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Journal of American Studies / Volume 46 / Special Issue 02 / May 2012, pp 423 - 439
DOI: 10.1017/S0021875812000151, Published online: 30 May 2012

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021875812000151

How to cite this article:
IMRE SZEMAN (2012). Crude Aesthetics: The Politics of Oil Documentaries. Journal of American Studies, 46, pp 423-439 doi:10.1017/S0021875812000151

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Journal of American Studies, **46** (2012), 2, 423–439 © Cambridge University Press 2012
doi:10.1017/S0021875812000151

Crude Aesthetics: The Politics of Oil Documentaries

IMRE SZEMAN

How does the problem of oil appear in documentary film? I provide an answer to this question by examining the narrative and aesthetic choices through which the problem of oil is framed in three recent "feature" documentaries: Basil Gelpke and Ray McCormack's *A Crude Awakening* (2006), Joe Berlinger's *Crude: The Real Price of Oil* (2009), and Shannon Walsh's *H2Oil* (2009). My aim is to understand not only the specific politics enacted through the formal and aesthetic choices made in each film, but to map out what these documentaries tell us about the social life of oil today, and the capacity for films such as these to meaningfully intervene in the looming consequences of our dependence on oil. The essay proceeds in three parts. First, by offering readings of the discursive, narrative and aesthetic strategies of these documentaries, I draw out the ways in which each comes to understand the problem of oil. In the second part, I identify the key insights that these films offer regarding the specific social contradictions and political blockages that emerge from their attempt to name and understand oil. Finally, I conclude with an exploration of the insights these films provide for addressing the antinomies that define and separate the anticapitalist and environmental movements.

How does the problem of oil appear in documentary film? In what follows, I examine the manner in which oil is represented in three "feature" documentaries released over the past five years: Basil Gelpke and Ray McCormack's *A Crude Awakening* (2006), Joe Berlinger's *Crude: The Real Price of Oil* (2009), and Shannon Walsh's *H2Oil* (2009).[1] As might be expected, while each has oil at its core, these documentaries differ substantially in both subject matter and form. Berlinger's *Crude* deals with a protracted legal case against the activities of Chevron in Ecuador; Walsh's film examines the ecological and social impact of the Alberta oil sands, specifically their effects on the communities that rely on the water used in conjunction with bitumen processing; and Gelpke and McCormack offer an overview of the politics and economics of oil, together with the environmental damage it causes and the potential crisis of the end of oil. By examining them together, I want to consider the range of ways in which these documentaries frame oil as a problem for their

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[1] *Crude: The Real Price of Oil*, dir. Joe Berlinger (DVD; Red Envelope Entertainment, 2009); *A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash*, dir. Basil Gelpke and Ray McCormack (DVD; Lava Productions AG, 2006); and, *H2Oil*, dir. Shannon Walsh (DVD; Loaded Pictures, 2009).

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audiences, and what resources they offer as possible solutions to this (historically unprecedented) social and ecological problem. These documentaries both reflect and are a source of the social narratives through which we describe oil to ourselves; it is revealing to see both the limits and the possibilities of the narratives they proffer, which are pieced together out of the fragments of concepts and discourses dating back to the Enlightenment concerning nature, the social, and human collectivity.

As is the case with documentaries on a wide range of social issues, these films about oil understand themselves as important forms of political pedagogy that not only shape audience understanding of the issues in question, but also hope to generate political and ecological responses that otherwise would not occur. This production of an outcome or change in societal imperatives is a long-standing desire of the kind of politically and ethically committed documentary filmmaking that for publics has to a large degree become identified with the function of documentary as such – even if there may be relatively scant evidence of the hoped-for translation of audience awareness of film themes into political action outside the theatre (Gaines).[2] While it nonetheless remains productive to critically assess the political efficacy of documentaries like these – whether by considering the formal or stylistic approaches each makes to its subject matter,[3] examining their capacity to effectively expose "the gap between self-professed norms and behavior,"[4] or by probing the generic politics of such "commodity biographies"[5] – my aim here will be to consider what these documentaries tell us about the social life of oil today. In what follows, I will treat these films as providing examples of narrative and aesthetic choices through which the problem of oil is framed – or *can* be framed – not only within the films, but within the social more generally; the site of politics I will focus on is not the success or failure of any given documentary to constrain or mobilize a political response, but rather what the discursive, narrative and aesthetic strategies employed suggest about the dominant ways in which the problem of oil is named and solutions to it proposed. Fredric Jameson famously describes cultural texts or artifacts as "symbolic acts" in which "real social contradictions, insurmountable in their

[2] See Jane M. Gaines, "Political Mimesis," in Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov, eds., *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 84–102.

[3] Salma Monani, "Energizing Environmental Activism? Environmental Justice in Extreme Oil: The Wilderness and Oil on Ice," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 2, 1 (2008), 119–27.

[4] Meg McLagan, "Introduction: Making Human Rights Claims Public," *American Anthropologist*, 108, 1 (2006), 192.

[5] Jennifer Wenzel, "Consumption for the Common Good? Commodity Biography Film in an Age of Postconsumerism," *Public Culture*, 23, 3 (Fall 2011), 573–602.

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own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm."[6] It is in this sense that I will offer readings of these three documentaries as aesthetic acts that, in their own specific manner, have "the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradiction"[7] – unresolvable in perhaps a stronger and more determinate way than the social contradictions to which Jameson referred.

My essay proceeds in three parts. First, by offering readings of these documentaries, I draw out the ways in which each narrates the social life of oil. In her recent discussion of human rights films, Meg McLagan argues that these are developed around the axiom that to expose hidden forces and problems to the light of film is to generate the capacity in publics to address the situations the films uncover.[8] One of the reasons for focussing on these three films in particular is that while they, too, might have this axiom at their core, they proceed with the awareness that the importance of oil to social life is already well known, that publics have yet to adequately respond to its demands and looming crises, and indeed that they may be entirely unable to respond even if they adequately understand the issues. As my analysis of these three films will show, the "solutions" these films offer to the social contradictions generated by oil are made difficult by the fact that the place of this resource in our lives seems to defer the politics one hopes to generate from the production of a documentary about it – and not just the politics directly connected to documentary practice, but to broader ideas that persist about the relationship between belief and action in the operations of social life more generally. In the second part, I draw out some key discursive and conceptual claims made within these documentaries about the unprecedented social problem of oil. Finally, I conclude with an exploration of exactly what kind of "unresolvable social contradiction" oil might be. In "Two Faces of the Apocalypse," Michael Hardt productively explores the antinomies that define and separate the anticapitalist and environmental movements.[9] The insights offered by these films suggest that the problem of oil has the potential to destabilize the aims of both movements. As surprising as it may sound, it is the socially taken-for-granted physical substance of oil – and, of course, the practices that it supports and enables – that has to be placed conceptually and discursively at the heart of both movements if either is to realize its ambitions.

[6] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 64. [7] Ibid., 64.
[8] McLagan, 191–195.
[9] Michael Hardt, "Two Faces of Apocalypse: Letter from Copenhagen," *Polygraph*, 22 (2010), 265–74.

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I. OIL ON FILM: *A CRUDE AWAKENING, CRUDE* AND *H2OIL*

There are an increasing number of documentary films that address the role, function and impact of oil in the world today. The three films that I am discussing here attempt to map the social ontology of oil – the how, why and wherefore of oil in our social, cultural and political life. *A Crude Awakening* alerts publics about the degree to which contemporary global society is dependent on a natural resource necessarily in short supply. *Crude* and *H2Oil* each examine the environmental consequences of oil exploration, with a focus on its effects on those indigenous communities who live in proximity to the resource and who thus have to endure both the ecological traumas of ongoing drilling and the sludge and slurry left at past drill sites. What distinguishes *H2Oil* from *Crude* is that the former includes brief lessons on peak oil as part of its overall narrative and makes this an element of its case against the Alberta oil sands; *Crude*'s focus, on the other hand, is on the dynamics of law and corporate power as these play out in relation to a commodity at the heart of capitalism's profit logic. In what follows, I probe the "lessons" each provides for thinking about oil by drawing out the (implicit or explicit) ways, both thematically and formally, in which they address the problems this substance generates.

A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash is divided into ten sections (introduced by intertitles) that provide a narrative of the significance of oil for contemporary global society. It takes the form of a social documentary intended to identify and explain a contemporary problem hidden from view. The secret exposed here is the depth of dependence of contemporary social and economic systems on oil – a nonrenewable resource whose era of abundance and easy access is now past, even if this fact seems little acknowledged by the manner in which it continues to be used and exploited.

The film conveys the gravity of our historical moment with respect to oil through three techniques. First, it showcases testimonials about oil from a large number of experts. The range of expertise on which the filmmakers draw is impressive, as is the attention to the politics of each of these talking heads. Two of the most prominent speakers are Matthew Simmons, an energy investment banker, author and adviser to President George W. Bush; and Roscoe Bartlett, a Republican US Congressman from Maryland. The film is careful to include voices from the oil industry, as well as from academics and scientists who deal with the issues the film raises from the vantage point of their own specialties; notable for their absence – with the sole exception of attorney Matthew David Savinar, who until recently ran a website on the politics of peak oil – are those activists or environmentalists (or even Democrats!) whom one might expect to find in a film awakening us to the challenges of peak oil.

A second technique is the communication of information about oil through the use of facts and statistics. These come directly from the mouths of the

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experts themselves, and they are invariably alarming (e.g. each calorie one eats require ten calories of fossil fuels to produce, by 2030 the planet will have to bring 200 million new barrels of oil on stream *per day* in order to deal with the depletion of existing wells as well as growth in demand, and so on). Finally, the context of peak oil is framed through the formal decisions made with respect to the images and sounds that fill up the space between the talking heads. There are numerous points one could make with respect to the particular use of montage and fast-cutting in many of the sequences in the film. The speed of much of the visual evidence, especially against the backdrop of Philip Glass's minimalist soundtrack, suggests "a life out of balance," as do the many images meant to evoke oil culture: sheiks walking through fancy shopping malls, sludge-filled rivers and oceans, battlefields on which wars have been fought over oil, and the mess of drill sites all over the world. At times, *A Crude Awakening* interlaces these images with older footage of car ads, instructional videos, and clips from celebratory corporate documentaries, all of which appear in hindsight not just as shortsighted but as obscene testaments both to humanity's waste and (in the case of the clips from the instructional videos) to the very different relationship between supposedly objective knowledge systems (i.e. science and documentary film) and oil in the not too distant past.

The ten sections of the film build an effective case against oil. They link oil to geopolitical conflict (Section 4: A Magnet for War), identify its centrality to daily social life (Section 2: We Use it for Everything!), and explore the reasons for concern about the end of oil (Section 6: Peaking Out). What it does not do is offer a solution or resolution to the coming oil crash. The third section of the film looks at three spaces of oil production that have experienced the traumatic passage from oil boom to bust (McCamey, Texas; Maracaibo, Venezuela; and Baku, Azerbaijan). These are micro-case studies intended to provide examples of what might soon happen on a macro-scale. What we see are images of formerly flourishing towns and cities, now semi-abandoned and ugly. The images of Baku's oil fields (which have been captured iconically in the photographs of Edward Burtynsky[10]) are especially haunting: the screen is filled with the remnants of old wooden derricks running up and spilling into the Caspian Sea, fresh oil still staining the ground. If these cases are meant as object lessons, one might expect them to be followed by information as to how it might be possible to manage the down cycle of oil that will soon be experienced on a planetary scale. *A Crude Awakening*, however, seems intent on informing its viewers that there is no way of offsetting a planetary crisis. The penultimate section of the film (Section 9: Technology to the Rescue?) presents possible options – electricity, hydrogen, biomass, nuclear, wind, and

[10] See Edward Burtynsky, *Oil* (London: Steidl, 2011).

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so on – only to have technology experts rule each of them out on the basis of inefficiency (e.g. at present it takes three to six gallons of gas to create enough hydrogen to enable us to drive the same distance as one gallon of gas), scale (10,000 nuclear plants would be needed to replace oil), or lack of resources (with that many nuclear plants in existence, uranium reserves would be exhausted in one to two decades). The film lays open the consequences of a civilization based on oil in order to present audiences with some insight into the why and how of the conflicts and pressures of the near future – a future about which there is little of substance that can be done due to the weight of existing infrastructure and the realpolitik of power in contemporary political and economic systems.

There appears to be a deliberate decision in *A Crude Awakening* to avoid directly linking the narrative of peak oil to the impact of petrochemicals on the environment. The question whether or not continued oil use – either at current or at higher levels – will damage the environment is suspended, one suspects, in order to focus on the necessity of oil to current ways of living and being, and to preclude challenges to the film that might emerge from the growing contingent of climate skeptics. By contrast, *H2Oil* and *Crude* each explore specific examples of the impact of oil exploration and production on the environment and human communities. What we learn from these cases is not only the manner in which oil damages both ecological and human health, but also the degree to which the interests of elected governments, national legal systems, and multinational corporations are intertwined in ways that make difficult the possibility of addressing some of the specific (as opposed to systemic) impacts of oil.

Crude examines a landmark legal case against the consequences of the oil exploration and extraction conducted by Texaco (purchased by Chevron in 2001) in Ecuador from 1964 to 1993. There are two main anchoring narratives in the film. The first follows the actions of Ecuadorean lawyer Pablo Fajardo and his American counterpart Steven Donziger over a two-year period (2006–7) as they pursue a suit against Chevron on behalf of thousands of members of the Cofán indigenous community. The second is a single moment in the trial in which plaintiffs, defendants, and the presiding judge in the trial visit the Lago Agrio oil field as part of the evidentiary process. In the first narrative, we witness the political and cultural struggles in which Fajardo and Donziger engage in an effort to generate awareness and legitimacy for their case. In addition to on-the-ground fights within the Ecuadorean legal system, this includes actions at Chevron shareholders' meetings, talks with the New York legal firm that is funding the suit, and engagement with the (then) new left-wing government of Rafael Correa. In January 2007, the public-relations battle they conduct in conjunction with the legal proceedings is accelerated as a result of the commission of a *Vanity Fair* article on Fajardo's

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fight against Chevron on behalf of the Cofán, which leads to the involvement of pop singer Sting and his wife Trudi Styler, and results in Fajardo being given a CNN Hero's Award in 2007. Even though the plaintiffs build legitimacy and support for their case in the media, legal maneuvering by Chevron means that a case that had at the time of the film's release (2009) already been in process for fourteen years would continue for another ten: the documents collected in the trial's evidence room are so numerous that it is difficult to imagine any judge being able to work through them in a meaningful way even in the decade estimated by the film at its conclusion.

The perspective of the film is clear: Chevron is at fault and is using its immense power as a multinational corporation ($204 billion in revenue in 2010) to make a conclusion to the trial impossible. The dirty soil and water, and the numerous health problems of the Cofán (infant deaths, cancers, skin lesions, and more), contrast starkly with the talking-head segments with Chevron scientists and lawyers, whose mobilization of scientific data attesting to the safety of their drill sites cannot but seem little more than corporate lies (indeed, the film points out that Ricardo Reis Veiga, the Chevron lawyer interviewed in the film, was indicted for fraud by the Ecuadorean government). Despite the fact that Donziger is shown to work the system in sometimes ethically questionable ways (he whispers to Trudi Styler to mention Chevron as frequently as possible in her comments on the situation of the Cofán, and the New York firm for which he works stands to make a fortune if the case is successful), his relentless indictment of Chevron's corporate malfeasance mirrors the film's own perspective on the situation both in Ecuador and in the world at large.

However, the second guiding narrative of the film complicates this easy indictment of Chevron's actions. In this section, Fajardo and Chevron's attorney, Adolfo Callejas, move around the Lago Agrio oil field, each making points as to what might constitute physical evidence for use in the trial (contaminated water, oil-soaked soil, and so on) While Callejas uses numerous tactics to shield Chevron from responsibility for the site, all return ultimately to the question of ownership. Callejas argues that while Fajardo and the plaintiffs make numerous claims, they provide no substantial evidence. Chevron dispute the claim that the water is contaminated by oil, or argue that such contamination as does exist introduces no health risk; they insist that it is impossible to link water contamination to oil that they own (as opposed to oil that might have seeped into river water or groundwater from other drill sites or through natural means); and they make numerous legal points in relation to property rights. Property begets responsibility, and so Chevron argue that Petroecuador assumed responsibility for the site when they took it over, that the site was always a Texaco–Petroecuador consortium (such that the latter shares whatever responsibility is assumed for the former); that Texaco no longer exists

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as a company and so cannot be held responsible; and that the area in which the Cofán live was designated an oil exploration site by the government in the 1960s, and so no people should be living there to begin with. Taken together, these points (and there are others in a similar vein) offer a confusing defense. Rather than building a coherent case, it is as if they are being thrown out in the hope that one or another will stick. After all, if there is no pollution, then does it matter who owns the oil? If it were truly the case that Petroecuador has had responsibility for the site since 1992, why would Chevron be anxious about the level of pollutants in the area? And does the government not bear ultimate responsibility for the Cofán if it has allowed this indigenous group to live in an area not intended for people? So why mount a defense about "safe" levels of oil in water *or* who owns what, when? From the perspective of the film, such confusing and overlapping arguments constitute further evidence against Chevron. But, from another perspective, the claims made by Callejas and other Chevron employees draw attention to the metanarrative of the film, which is less about oil than about the constitutive, systemic gap between, on the one hand, social responsibility, equality, and justice, and, on the other, the legal and political mechanisms that are in place to address the very real crisis faced by a community that now lives on in the barely concealed sludge of former drill sites.

As its title indicates, *H2oil* is also about what happens when oil finds its way into water as a result of industrial oil extraction. In the main, this film looks at the effects of the Alberta oil sands on the First Nations (Athabasca Dene) community in Fort Chipewyan, a hamlet situated on Lake Athabasca near the terminus of the Athabasca River. The Athabasca runs through the primary site of bitumen extraction and constitutes an important element of the process by which oil is recovered from the near-solid "tar" that makes up the oil sands. Based on the recorded levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH) and arsenic in the water of both the river and the lake, the Dene and environmental scientists argue that the Athabasca River is absorbing the chemicals left behind by the extraction process, whether through deliberate action or through errors and accidents in the retention of tailings. The main body of the film moves back and forth between claims and counterclaims about the level of toxins in the Athabasca by the Dene and the Alberta government, and in so doing explores the larger dynamics of corporate and political power in the province as it follows attempts by members of the Fort Chipewyan community to draw attention to the serious environmental and health problems they face.

While it is committed to the exploration of the problems of Fort Chipewyan, *H2Oil* makes use of this case to outline the larger political, economic and ecological entanglements generated by the oil sands. Well-known critics and commentators on Canada's oil policy (and its connection with climate change), such as Tony Clarke, Dr. David Schindler, and Dr. Gordon

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Laxer, are given an opportunity to weigh in on the implications of current government decisions (or lack thereof) on greenhouse gas emissions, water and soil contamination, and national resource independence. There are also short cartoon segments included that provide quick instructional overviews of the mechanics of oil sands, the implication of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America for Canadian water and oil, and the places to which the end product of the oil sands are pumped (*all* of the oil is currently exported to the US). If *Crude* emphasized the role of corporations in the narrative of oil and water, the antagonists in *H2Oil* are in the main government agencies and ministries, whose representatives argue that they are behaving in a responsible and efficacious manner to address health and ecological concerns. The Ministry of the Environment disputes every one of the facts and figures on cancer rates, oil seepage, and carcinogen levels in the water proffered by scientists critical of their practices. A secondary narrative concerning the problems generated by a drill site for a springwater company based in Hinton, Alberta amplifies this criticism of government, highlighting how difficult it is even for businesspeople outside the oil industry to bring attention to the overuse and contamination of groundwater as a result of oil exploration and extraction.

Notable for its absence in *H2Oil* is the oil industry itself. With few exceptions, its presence is signaled only by the frequent images inserted into (what have become) a form of generic montage about the oil sands: enormous, glowing refineries, made up of systems of pipes, exchangers, and condensers of almost unimaginable complexity; slow aerial pans of the vast extraction sites, framed against the edges of boreal forest now fast vanishing in their wake; and the slow-motion movement of grasshoppers (oil pumping units) conjoined with (in a fashion similar to *Crude Awakening*) sped-up images of consumer modernity – driving, building, shopping. The film is careful to highlight the close connection between industry and government in Alberta. The Office of the Environment is located in the Petroleum Tower in downtown Edmonton, and the assistant deputy minister of the Oil Sands Sustainable Development Secretariat, Heather Kennedy, is identified as a former employee of oil giant Suncor. Nevertheless, in contrast to the intimacy with which *H2Oil* engages with the Dene and others (e.g. Fort Chipewyan's medical doctor, John O'Connor), oil corporations are filmed at a distance, figured as inhuman Goliaths in comparison to the all too-human Davids living in Northern Alberta who are dependent on water that makes them sick.

Taken together, these three films and the critical discourses that they mobilize – multiple in each case, and neither dogmatic nor simplistic – provide insight into how the problem of oil is framed and negotiated, both within documentary but also beyond it. These investigations of oil on film generate three insights into the discourses and narratives of the politics and problems of

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oil. In an earlier paper, I argued that there are three broad social narratives through which the futures of oil (and so approaches to its present) have been articulated: strategic realism, techno-utopianism, and eco-apocalypse.[11] These three documentaries interest me in particular because they do not fall easily into any of these categories; nor are they examples of the kind of formally inventive, reflexive documentary on the problem of oil to which I have devoted attention elsewhere.[12] While they share some of the conclusions of these latter documentaries, their commitment to a more expository or observational documentary form place them to one side of my earlier taxonomic scheme – neither abandoned to the realpolitik of struggles over diminishing resources, nor advocating a miraculous technological solution, nor accepting the disastrous fate of the end of oil even while critiquing the manner and extent to which we late moderns use it. Even while they are cautious not to promote "solutions" to oil (even in the case of *Crude* and *H2Oil*, films for which redress for the effected indigenous communities might constitute at least a small step forward), they avoid the (sometimes too easy) discourse of eco-apocalypse. In all three films, conclusions are suspended in order to better map the nervous system of oil capitalism.

II. SYSTEM FAILURE, ANTINOMY, SCALE

What insights, then, emerge from these films about how we narrate and respond to the problem of oil?

1. System failure

All three films make clear that our existing social systems are inoperative. Though it might seem obvious to say it, oil is only a problem because of the larger systems through which it flows. The injustices faced by the Dene and the Cofán cannot and will not be resolved through existing mechanisms of law, property, electoral politics, or knowledge (i.e. science). The struggles waged by both indigenous groups regarding the scientific establishment of levels of pollutants in their water highlights the malleability of knowledge when it bumps into the imperatives of government and business. Systems of property and ownership overwrite questions of corporate or ethical responsibility: one rejoinder by Chevron lawyer Callejas is that it is impossible to identify the oil in the Cofán rivers as belonging to Texaco because "it doesn't have a

[11] Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106, 4 (2007), 805–23.

[12] Imre Szeman, "The Cultural Politics of Oil: On *Lessons of Darkness* and *Black Sea Files*," *Polygraph*, 22 (2010), 3–15.

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trademark on it." There is no suggestion in *Crude* that a different legal outcome might come about if the US government legislated oil companies differently: the jump of the case to Ecuador is an attempt to see if corporate laws might be stronger elsewhere, but the film is careful not to suggest that even in Correa's government property laws might be jettisoned. In *H2Oil*, government hypocrisies are not linked to this or that party in power – such that an electoral shift would open up new possibilities – but to the operations of power around a commodity that will be excavated no matter what the health or environmental outcomes. *A Crude Awakening* is most directly about system failure: whether or not large social systems develop a greater awareness and more concerted direction about their energy futures, there is little sense that they can in fact meaningfully address the impacts of oil or manage to offset the looming civilizational crisis of oil ontologies. Existing systems have failed precisely by working all too well.[13]

On the evidence of this film, two axioms drive the social toward this "successful" system failure. The first is accumulation. Even at levels that have recently (May 2011) caused US drivers to pull back on filling up their tanks, oil remains cheaper than drinking water or a Starbuck's latte (which *A Crude Awakening* estimates at fifty dollars a gallon).[14] It remains a primary commodity in global production and consumption systems that depend on an ever-increasing expansion of GDP as a measure of social wealth and of progress – the reason why economic growth trumps action on the climate in Alberta (and almost everywhere else). A second axiom operates at the level of the subject. One might ask: why do people work for Chevron? Or Petroecuador? Why do workers and technical experts flock to the spaces of oil production? It is unlikely that it is because there is strong support for the imperatives and initiatives of oil extraction and the economies it supports, but rather the need for work and fiscal security in an era in which the first axiom no longer encounters the impediments and strategies of a good (i.e. Keynesian) state. Lianne Lefsrud and Renate Meyer have studied the mechanism by which scientists involved in the Alberta oil fields explain to themselves their involvement in a process that they understand to have a climate impact: the availability of work enables a denial of scientific evidence even by scientists themselves.[15] There is a telling moment in *H2Oil* in which spokespersons for an oil sands company are sent to address the concerns of the Dene First

[13] See Eric Cazdyn and Imre Szeman, *After Globalization* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 134–52.

[14] Mark Shenk, "Oil Drops below $100, Gasoline Tumbles, on U. S. Supply Surge," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 11 May 2011, available at www.bloomberg.com/news/2011_05_11/crude-oil-falls-for-first-day-in-three-on-projected-gain-in-u-s-supplies.html, accessed 2 Dec. 2011.

[15] Lianne Lefsrud and Renate Meyer, "Science or Science Fiction? Experts' Discursive Construction of Climate Change," *Organizational Studies* (forthcoming).

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Nations. Their response to the criticisms by the Dene: they are only doing their jobs and not intending to hurt anyone. Their refusal to drink the local water suggests that they, too, suspect that the companies they represent are in fact causing damage to the environment and its human inhabitants. But they work for them anyway.

2. Antinomy?

The identification of a failure in the capacity of a broad range of social systems to address anything as serious as the crises generated by oil can lead only to one conclusion. If existing systems cannot address the problems these films bring up, *everything* has to change – new systems have to come into existence guided by new axioms. But how to move from here to there? There is an expected suggestion in each of these films that it is through education and the transmission of information to publics, which in turn will generate change through official and unofficial social and political networks, that politics "happens" – in other words, the gesture that politically committed documentaries tend to make towards the pedagogic effects of "seeing is believing." The opening segments of *A Crude Awakening* address bluntly the limits of knowledge about peak oil (Congressman Bartlett: "Not one in fifty, not one in a hundred people in our country have an inkling of the potential problem we're facing"); part of the intent of the film is to transform this small minority into a majority. The addition of the didactic segments to the narrative of *H2Oil* confirms director Shannon Walsh's hopes for the film to play a role in "educating a public who hadn't yet heard of the tar sands, and creating a context for further activism," and the ominous subtitle of *Crude* speaks to a similar desire to explain the "real price of oil."[16]

But even if the films never disavow this fundamental political aim, they recognize the complexity of the situations they encounter and represent, and they are cautious about the degree to which they are willing to figure their politics solely in relation to this pedagogic mode of knowledge transfer. These films frame two antinomies – first, that of the constitutive gap between knowledge and action, and second, between aesthetics and politics. While neither of these may be an antinomy in the strong sense of the term – they are not the same as the Kantian puzzle of the divide between natural causality and human free will, for instance – the suggestion of a blockage that seemingly no amount of conceptual thought or political activity looks likely to undo generates a

[16] Claire Ward, "The Future Is inside Your Sock: How People, through Documentaries, Can Make a Difference," NFB.ca Blog, 10 May 2011, avalable at http://blog.nfb.ca/2011/05/10/the-future-is-inside-your-sock-how-people-through-documentaries-can-make-a-difference, accessed 2 Dec. 2011.

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genuine problem for knowledge and aesthetic practice. Antinomy here is meant to describe a stark social contradiction that emerges out of the messy activity of innumerable social systems. Generating an awareness of the structuring role of oil in civilizational processes, and so, too, of its obscene primacy over both human needs and ecological ones, produces on its own no resolution, even as it indicts the poverty of the present. As a genre, political documentaries like these three films might be seen as the invention of an imaginary solution to a social contradiction – the "imaginary" being the phantasmatic liberal public sphere it imagines into existence, that supposed space in which debate and discussion lead to a resolution that maximizes (say) individual freedoms within the demands of social necessity. These films gesture in this direction, but the substance they each address – oil – does not allow them to imagine that they do more than give evidence of the social contradiction produced by this sticky substance. The politico-aesthetic at work in these films gestures towards the possibility of audiences "doing something" because of the conditions in their world, while at the same time being unable to commit themselves fully to a belief that they can produce either an increase in knowledge or political action – less as the result of failure of political will, than due to a recognition of the constitutive nature of the world they produce and represent on film.

The productivity of antinomy is that it gestures to an overcoming that is present in the terms of the structuring division – one that requires only the right insight into the dynamic that produces the division to begin with. A crude, reductive (which is not to say unproductive) way in which to think about oil is to understand it as foundational to contemporary social form. The social contradiction is that the founding premise of society *as such* is draining away and cannot be replaced. Where exactly can one find synthesis in such a system, even if one were to undo the "enlightened false consciousness" that generates the gap between knowing and doing, evidence and action?[17] As a result of the demands of its subject matter, social contradiction in these films remains on their surface, whether they try to generate an imaginary resolution to it or not.

3. The failed sublime, or, scalar aesthetics

This final point emerges out of the previous one. A dominant aesthetic strategy in reference to oil is to emphasize scale. This is perhaps 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

[17] See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

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that permit a direct visualization of environmental destruction.[18] But there are other ways to visualize and narrativize the scale of oil, too, including images of old drill sites on which derricks are clustered as tightly as bees in a hive, or the flow of traffic along freeways and through cities all over the planet. These images of cities and traffic are prominent in *H2Oil* and *A Crude Awakening*, and identify the civilizational dependence on oil that will lead to crisis as its last dregs are used up; the former images of environmental impact, present in all three films, point to the astonishing degree to which human beings have remade a space as big as a planet, and continue to do so in ever more visible ways.

The use of scale in these documentaries is intended to add to knowledge and to generate an affective response. Is this not an appeal to the Kantian sublime in both of its aspects, the mathematical and the dynamical? Again, as with antinomy, the correlates are inexact: the palette of cities, however many different images of sped-up traffic we are shown, is not without limits, and the images of the oil sands are not of Nature but of its antithesis: "nature" after its encounter with humanity. Nevertheless, the gestures these films make towards representing oil through the visualization of scale do seem to have as their endpoint the same gesture as Kant's analysis of the sublime: to bring into cognition even that which seems to supersede and fall outside it. We are placed in awe of scale not so that we give up in the face of the vast existing infrastructure that depends on oil, or so that we concede to an ever-expanding tear in the face of the Earth (one now said to be visible from space), but so that it provoke a closure of that gap between knowing and acting described above.

And yet this gap persists. Has the possibility of a politics through such scalar aesthetics collapsed? Throughout the history of film theory (starting with writers such as Jean Epstein and André Bazin), there is an insistence on the capacity of film to record what is otherwise inaccessible to vision, opening up reality to that quotidian experience which cannot help but miss reality's full ontological presence and depth. One should not disavow the capacity of documentary to bear witness to reality in just this way, at the level of both form and content; the sublime of oil culture that these films visualize does not readily appear to everyday experience, which is one of the reasons why the consequences of the end of oil are neither feared nor acted upon. One can see Kant's sublime as a domesticating process that renders what might well be alien to thought amenable to existing schema. The fact that the sublime fails is, then, not an issue, since its capacity to control and contain filmic images

[18] One notable instance of the documentary use of scale is Peter Mettler's *Petropolis*, which consists entirely of aerial shots emphasizing the size and scope of Northern Alberta oil extraction. *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands*, dir. Peter Mettler (DVD, Greenpeace Canada, 2009).

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of traumatic scale in fact drains the latter of its effects, which is the exact opposite of what one might want. At the same time, however, abandoning oil to mathematical incomprehension or the terror of destroyed nature on a vast scale – the way in which a scalar aesthetics might be thought to do its work – seems to abandon thought to the inaction of what Slavoj Žižek has termed "cynical reason": awareness without action, even in the face of disaster, since we cannot possibly act on something that exceeds our comprehension. In the end, what is incomprehensible is not the scale of our action on the world, but that our social world has as its foundation a substance demanded by our quotidian infrastructures, an input whose time has come, and soon will be gone. It is unclear what action one could take, even if one wanted to.

III. THE POLITICS OF DOCUMENTARY IN AN ERA OF SCARCITY

> Natural resources can become depleted but human creativity is inextinguishable. I believe that once oil depletes, the genius of humankind will invent alternative sources of nutrition and fuel.
>
> Arman Medezuleyev, Baku oilfield operations manager, *A Crude Awakening*

Michael Hardt's "Two Faces of Apocalypse: A Letter from Copenhagen" draws attention to the similarities in and differences of the politics of the anticapitalist and the environmental movements. Superficially, one might expect these two movements to be more similar than different, or even as occupying the exact same ground: a visual representation of this relationship would be less a Venn diagram in which there is a zone of overlapping concern (and so zones of exclusion, too), but one of two perfectly congruent sets that appear to be distinct only because each group spends more time in one part of the field than the other, thus misrecognizing the extent of their shared interests. Reflecting on his experience at COP 15 (the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference), however, Hardt recognizes that there are significant differences that would have to be addressed before each movement can operate fully in conjunction with the other.

Hardt identifies three antinomies that define and separate the anticapitalist and environmental movements (about the points of intersection – an opposition to property relations and their joint challenge to traditional measures of economic value – I will say no more). The first and defining one has to do with "a tendency ... for discussions in the one domain [environmental movements] to be dominated by calls for preservation and limits, while the other is characterized by celebrations of limitless creative potential."[19] A second has to do with the question of knowledge. While "projects of autonomy and self-governance, as well as most struggles against social

[19] Hardt, 271.

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hierarchies, act on the assumption that everyone has access to the knowledge necessary for political action," Hardt writes,

> the basic facts of climate change – for example, the increasing proportion of CO_2 in the atmosphere and its effects – are highly scientific and abstract from our daily experiences. Projects of public pedagogy can help spread such scientific knowledge, but in contrast to the knowledge based in the experience of subordination, this is fundamentally an expert knowledge.[20]

The final antinomy grows out of a different relationship of each to time. For anticapitalist movements, radical change that would bring about the end of days is the opening to a new (and better) world. By contrast, for environmentalists, "the end of days is just the end," as the radical change that is likely on the horizon is one of "final catastrophe."[21]

The second antinomy is the one on which documentaries of the kind that I have been exploring here hope to do their work, either by translating expert knowledges into lay language or by producing accounts of damage to the environment that can be narrated and made visible, moving audiences from the specific (a film or a specific case) to the general (a confrontation with the issues facing the globe as a whole). When the subject matter is oil, it is impossible not to reflect on the terms of the first antinomy – that is, on limits, not only of Earth's environment but also of one specific element of it whose use has resulted in an assault on the environment even as it has contributed to or amplified the (apparent) limitlessness of human productive and imaginative capacity.

But it is the third antinomy that haunts documentaries on oil. The division Hardt points to in this third moment is, at least from one perspective, the least convincing. Does the end of days always already signal the effective destruction of the Earth's environment? Or can it not also speak to the possibility of a new world in which the antinomy between limitlessness and limit has been resolved (which is to say: what kind of revolution today could imagine that it has passed the end of days if it has not conceptualized what it means to live within limits?). As long as it is figured in terms of climate change, the apocalyptical imagination of environmental movements continues to operate with an understanding of final catastrophe as temporally distant. When one thinks of catastrophe as the end of oil, however, the time horizon is pulled much closer, even as its politics are more difficult to cognitively map. For where should we place oil within this opposition of limit and limitlessness, the environment and the common? Oil is limited, and its use pulls closer that larger limit of the Earth's environment, of which it is simultaneously a part (limit) and an other (catastrophe) that the future would be better off without.

[20] Ibid., 272–3.

[21] Ibid., 273.

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And what of the common and its limitlessness? A radical change to the present may well be precipitated by the evaporation of a commodity on which the common depends more than it might want to believe. "Fossil fuels helped create both the possibility of modern democracy and its limits";[22] given the problems of modern democracy, its evaporation alongside that of the energy inputs that helped fuel it might be welcome. But there is no guarantee that the new world on the other side of the end of oil will be one made in the image of revolutionary groups and their labors. The oil documentaries that I have explored here struggle with Hardt's antinomies and the political antinomies of crude aesthetics that I describe above, leaving open the question of how to resolve them (or even *if* they can be resolved), and refusing to offer solutions that would do little more than affirm that which they would seek to deny. Does this constitute a form of political success or failure? Or, perhaps their politics lie in the evidence they provide of the limit of what can be said about a socially ubiquitous substance that remains hidden from view – even today, and even in the process of bringing it to light.

[22] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011), 1.

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