horizon; this curvature, again a feature of undomesticated objects, contrasts with the cadastral strips of habitation on either side. In the foreground is a highway that runs parallel with the frame, and in the background lie rolling hills. While the foreground and background portray conventional contrasts of striated and smooth space, the centre of the image features a provocative strip of highway that destabilizes our topographic expectations. The horizon
margin here: the culture of oil leaves a footprint, and it is massive and destructive. But the image of the pipelines in the forest that opens the collection suggests we should not read the processes of petroculture as unidirectional and linear, as the obvious passage from extraction to deposit. Instead, consider the absence of human activity in the first and last images of OIL. Burtynsky’s vision is distinctly materialist, with human activity reduced to a relatively minor presence (in the few photographs devoted to “Motor Culture” and later to “Shipbreaking” and “Recycling”). The diminution of human actors reveals at least two ways in which Burtynsky’s photography is consonant with the “materialist turn” in cultural studies: first, his cadastral vision articulates what Patrick Joyce and Tony Bennett call the “muteness” of infrastructural power, the ways in which “infrastructure is a good location for understanding how material powers can to varying extents operate outside human consciousness and language,” the durable power of “objects and processes,” “this capacity to be left to operate by themselves” (10); and second, Burtynsky’s relative resistance to the “close range” of smooth space suggests the primary concern of his photographs about oil is “lose the ways in which objects become effective by being integrated into the subjective world of human consciousness, and more the difference they make in their own right as a consequence of their specific material properties considered relationally” (Joyce and Bennett 5).

Mitch Epstein’s American Power

I wanted to photograph the relationship between American society and the American landscape, and energy was the linchpin…. Energy—how it was made, how it got used, and the ramifications of both—would therefore be my focus. (Epstein, “Afterword”)

While Edward Burtynsky tells us he had his “oil epiphany” in 1997, American photographer Mitch Epstein embarked on a form of what he calls “energy tourism” in 2003 after witnessing the evacuation of an Ohio town from environmental contamination. For five years, Epstein catalogued the various forms of American energy production and their consequences. His comments in the Afterword of American Power reflect a realization about energy that emphasizes the current moment as one of passage:

About a year into making this series of pictures, I realized that power was like a Russian nesting doll. Each time I opened one kind of power, I found another kind inside…. But now—while America teeters between collapse and transformation—I see it differently: as an artist, I sit outside, but also within, exerting my own power.

Epstein’s photographs share in common with Burtynsky’s this sense of living between a dying empire and the sociality to come. They also share an understanding of being implicated as artists in what Imre Szeman calls “oil capitalism” (Szeman 806). Many of Epstein’s images, such as Amos Coal Power Plant above (Fig. 6), juxtapose the settings of the New Topographies, in documentary form, with the types of energy that either make habitation possible or constitute the industry for that locale. In Amos Coal Power Plant, a lower-middle-class habitat shares the frame with an apparitional power plant; the connection of everyday life with what in Burtynsky’s images is often a distant and secluded phenomenon—the production of energy—foregrounds the associational ethos of Epstein’s photo, and the lush, saturated conceptualism of the habitat makes the power plant seem even more discordant by contrast. Epstein’s documentary proficiency and almost surreal conceptualism creates an effect much like the ambiguity of Burtynsky’s cadastral images: something either banal or deeply corrosive acquires an aesthetic sheen that troubles the viewer’s desire to condemn in simple binaries the social and environmental causes and effects that produced this scene. Whereas Burtynsky prefers the cadastral spatiality of the distant view and the frequently unseen materials of petroculture infrastructure, Epstein visits many of the everyday spaces and architectures typical of the New Topographics. Epstein captures the associative qualities of energy production and transfer.
not by gesturing beyond the frame, as Burtynsky often does, but by filling the frame with uncommon objects within this transition: the perforated American flag that adorns the refinery in BP Carson Refinery (Fig. 7), for example, or the belching stacks of the Amos coal power plant observing a high school football practice in Poca High School and Amos Coal Power Plant (Fig. 8).

**Alien Capitalism and the Dark Ecology of Burtynsky and Epstein**

The content of Burtynsky and Epstein’s photographs invites an associationalist perspective on the relationships between energy and landscapes. More specifically, Burtynsky and Epstein evoke some of the implications of Timothy Morton’s “dark ecology”: in the way they “linger in the shadowy world of irony and difference” (Morton, The Ecological Thought 17), in the way their images are “dark but suicidal” (100), and in the way they foreground what Morton calls “hyperobjects,” materials that will “far outlast current social and biological forms” (130). In Ecology Without Nature, Morton declares that his work is “about an ‘ecology to come,’ not about no ecology at all” (6). The idea of ‘nature’, so explicitly foregrounded in the photography of Ansel Adams and reconfigured in the New Topographics, “will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society,” says Morton (1). “Substantialist images of a palpable, distinct ‘nature’ embodied in at least one actually existing phenomenon (a particular species, a particular figure),” claims Morton, “generate authoritarian forms of collective organization” (17). Morton’s project is to deconstruct “nature” to the point it no longer registers, rethinking in what he calls “the ecological thought,” the “thinking of interconnectedness” and a form of thinking “that is ecological” (The Ecological Thought 7).

The concept of dark ecology is a “melancholy ethics” (Ecology Without Nature 186) that “preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe” (187). Morton believes “we can’t mourn for the environment because we are so deeply attached to it—we are it” (186); instead, deep ecology is “saturated with unrequited longing,” “a politicized version of deconstructive hesitation or aporia” (186). In this article, I have suggested repeatedly that Burtynsky and Epstein represent this kind of ambivalence in their photographs, even in the face of certain catastrophe; however, some might challenge this reading of the photographs, even in the face of certain catastrophe; to this objection, I would promote dark ecology as a more ethical response to these photographs, rather than ontology (188). Burtynsky’s photographs, even in the face of certain catastrophe, do not impose a solution to the problem of environmental degradation (there are no images of wind farms juxtaposed with oil refineries, for example). There are, however, several impressions of everyday life under oil capitalism: a high school football team practicing, a busy freeway, the Talladega Speedway, a McDonald’s, a gas station. LeManage rightly identifies “the sticky mess that we’re in,” pausing at an abandoned oil field in Baku, Azerbaijan, 2006, to see its haunted reflection in a pool of dirt and oil, proof that not only does rust never sleep, it also has nightmares. Dark ecology also promotes lines of flight that interrupt the intersection of nation and nature, cadastral map and the ecological thought. “Later in the modern period,” Morton writes in Ecology Without Nature, “the idea of the nation-state emerged as a way of going beyond the authority of the monarch. The nation all too often depends upon the very same list that evokes the idea of ‘nature’ (15). Deconstructing the synoptic view of the State conjoins with the ecological thought, when contemplating and practicing the ecology to come.

Nowhere in these collections of photographs does one find an image that intimates a possible return to some form of pristine natural world; instead, viewers must confront the toxic future of oil refineries, hundreds of thousands of kilometres of pipelines, and other hyperobjects of petromodernity. Morton compares these hyperobjects, such as the plutonium waste from nuclear reactors, to the “acidic blood of the Alien in Ridley Scott’s film” (130). Indeed, in conjunction with Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence,” Morton’s hyperobjects begin to articulate what I would call alien capitalism, an economic system whose materiality kills while dying, unleashes almost unimaginable toxicity even as its purpose or functionality wanes. In this sense, the sociability to come is always already toxic. Certainly, Burtynsky and Epstein do not try to avoid the toxicity to come in their haunted images.

In addition to Timothy Morton, the work of Stephanie LeManager speaks to the aesthetics of ecology and energy in the work of Burtynsky and Epstein. Burtynsky and Epstein provide an aesthetic experience of energy infrastructure that presents some of its associations with landscape but does not impose a solution to the problem of environmental degradation (there are no images of wind farms juxtaposed with oil refineries, for example). There are, however, several impressions of everyday life under oil capitalism: a high school football team practicing, a busy freeway, the Talladega Speedway, a McDonald’s, a gas station. LeManager rightly identifies the relationship between “ecological narrative” (“Petro-Melancholia” 26) and the embodied memories of life under petromodernity, moving forward:

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The petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitats for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of asphalt on the soles of one’s feet are incorporating practices, in Paul Connerton’s term for the repeated performances that become encoded in the body. Decoupling human corporeal memory from the infrastructures that have sustained it may be the primary challenge for ecological narrative in the service of human species survival beyond the twenty-first century. (“Petro-Melancholia” 26) One way to decouple “human corporeal memory from the infrastructures that have sustained it” is, as Epstein does, to depict explicit conjunctions of energy production and everyday life, such as a coal-fired power plant looming over a lower-middle-class home and yard, or that same power plant spectating at a high school football practice. The juxtaposition of toxic energy production and everyday life performs a kind
of defamiliarization that disrupts the quotidian affect associated with petromodernity. Burtynsky often isolates energy production from human cultures; however, his images of energy production, as noted above, depict the "sticky mess" we are in, what LeManager calls the "humiliating desire and dependency of the human vis-à-vis non-human actors" ("Petro-Melancholia" 27). LeManager, in a nod to Morton, calls this "feeling ecological," and it “need not be pleasant” (27).

Conclusion: Post-Anarchist Ecology and the Synoptic View

The photography of Edward Burtynsky and Mitch Epstein provides a series of cultural objects with which to consider relationships between agency and energy in oil capitalism. As demonstrated above by reference to the (largely Marxist) “material turn” in cultural studies and the poststructuralist associationism of Deleuze and Guattari, the foregrounding of infrastructure in the context of oil capitalism in the photographs of Burtynsky and Epstein offers an occasion and a visual lexicon for interrogating the “cascade of intentionalities” in which we now live. The prolonged emancipation towards pristine nature that is an object apart from human needs and alternative possibilities within localized micropolitics “is about critical emancipation, not necessarily towards a more unified flux of constantly circulating relations, interactive encounters, and shared transformations” among the Earth’s “natural-social habitats” (Hayden 31), while simultaneously it offers political ecology a consideration of “which concepts, practices, and values best promote the collective life and interests of the diverse modes of existence inhabiting the planet” (34). In this sense, a post-anarchist ecology works against the systematizing approaches of the technology “neutrality” thesis and Manichean dualisms. Any global response to environmental crises needs and alternative possibilities within localized micropolitical. Hayden argues that “for ecopolitical activism to engage itself effectively, it must steer clear of universalized abstractions and carefully study the specific needs and alternative possibilities within localized situations” (34). The global scale of the ecological crisis has led some to demand a global solution; however, “while existing ecological problems undoubtedly present a danger to the entire planet, a micropolitical focus on the particular needs and interests of diverse local habitats and inhabitants in light of the available knowledge of ecological conditions will perhaps better contribute to the creation of effective ecopolitical interventions than will a focus solely from a unitary, large-scale framework” (35). This mode of thought is also consistent with the anarchist preference for direct action and aversion to bureaucratic and institutional structures. Any global response to environmental crises is more likely to produce arborescent power structures than it is to produce open multiplicities. Deleuzean micropolitics “is about critical emancipation, not necessarily from systems, but towards other types of open systems” (Cato and Hillier 11). For centuries, state capitalism has killed indigenous ways of existing and non-human species, to the point of mass extinction in which we now live. The prolonged emancipation from this rule of arborescent thought will require an unprecedented proliferation of “open systems” attuned to “diverse local habitats and inhabitants,” not a one world order of resistance.

Finally, a post-anarchist ecology could embrace Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of machinic assemblages, not only for the epistemological and ontological advantages of a process philosophy that emphasizes relationships over essences, but also to avoid the limitations of debates over what kinds of technology are appropriate for an anarchist politics (for a brief discussion of anarchism and technology, see Truscello 2011). Herzegovin bookmarked the advantage of the concept of the “machine” in Deleuze and Guattari, which concerns connections rather than essences: “Their model [of machines] also affords a single mode of articulating developmental, environmental, and evolutionary relations within ecological systems, and makes room for a conceptualization of a general, non-anthropomorphic affectivity within dynamic systems” (“Natural Geophilosophy/Machinic Cosmopolis” 4). From this perspective, a post-anarchist ecology concerns itself with “resonances, alliances and feedback loops between various regimes, signifying and non-signifying, human and non-human, natural and cultural, material and representational” (5).

The resulting philosophy avoids outmoded invocations of the technology “neutrality” thesis and Manichean compartmentalizations of “good” and “bad” technology.

[Deleuze and Guattari’s] “machinism” avoids both technophilia and technophobia, its guiding principle being that of the invention of possibilities of life. For Deleuze and Guattari values are perspectival, and hence unavoidable ally to what deep ecologists might deem "speciesism." However, Deleuze and Guattari’s problematization of the concept of the human ensures that their perspectivism is not anthropocentric, at least in the conventional sense of the term. (10)

Instead, as Mark Halsey notes, the “function of machines” in Deleuze and Guattari “is to break and redirect flows—flows of capital, wood, metal, genes, friendship, knowledge, work and so forth” (Halsey 40).
In other words, the machinic assemblages of Deleuze and Guattari refer to the “processes which give to the earth its discursive qualities and quantities (the effects levied by abstract machines of coding) and which, on occasion, implode the logic underpinning such qualities and quantities (the effects levied by abstract machines of absolute decoding)” (40). How machines connect flows of desire and produce habit-forming potentials is never simply a question of doing the right thing for the environment, obviously, and something always escapes machinic encoding. But at least Deleuze and Guattari offer a perspective that always seeks to proliferate the “invention of possibilities of life.”

Halsey argues that this perspective forces the “critical question: what would it mean to cease mapping the earth? Alternatively, what might it mean to map earth according to, for instance, a becoming-eagle, a becoming-fish, a becoming-redwood, a becoming-worm, or a becoming-bronx?” How what Deleuze and Guattari demand of us—that we move beyond the bodies, lexicons and modes of envisioning traditionally associated with late capitalist subjectivities in order to develop and inhabit the worlds of others” (45). Burtynsky reminds us of the cadastral legacy of the synoptic State, but as Government of Alberta, “Pipelines.,” Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development. Web. March 3, 2012. <http://environment.alberta.ca/02260.html>.


Therefore, oil requires vigilant interpretation. Narratives and spread too wide to have talking points of its own. As animist as this may sound, oil is deposited too deep much to say about humanity's epic trajectory. As Parsani asserts: "[b]urrowing sounds may be heard from within the earth. Once they have finished infesting the earth's solid part, the larvae will cut breathing holes and press their headless tails against the surface for air" (67) Very little "happens" in Cyclonopedia in the traditional sense of imparting a plot. The text consists of a series of exegeses of Parsani's thoughts, primarily from his lifework Defacing the Ancient Persia. The effect of reading Parsani within a Negarestani's text is disquieting and it causes one to question how fact, fiction, fantasy and theory coexist in contemporary accounts of oil culture. Without a firm sensory footing, why assume that the value of narrative has its basis in stock-still and clear-eyed composition? What's more, the surfaces of narrative forms, standard narratives remain a linguistic artefact, a relic of epic narratives, "is immediately traced back to only one thing, Petroleum" (42). Parsani's idée fixe fuses its way through all his encounters in the Middle East. His obsession builds to a notion that narrative allows for a better understanding of humanity, but only insofar as it helps one anticipate the demise of the species (i.e., relics yield unheeded lessons). Without narrative one is prone to affirm appearances, and most appearances today present one with the idea that sustainability, communication and redemption are always collectively attainable. Parsani makes a valuable counter claim that "oil is...a vehicle of epic narratives," (69) and it is crucial to know the vehicles of narrative, rather than to speculate on how they might be transcended. Petroleum, too, is a relic with much to say about humanity's epic trajectory. As animist as this may sound, oil is deposited too deep and spread too wide to have talking points of its own. Therefore, oil requires vigilant interpretation. Narratives from Parsani's research surface in Cyclonopedia as if unannounced from the soil and with an unpredictability that might prove too hectic for minds more familiar with, say, oil industry journalism. Whereas journalists critique oil orthodoxy in remote dependency or with the help of the odd dispatch from wars taking place elsewhere, Negarestani's narrative explains the historical myths within vast petroleum fields and his sentences emit the stench of its exhaust. The deserted ground of Parsani's fieldwork is comprised of holes, dust, bitumen and critters that sink, shift and linger with an incalculable long-term effect on the archeologist's senses. Geologic formations thus seem to Parsani as sentient and responsive as any scenario above the soil. He recounts in his journal that "[b]urrowing sounds may be heard from within the earth. Once they have finished infesting the earth's solid part, the larvae will cut breathing holes and press their headless tails against the surface for air" (67). Very little "happens" in Cyclonopedia in the traditional sense of imparting a plot. The text consists of a series of exegeses of Parsani's thoughts, primarily from his lifework Defacing the Ancient Persia. The effect of reading Parsani within a Negarestani's text is disquieting and it causes one to question how fact, fiction, fantasy and theory coexist in contemporary accounts of oil culture. Without a firm sensory footing, why assume that the value of narrative has its basis in stock-still and clear-eyed composition? What's more, the surfaces of Negarestani's oil rich terrains are charred, slurry-ridden and militarized for a more predictable rate of extraction. The overall aesthetic of Cyclonopedia verges on breakdown. Like many of the characters written into existence by Georges Bataille and H.P. Lovecraft nearly a century earlier, Negarestani's Parsani is elusive because he is summoned from 'below' and not from 'on high.' Lost deities, hidden numbers and script, the sun's detritus, corpses, generational layers of decay—Negarestani pulls the reader across the contours of Parsani's voracious narrative to exhume the sounds from this infested source of energy.


REVIEW BY GEORGIANA BANITA

Over the past few years, the conflation of energy and culture has yielded a dynamic research field whose freshness and enthusiasm are at once its glory and its bane. While work towards a reorientation of literature around energy logics and reading protocols continues to make great inroads, Canadian novelist and scholar Nadia Bozak has produced a book that makes manifest the under-excavated entanglements of cinema and energy as a way of complicating the dyad of analogue and digital filmmaking that dominates the field. What do we expect from such a study? A damning investigation into the wasteful mechanics of film production, or a subtle unveiling of the more ethereal energies of the cinematic as a medium of power, consumption, and the pleasurable excretion of material and imaginative waste?

Bozak’s study offers both, and is nothing short of a revelation. The Cinematic Footprint is an environmentally conscious, conceptually persuasive account of, firstly, how to frame the current absence of an energy discourse within film (and more broadly visual) studies, and in a second step, how to proceed back from the assumed immobility of film and the “hydrocarbon imagination” (12) to reconfigure the production, circulation, and aesthetic of cinema. On this two-lane track, Bozak provides both an impressive overview of resource media and energy as a way of complicating the dyad of analogue and digital filmmaking that dominates the field. What do we expect from such a study? A damning investigation into the wasteful mechanics of film production, or a subtle unveiling of the more ethereal energies of the cinematic as a medium of power, consumption, and the pleasurable excretion of material and imaginative waste?

My quibbles with this book are minimal and can be quickly summarized. Because Bozak unveils an understudied energy consciousness in cinema, the questions she asks are sometimes awkwardly linked and their phrasing is often disorienting: how does peak oil affect the movie picture industry? In what ways is the image not only biophysically ground ed, but also a key pedagogical tool of the environmental movement? If cinema is connected with unsustainable energy systems, how does cinematic resource consumption differ from the energy feedback loops of, say, the car manufacturing industry? Obviously, a key dimension of cinema’s entwinement with hydrocarbon culture is cinema’s own obsession with energy production and consumption, and it is in sections where this formal and thematic ‘energy imaginary’ comes to light that the book shines most brightly. Indeed for me, its highest metabolic temperature isn’t reached until the central conceit of what Bozak calls “resource image” (2) takes clear shape. If energy consumption is, by the author’s own admission, mostly intangible and invisible, how do we conceptualize a resource image? What energies are deployed to visualize resource power, and what aesthetic forms does this transformation ultimately (and concretely) fuel? At its most provocative, the book asks how cinema circulates, emplots, and envisions energy in specifically cinematic ways, whether mechanical or auratic.

The book’s brilliant observations are many and can be found in each of the five economically headlined chapters: “Energy,” “Resource,” “Extraction,” “Excess,” and “Waste.” Bozak seeks to articulate not only a taxonomy of cinema practices from the viewpoint of their carbon footprint, but also a usable grammar for a cinematic energy discourse. “Energy” delineates a capacious and quite striking notion of the cinematic image as “fossilized sun” (18). Bozak uses the Bazinian concept of temporal fossilization to analyze the “carbon dating” procedures of films such as Chris Marker’s La Jetée and Sans Soleil in order to distill the outlines of a carbon-neutral cinema not merely as one dedicated to neutralizing its carbon emissions, but also to an aesthetic and ephemeral neutrality whose binary implication of luminosity and darkness Bozak traces back to the constitution of the image—from early photography to impressionist painting to Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier—through capturing and refining the power and imprint of light. It’s an important chapter that grounds the question of cinematic energy in the history of photographic practice and cinema kinetics, although it lacks a sense of a causal genealogy and the examples, though apposite, don’t fully cohere into a narrative of the kind that the image of solar fossilization seems to promise. In reading Werner Herzog’s Lessons of Darkness and Deborah Szron’s The War Tapes, “Resource” more precisely establishes how cinematic energy circuits entwine with ideological and geopolitical tensions. To highlight only one key moment in this chapter: Bozak discusses CNN’s live and on-demand news channel referred to as Pipeline and opened in 2005 at the height of the Iraq war. She writes: “Not only does the term describe news and information as resources, it also ironeously aligns CNN’s live images of Iraqi horrors—the dominant source of the service’s content—with the same petroleum politics that were the rationale for the U.S. invasion” (64). “Extraction” is worth reading for its exhaustive analysis of Edward Buryynsky’s photographic portraits of hydrocarbon culture’s industrial wastelands. “Excess” is, I think, the strongest section for its inspired argument that uncovering the obscured dimension of energy adds new scope to our views of classic cinematic techniques and tropes, such as the long take, seen here by way of Andy Warhol’s Empire and Georges Bataille as “a gruanny, an opulence of choice and an indulgence in materials, as well as in space, time, and energy” (122). What Bozak says about resource-conscious films “displaying a lack of energy in order to reveal energy’s totalizing presence in culture at large” (137) resonates deeply with a panoply of cinematic styles and will certainly spark other incisive readings in the same vein. Revolving around what Bozak calls “secondhand cinema” in a gesture that aligns Agnes Varda’s randomized digital cinema with documentary accounts of Hurricane Katrina, the section titled “Waste” innovatively links cinematic detritus (the residual waste of production equipment and so on) with a “biopolitics of expendability” (178) that foregrounds the disposable human subject. The book concludes with a critical response to the Harper government’s oil-motivated interest in the Canadian North and their unfortunate nomenclature (Operation Nanoq), which Bozak unpacks—with recourse to Robert J. Flaherty’s silent documentary Nanoq of the North (1922)—as obscuring “what the Inuit can teach us about surviving in a post-hydrocarbon world” (202).

The Cinematic Footprint eloquently widens the horizons within which film production, cinematic image, and film time may be understood as biophysical resources. While far from encyclopedic, the wealth of material gathered here should encourage scholars to not only catalogue the traces of fuel consumption in the global visual imaginary, but also become more attuned to cinema’s petrochemical origins and of the necessity to position the resource image not merely as a bottomless archive of energy’s visual avatars (although Bozak cites countless useful examples of energy-oriented works), but especially as an aesthetic strategy and a way of seeing. For everyone with an interest in the origins and futures of energy cultures, this book is indispensable reading.

Banita, Georgiana : Dr. Georgiana Banita is an assistant professor of North American literature and media at the University of Bamberg and Honorary Research Fellow at the United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney. She is the author of Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/11 (Nebraska 2012), as well as several recent essays on petrofiction and globalization and her forthcoming book on the aesthetics of oil in films by Michelangelo Antonioni and Bernardo Bertolucci.

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Ezra Levant, the foremost proponent of the idea of ethical oil, depicts Alberta’s bitumen industry in utopian terms: “the oil sands are proof of the great good fortune that a huge amount of energy, in the right hands, can deliver to a staggering number of people.” (224-5). Levant’s account encapsulates and epitomizes the narratives of social and petrocultural smoothness that underpin prevailing defenses of bitumen extraction in the contemporary moment. Smooth oil and smooth society enable one another, to the enrichment of all, now and forever – or so the story goes.

Timothy Mitchell’s Carbon Democracy manages, among its many bracing interventions, to demolish the smooth oil story. Over the course of an introduction, eight chapters, and a conclusion, the book historicizes and critiques the aims and ends, origins and outcomes, of smooth oil’s narratives. In so doing, it affords new and incisive insight into modernity’s politics of mobility.

But what if,” Mitchell wonders, “democracies are not carbon copies but carbon-based? What if they are tied and forever – hinged on the labor power and technical expertise of miners, their ability to disrupt the extraction and distribution of the resource afforded them tremendous leverage in demanding and asserting democratic rights. Such vulnerability, intolerable to the sovereign powers of industrial modernity, was as Mitchell makes clear a prime spur in the shift away from coal toward petroleum – and so toward democracy in his second sense. From the outset, the oil network was a distressed one, with refinement occurring far from the scene of extraction, and distribution managed by pipeline and tanker more than by rail. Against the model of coal, in other words, oil production and circulation displaced and diminished the agency of workers – and thereby the energy vulnerability of the ruling order. Concomitantly, oil expertise became increasingly the province of the engineer and the economist, complementary figures whose combined knowledge could serve to complicate the meanings of petrocarbon fuels, and so occlude mass or everyday understandings of them. Thus rendered a nearly magical resource, oil could supply the name, in social narrative or ideology, for democratic freedom, abundance, and opportunity, yet also undermine, in social practice, the very conditions of possibility for mass democratic life.

Mitchell’s analysis manages to demonstrate, compellingly, the intimate inextricability not antinomy between authoritarian oil states in the Middle East and liberal democracies in Europe and North America. In the age of oil, the former constitute something like the latter’s necessary supplement – what Mitchell pithily terms “McJihad” – as dynamics of the oil system fuel resilient kinds of imperial control while checking democratic potentialities everywhere. Petrocultural’s carbon democracy impels the continuing support, and so toward democracy in his second sense. From the outset, the oil network was a distressed one, with refinement occurring far from the scene of extraction, and distribution managed by pipeline and tanker more than by rail. Against the model of coal, in other words, oil production and circulation displaced and diminished the agency of workers – and thereby the energy vulnerability of the ruling order. Concomitantly, oil expertise became increasingly the province of the engineer and the economist, complementary figures whose combined knowledge could serve to complicate the meanings of petrocarbon fuels, and so occlude mass or everyday understandings of them. Thus rendered a nearly magical resource, oil could supply the name, in social narrative or ideology, for democratic freedom, abundance, and opportunity, yet also undermine, in social practice, the very conditions of possibility for mass democratic life.

Mitchell’s study compounds its accomplishment in theorizing and historicizing the dynamics of carbon democracy by refusing to propose any straightforward alternative or solution to the passing of the age of oil. That said, Carbon Democracy clearly empowers its readers, both by advancing such a stimulating account of the interrelation of energy to politics in the modern era and by identifying, in the very uncertainty of the present moment, the conditions of possibility for new political potentialities to emerge. Anyone concerned with the genealogy and futurity of energy politics – as for that matter of democratic energies – needs to read this remarkable book.

Works cited:

Simpson, Mark: Mark Simpson is an associate professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. His research takes up issues of mobility, circulation, and collectivity in US culture. He has published Trafficking Subjects: The Politics of Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America with the University of Minnesota Press (2005), and articles and chapters in English Studies in Canada, Nineteenth-Century Prose, Cultural Critique, and the recent Oxford UP collection US Popular Print Culture 1860-1920, among other venues. Current projects include a study of postcard culture circa 1900, and a study of taxidermy and animal conservation.


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SIMPSON

REVIEW
Call for papers

*Imaginations* invites academic articles that discuss the historical inheritances of 20th century discourses on and between images as they are in dialogue with and articulated in 21st century cultural contexts. Potential contributions should innovatively reflect on the image. Points of departure could include new technologies, interactions between text and image, text as image, image and the self, dynamic and static images, omnipresence of screens (big and small), thinkers of the image, image across the disciplines and forms of thought (visuality, medicine, science, urban studies, political studies, gender studies, queer studies, etc.). We are also seeking, on an ongoing basis, one review essay per issue that compares three or four books on the image. Each issue of the journal will also feature one artist, and an interview with the invited/selected artist to contextualize his/her artistic contribution(s). If you are interested in conducting an interview with a specific artist, please send a proposal; if you are an artist who would like to be considered as the feature artist, please send sample work with some indication of what type of artistic contribution you would like to feature in the journal’s online format. We accept papers in English and French on an ongoing basis.

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La revue en ligne *Imaginations* est à la recherche d’articles proposant une réflexion sur la manière dont l’histoire a laissé son empreinte sur les discours dédiés à l’image, et plus spécifiquement sur les discours ancrés dans le XXe siècle. Nous nous intéressons également à la manière dont les images ont été pensées et produites, en interrelation les unes avec les autres, dans le temps et en lien avec les nouveaux contextes culturels du XXIe siècle. Les propositions de contribution devront faire montrer d’une réflexion innovante sur le sujet. Sont bienvenues toutes propositions portant par exemple sur : le rôle de l’image dans les transferts culturels, l’intégration des nouvelles technologies, les interactions entre texte et image, le texte en tant qu’image, les liens entre image, identité et représentations, les images dynamiques et statiques, l’omniprésence de l’écran (« petit écran » et « grand écran ») dans notre monde contemporains, les penseurs de l’image, la pénétration par l’image de disciplines telles que la médecine, la science, les études urbaines ou politiques, etc. Les textes soumis peuvent être rédigés en anglais ou en français.

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