

OIL IN AN AMERICAN IMAGINARY

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If money, according to Augier, comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek, capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.

Karl Marx, *Capital*

It is common to view oil as emblematic of all that is dynamic and disastrous in advanced capitalism. Just as oil dominates commodity trade and circulation globally, so its symbolic order critically organises competing discourses about its human worth. The rhetoric of oil remains extremely powerful and is not so much an integer of price swings in oil on the world market but is deeply embedded in the ways a society represents itself to itself. In 1992 the critic and author Amitav Ghosh pertinently argued that oil had little presence in cultural expression apart from standout contributions like that of Abdelrahman Munif and his brilliant extended fiction of the petro-state, the quintet *Cities of Salt*.¹ Much of Ghosh's reading of Munif holds but petrofiction, as he calls it, has a more substantial and turbulent genealogy than Ghosh suggests. Why is it, for instance, that oil's representation seems ubiquitous and yet is relatively absent from critically and creatively articulated claims on space, history and social formation? If climate change has provoked utopian desires for a world beyond oil, a planet where oil does not and cannot centrally drive its economic activity, then that challenge must include an imaginative grasp of its otherwise abstruse narrative of modernity, not in the mere content of oil's omnipresence, but in the very ways oil has fictively come to define so much of being in modernity, or what is sometimes referred to as an oil ontology.² It is oil's saturation of the infrastructure of modernity that paradoxically has placed a significant bar on its cultural representation. The following argument will address this conundrum, particularly as it informs an understanding of the rise and fall of United States' hegemony in the twentieth century. Obviously, oil is not the only way to understand this history (which has been extensively critiqued by Wallerstein, Arrighi, and Harvey, among others³) but nevertheless, petrofiction provides provocative insight into oil's claims on an American imaginary and holds some important lessons for the ways we might read oil both as a commodity and as a cultural logic in its own right.

Crucially, Ghosh does not consider the possibilities of a logic of oil that puts it in the shade, in his eyes, when compared with the creative commodity par excellence, spice (although even here, in the realm of commodities of colonisation, he might have made space for the vast histories on sugar and coffee). In the case of the United States, for instance, Ghosh claims that a

1. Amitav Ghosh, 'Petrofiction', *New Republic*, 2 March 1992, 29–34.

2. This was the title of a panel at the MLA, Philadelphia, December 2009. Much of this essay is dedicated to understanding the being of oil in the present conjuncture.

3. See, for instance, Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Eagle has Crash Landed', *Foreign Policy*, (July/August, 2002): 60–68; Giovanni Arrighi, 'Hegemony Unravelling 2' *New Left Review*, 33 (May/June 2005): 83–116; David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

4. Ghosh, 'Petrofiction', op. cit., p30.

5. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Alan Sheridan (trans), New York, Norton, 1998, pp53-66.

6. See, Imre Szeman 'System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106, 4 (Fall 2007): 805-823.

7. For my reading of Williams on formation see 'Information in Formation' in Christopher Prendergast (ed), *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp340-358.

8. For more on the Suez crisis, see the immensely useful book by Keith Kyle, *Suez*, London, St Martins, 1991, and Barry Turner, *Suez, 1956: The Inside Story of the First Oil War*, London, Hodder Headline, 2007. For the Iran/Iraq conflict, see, for instance, Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq*

literature reflecting oil's great influence - what he terms the 'oil encounter' - never emerged and there is consequently no Great American Oil Novel because to Americans oil 'smells bad': 'It reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises; of thousands of dead civilians and children and all the troublesome questions that lie buried in their graves'.⁴ Who would want an encounter of this kind, the thinking goes, when it betrays a sordid history harder to wash off than blood or dirt, to recall our epigraph? It is important to underline the fact that Ghosh's position in 1992 derives directly from the experience of the Gulf War: a short but brutal conflict that provides a telling script for the aversion he describes. Furthermore, the immediacy of the war overdetermines at a second level precisely the absence which Ghosh discerns in the literature of oil. If we are to understand the oil encounter and its genealogy, then the Gulf War must be an initial pivot: a veritable *punctum* in a field of apparent over-representation, one that points simultaneously to an encounter - or what Lacan calls a *tuché* or *traumatic experience that interrupts repetition*⁵ - in American self representation, but also to a war of position that anticipates the ultimate decline of oil's pivotal role in the global economy. It is a symptom, then, of both troubled hegemony and creative resistance to the same. Crude oil remains a dominant symbol of contemporary global capitalism for now, but there was a certain flourish in the black skies over burning Kuwaiti oilfields that has made the long narration of commodity logic in oil more polemical. In general, oil dependency is not just an economic attachment but appears as a kind of cognitive compulsion that mightily prohibits alternatives to its utility as a commodity and as an array of cultural signifiers. Since I view the problem as primarily dialectical in the broadest sense, rather than as one of cultural expression by itself, the trope of encounter Ghosh invokes should be read both with and against itself. First, how can the encounter be 'missed' when encounters as conflicts are coterminous with 'oil capitalism' (to borrow Imre Szeman's term⁶)? The encounter is 'missed' only to the extent that America's self definition through oil has been inadequately theorised as simultaneously a social, political, economic *and* cultural trajectory or formation.⁷ Second, does not any extensive commentary on this missed encounter simply fill in the absence decried and, by telling a story of oil, negate the thesis that oil prohibits this very tale? Ghosh's position threw down a gauntlet, a challenge to find and elaborate a significant counter-critique of petrofiction rooted in the specific geo-political circumstances of the US's rise to global power over the last century. In the almost twenty years since Ghosh's pronouncement, the task has been enjoined because a waning US hegemony has thrown into relief the possibility of reconfiguring oil's meaning for the American imaginary. This does not mean that the story is now told, but that we are beginning to understand how it might be better expressed. The prohibition continues, but weakens in direct proportion to hegemony's retreat. At this level, war is not the quintessence of the encounter but its violent displacement, an obfuscation of oil's contribution to American self-identity.

Let us consider first, the events of the displacement, then the cultural arc that to a significant degree answers it. The Gulf War itself had two vital precedents that appear largely abstract within an American imaginary: the Suez War of 1956 and the Iran/Iraq War of 1980-1988. For many people these wars are well known but the links between them are insufficiently elaborated.⁸ The first war defined the importance of oil distribution channels (by 1955 fully two thirds of Europe's oil supply passed through the Suez Canal); the second war linked territorial dispute directly to the desire for oilfields (principally sovereign right over the province of Khuzestan). The Gulf War essentially multiplied these factors together, giving it the scale of a major global resource conflagration (because of its strategic value, oil appropriation became a major catalyst for battles in the Second World War but was not a primary *causis belli* in 1939; more on the First World War, however, below). Each oil war, however, necessitates examination as a means to investigate oil's deep insinuation both in geopolitical strategy (the work of Stephen C. Pelletiere is notable in this regard⁹) and in an attendant cultural logic. The Suez crisis, for instance, was one of the last gasps of British Empire, a moment when a declining power sought a coalition (with France and Israel) sufficient to destabilise postcolonial and socialist claims on sea lanes. In addition to its importance for oil supplies, Britain wanted to guarantee its routes to former colonies in the east (a desire that had built the canal) and weaken Nasser's populist government, a project that saw Britain cultivating ties with the Hashemite kingdoms of Jordan and Iraq (consecrated in the Baghdad Pact of 1955). While the military campaign was largely successful, the politics of a flailing hegemony proved disastrous. Indeed, the United States reminded Britain that, although it recognised the importance of both oil routes and undermining Nasserism, its own geopolitical prowess was now paramount and it accordingly threatened the sale of its pound-denominated bonds and encouraged a Saudi Arabian oil boycott. The meaning of the first oil war in West Asia then cannot be separated from this interaction between a falling empire and a rising one.

The second oil war is more complicated in its origins and implications, all of which produces a different resistance to narration within the rhetoric of oil. In 1956, as Britain manoeuvred to be the gatekeeper of oil for Europe, M. King Hubbert delivered a paper at the American Petroleum Institute in San Antonio, Texas where he calculated US oil production would peak in the late Sixties or early Seventies at the latest. Hubbert's peak theory proved correct (it is the standard theory of peak oil) and in 1971 US production began to decline at the same rate as its previous increases.¹⁰ If the new emperor was seen to be militarily vulnerable in the Vietnam War, the meaning of Hubbert's prediction quickly exposed an economic correlate (again, the persistent denial of this weakness does not detract from its continued significance). This vulnerability was fully exploited in the 1973 oil crisis, when the US was punished dearly for its resupply of Israel during the Yom Kippur War. Arab states initiated an embargo on oil exports to the US (worth recalling,

War 1980-1988, London, Osprey, 2002; and Stephen C. Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum*, New York, Praeger, 1992.

9. Stephen C. Pelletiere, *Iraq and the International Oil System: Why America Went to War in the Gulf*, New York, Greenwood, 2001; and *America's Oil Wars*, New York, Praeger, 2004.

10. M. King Hubbert, 'Nuclear Energy and the Fossil Fuels', presented at the spring meeting of the Southern District Division of Production, American Petroleum Institute, Plaza Hotel, San Antonio, March 8, 1956, Dallas, American Petroleum Institute, Division of Production, 1956. Preprint subject to correction, March 1956. Archived, File Folder (18), Box 156, M. King Hubbert Collection, Accession Number 1238, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming. The literature on Hubbert's theory is vast, as is the debate about energy alternatives, hinted in his paper's title. For a recent film that confronts the prospects of peak oil, see *A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash*, Basil Gelpke (director), 2006. The allusions to oil as blood at the beginning of the film are particularly provocative, especially given my critique below.

given America's previous advocacy of the same tactic against the British) and reduced global production resulting in an almost immediate 400 per cent increase in the price of crude (other states were targeted but the effect in the US was exacerbated by its increasing reliance on oil imports). The economic and political ramifications of this crisis continue to the present day. Just as Germany's aversion to inflationary monetary policy is conditioned by the deep memory of hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic, so US geoculture is mediated by the experience of the 1973 crisis through a displacement that produces Reaganesque bravura and intense militarism in equal measure. In subsequent decades, Americans would be encouraged to repress the images of long lines of cars at gas stations, 'Don't be fuelish' slogans, and the spectre of gas ration coupons.

But before Reaganism could take hold, the law of oil held another lesson. Iran had been a major oil supplier to the US but when the Shah was overthrown and Khomeini took power relations rapidly deteriorated, culminating in the 1979-81 US embassy hostage crisis. Once again, oil geopolitics were recalibrated and there is little doubt the second oil war was facilitated by US encouragement and supply for Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980 (interestingly, Israel assumed the US position as a key arms provider to Iran, although the US would maintain more covert resupply channels). The Iran-Iraq War had a devastating effect on both countries. For its part, Iraq failed to defeat the Iranian Revolution and could not hold the oil-rich province of Khuzestan. It finished the war with a 14 billion dollar debt to Kuwait, a problem that Saddam Hussein sought to solve two years later, along with outstanding issues on border partition bequeathed by the British in its aforementioned imperial decline.

This, of course, is very much a précis, but the reason we need to redraw its outline is to emphasise the strong role oil played in US policy *prior* to the moment of narrative absence noted by Ghosh. The Gulf War (which is really the second Gulf War given the conflagration between Iran and Iraq) justifies Ghosh's appreciation of Munif's extended fiction; after all, much of the US intervention hinges on a perceived threat to Saudi Arabia and its oil, the subject of Munif's work. Two central difficulties are apparent when reading Munif's quintet in this light. First, *Cities of Salt* is a wide-ranging and detailed attack on both the avarice of American oil companies and the corruption of Saudi Arabia as the apotheosis of the petro-state. The form of the novel, however, is highly unusual since it suspends the notion of a sharply individualised central character and places opposition to the geopolitical institutionalisation of oil in the hands of Bedouin nomads, whose cultural and community traditions are strong but do not depend on writing in general or novels in particular.¹¹ Munif's novelisation effectively writes out the speech genres of Bedouin socialisation in order to reveal how oil attempts to smother embedded and creative forms of community, even communities putatively outside the perquisites of the modern state. The chaotic surfaces of the text - timeshifts, repetitions, formal (classical Arabic) and colloquial narration

11. I do not deal with this here, but the formal problems of Munif's work are also bound up with a specific logic of time/space in decolonisation that I have elaborated elsewhere. See Peter Hitchcock, *The Long Space*, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 2010.

(local/regional dialects), lengthy digressions, and transnational locations - have produced many critical detractors who question whether these are novels at all (they note that Munif was trained as an oil economist who came to fiction writing relatively late in life). Meanwhile, the Saudi government overlooked the question of formal integrity for a forthright assessment of content, and accordingly revoked Munif's citizenship. If, as Ghosh argues, oil 'tends to trip fiction into incoherence', the Saudi government nevertheless had little trouble perceiving oil's meaning in Munif's work and the imaginary state of Mooran as a mirror to their own.

The second problem proceeds from the first, which is to say that Munif explores how oil proletarianises - it embodies both extraction from Nature and the value-extraction from labour which is integral to capitalist accumulation. In every instance where Ghosh considers oil's possible interlocutors and detractors in his article he underestimates oil's logic of objectification, which is itself a function of its role in class relations. It is not just that the world of oil is 'bafflingly multilingual' or simply that oil deposits are located in areas remote from the largely urban centres of Arab literary culture, but also that it entails a complex network of class formation and affiliation. This is the reason Ghosh writes off Munif's portrayal of an oil-worker strike as 'wish-fulfilment'. Ghosh does acknowledge the power of the oil oligarchies to weaken any will to class opposition in the oilfields by exploiting poor migrant workers, but this is a comment on class tactics not its theoretical understanding. The point is not that oil workers of the Arabian peninsula have simply been politically ineffective but that their position within the logic of oil is potentially decisive; hence, the extraordinary lengths to which states and companies will go to diffuse oil production's class resonance. But this is also, by and by, why a more robust genealogy of oil narrative has seemed to cheat articulation. Its anti-colonial and postcolonial lineaments might appear more effectively intertwined¹² yet the industry's class characteristics seem veritably unwritable, except in the somewhat dry prose of economic exegesis (indeed, Munif's professional experience cannot help intruding into his text; it is perhaps for this reason Peter Theroux's translation edits five volumes down to three). Ghosh is certainly right about one matter, however: Munif's use of satire to pillory the region's oil sheikhs can only fall short of their consummate ability to parody themselves. There is nothing subtle about their unapologetic indulgence, but the fetish of oil makes desirous governments and corporations pander to their every excess. At this level, the scandal and vulgarity of oil defies all attempts to fictionalise the extent of its hubris. And the arcane alignment of pre-modern monarchies with modernity's malevolence cannot be broken by satire alone.

Part of Iraq's rationale for invading Kuwait in 1990 was that their shared boundary sat atop vast oil reserves and necessitated recalibration beyond the arbitrary and capricious mapping of the British. In addition, Iraq accused Kuwait of slant drilling or directional drilling and believed Kuwait was stealing oil from Iraqi fields. Slant drilling technology is improving

12. A condition of emergence registered in other national spaces of oil production. See, for instance, Jennifer Wenzel, 'Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature', *Postcolonial Studies*, 9, 4 (2006): 449-464.

(enough for Halliburton to own a subsidiary that specialises in it) but at the time it only allowed a slant of about a mile from the wellhead and no such rig existed so close to Iraq's border (ironically, the United Nations redrew the border after the Gulf War and as a result Kuwait gained eleven oil wells). The flimsiness of Saddam Hussein's basis for war was almost as transparent as the one offered up by the United States for its intervention ('Saudi Arabia invited us'). Certainly, the United Nations produced precise resolutions but a host of propaganda manoeuvres¹³ ensured a belligerent outcome and the presence of US bases right next door to its resource interests. The construction of these bases, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the land of Mecca, would help persuade combatants elsewhere, notably Osama Bin Laden, that another war was necessary. And so it goes.

Nothing could be more stark than the contrast between the second oil war and the third. Whereas Iran and Iraq battled each other for eight years with largely effete technology and strategy (the heavy reliance on trenches echoing the First World War), the war of 1991 lasted barely 100 hours and featured degrees of hi-tech extermination (and digitisation) previously thought to be the domain of science fiction and video games. When Ghosh writes of the rarity of good oil fiction, the image of 700 oil wells burning simultaneously exists as an abject provocation and yet, almost two decades after the war, there is precious little fiction that examines the role of oil either as alibi or goal in its conduct. Most of the narrative fiction dedicated to the Gulf War focuses on its military exploits and this is true of many of the documentaries it spawned (a good number of which are highly critical of the premises, action, and aftermath of the conflict). Films like *Three Kings* (1999) and *Jarhead* (2005) primarily deploy oil's role in the war as a backdrop and substitute cynicism for satire at key junctures (poignantly, for the lead character in the latter the war itself is a missed encounter). Countless other mass-market fictions echo a sense of military triumphalism, overwhelming technological superiority, and 'smart' kills. After three oil wars in the region, Ghosh is right to question oil's imaginative block on articulation which, as I have suggested, is connected to a specific ubiquity, the certitude of its symbolic logic in the way we live now (one that flies in the face of oil's increasing scarcity). It is equally the case that the first three oil wars were never only about oil and to privilege the commodity in this way is to misread crucially the critical circuits of power that obtain in each conflict. But, just as commodity chain analysis can point to structural social and economic imperatives far beyond the basic materiality of a commodity itself, (something I have discussed elsewhere¹⁴) so the occluded and yet critical role of oil on the global stage has a symptomatic purchase on what states would prefer not to say about their constitutive logics, however much these exceed the reliance on a single commodity (although too many states are indeed one-commodity economies). This need not or should not deter any fictional representation, but oil is also a cultural logic that dares any writer to express its real, not as some character or passing reference, but as a very mode of referentiality, a texture in the way stories get told. On one

13. These include claims that Iraq's military was amassing at Saudi Arabia's border – satellite images obtained later showed no such force. Iraqi soldiers were also said to be pulling Kuwaiti babies from incubators and leaving them to die – the eyewitness to this was subsequently revealed as a member of the Kuwait royal family and the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States!

14. Peter Hitchcock, *Imaginary States: Studies in Cultural Transnationalism, Urban/Champaign*, University of Illinois Press, 2003.

level, this might seem a classic case of dependency that produces a shame-induced denial; on another, it appears closer to an ideological suasion that functions as a non-said, to borrow from Pierre Macherey, beneath and between the worlds expressed.¹⁵ I want to investigate this difficulty further in two ways: first by addressing its instantiation in the fourth oil war (the Iraq War, or Third Gulf War); and second, by turning Ghosh's position on its head in order to argue that the purported absence of the Great American Oil novel is an explicable *méconnaissance* that requires further examination within the history I have indicated so far. Indeed, such a narrative of oil constructs cultural brackets for the American Century just as it holds a warning about our ability to articulate and read resource scarcity in the future.

In March 2001, the Cheney Energy Task Force met to discuss several maps of West Asian oilfields, including those of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iraq. In addition, documents from the meeting obtained by Judicial Watch under the Freedom of Information Act include an extensive list of countries and companies with signed or pending oil contracts with Iraq. For obvious reasons, the United States was excluded from the list and this was a source of deep concern to a Bush administration looking to garner access to the world's second largest proven oil reserves. Such statements are the stuff of conspiracy theories, as former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair once put it, but, just as WMD claims and terrorist cells turned out to be chimeras, so the coincidence of oil and the subsequent tearing up of all those inconvenient contracts cited at the Cheney meeting has taken on a shape that is a good deal less spectral. Cheney knew a lot about the value of oil, both from his boosterism of Wyoming's coal and oil industries as a House Representative for the state, and as a CEO of Halliburton, a leading contractor in the energy sector and again, coincidentally, a major recipient of government contracts in the wake of the Iraq invasion. He was also an old hand at dealing with Iraq, having been Secretary of Defence during the Gulf War. Finally, in 1997 Cheney was a founding member of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), a 'think-tank' including Donald Rumsfeld (who Cheney later supported as Defence Secretary) that explicitly argued for the removal of Saddam Hussein and the protection of US oil interests (see, for instance, its open letter to President Clinton on 26 January, 1998¹⁶). Everybody opposed to the war has said it was about oil, yet no amount of facts could either prevent the onset of war or change the flow of oil in its outcome.¹⁷ As of the end of 2009 Iraq was continuing to pay 5% of its oil revenue into a UN mandated compensation fund, as well as compensating Kuwait for Gulf War reparations and monies owed to it for subsidising the Iran/Iraq war. A significant portion of the oil revenue, however, sits in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, overseen by international bodies concerned to monitor its disbursement. Billions of other dollars from the sale of Iraq's oil simply disappears in a fog of corruption, cash and carry practices, and private contractor payoffs. The platitude says you cannot make this up but that is also oil's generative law: everywhere and obvious, it must be opaque or otherwise fantastic.

15. See Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Geoffrey Wall (trans), London, Routledge, 2006.

16. See, www.newamericancentury.org/iraqlintonletter.htm: 'The only acceptable strategy is one that eliminates the possibility that Iraq will be able to use or threaten to use weapons of mass destruction. In the near term, this means a willingness to undertake military action as diplomacy is clearly failing. In the long term, it means removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power. That now needs to become the aim of American foreign policy.'

17. See, for instance, Steven Hurst, *The United States and Iraq Since 1979: Hegemony, Oil, and War*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009; and Linda McQuaig, *It's the Crude, Dude: Greed, Gas, War and the American Way*, Toronto, Thomas Dunne, 2006.

One could make the case that the Gulf War did not really end and, with barely a two-year respite between 1988 and 1990, it has been going on for thirty years. From the liberation of Kuwait to the liberation of Iraq, Iraq was regularly bombed in connection with the policing of no-fly zones. The current war was initiated not because Saddam Hussein had a huge army and WMDs but precisely because the opposite was the case: Iraq's military was decimated in the Gulf War and it was easily overrun in early 2003 (as military strategists pointed out, the possession of WMDs is a strong deterrent to ground wars of any kind). Indeed, PNAC cited Iraq's military weakness as another reason for invasion, since the US was committed to the use of Iraq as a buffer against Iran's influence in the region, both with regard to Israel and to oil assets. It is quite natural for states to resist the perception that their interest is in 'oil encounters' but this suppression is the very substance of oil's reality for geopolitics. The unpleasant truths of wars that kill innocents and produce environmental disasters are much easier to explicate than the *tuché* stitching these truths together into the fabric of the modern state. Both, of course, are subject to a third discourse, 'diplomacy', at once the most privileged and respected among the three but the one most likely to be banalised within the terms of globalisation, as then Secretary of State Colin Powell's address to the UN General Assembly on February 5th, 2003 made patently clear. It is not that Powell lied but that truth simply did not matter. The slogan that appeared at many anti-war rallies, 'No blood for oil' was summarily answered by the shock and awe bombing of Baghdad of 21 March, 2003: 'There will be blood'.¹⁸

18. This statement also answers the rhetorical question of the Retort collective: 'Blood for Oil?' See, Retort (Ian Boal et al), *Afflicted Powers*, London, Verso, 2005.

Truth in fiction has a hard time expressing such events, while historians struggle to understand the obscure transactions of modern states. My point is not simply to tell this story once again (especially since repetition may play a role in its continuing abstraction), nor even to invoke it by polemical gloss, but to figure how so much narration might still limit creative articulation, as if modernity has reached an inertia that even fiction cannot fathom. The reason it is difficult to imagine an end to the Iraq War is not because exit strategies are messy and democracies even messier but because Iraq remains a petro-state subject to the desire for resource hegemony. Other petro-states survive by authoritarianism but Iraq no longer has that brutal unifier except in the figure of the occupier itself, who strenuously claims the opposite. For the time being oil can be extracted with Iraq as a failed state (a formula that worked well during Algeria's civil war in the Nineties), just as long as the pipelines are unbroken, a matter of access that leads almost directly from our first example, Suez.¹⁹

19. In November, 2009 Exxon-Mobil was awarded the rights to Iraq's West Qurna 1 oilfield. British Petroleum and the new behemoth on the block, China National Petroleum Corp, were given extensive rights to the huge Rumaila field. As my analysis of Sinclair will suggest, one narrative in particular has come full circle.

Novels can make from anything, the thinking goes - through novelisation, in Bakhtin's sense, the genre ingests all others; like oil, the novel has a way of clinging to all it finds. This, however, is a source of frustration for Ghosh who discovers the slipperiness of oil sliding beyond the adaptability of the novel. Claire Chambers, for instance, has noted how Ghosh in his first novel, *Circle of Reason*, attempts to bring formal subtlety to oil's otherwise amorphous

register in petro-states.²⁰ His answer, Chambers argues, is to mix picaresque and social realist elements in his representation of ‘al Ghazira’, a space of oil encounter at the heart of his narrative. But while the experimentation is laudable, the calculated messiness of the text betrays his greater aim: to understand what is specific to a West Asian modernity that hinges on oil. Despite Ghosh’s own estimable work, both in *Circle Of Reason* and *In an Antique Land*, he notes ‘the truth is we do not yet possess the form that can give the Oil Encounter a literary expression’.²¹ The comment extends to his critique of Munif’s *Cities of Salt* where, for all the author’s expertise in the subject (a PhD in Oil Economics, various positions in the Syrian Oil Company, and head of an Iraqi journal, *Oil and Development*), Munif has the workers win their struggle against big American oil and see off the emir who was its proxy. This, Ghosh intones, is ‘nothing more than escapist fantasy’. To the extent that no story of decolonisation has simultaneously embedded and elaborated this denouement in the oil encounter, Ghosh is correct. But what if the very structure of the oil encounter compels the suppression of a missed encounter such as the uprising that Munif narrates, so that what the novel struggles to represent is the frame of this very missed encounter, the traumatic experience or *tuché* in the real of oil’s meaning for modernity? On this level, Munif’s ‘fantasy’ is not ‘nostalgia’ as Ghosh puts it, but an extended dream of the political economy of oil in globalisation, one that hinges on a transnational division of labour. Oil wars are not simply or only expressions of class war but symptomatically enact the crass inequalities that inhere in them. This would not excuse the ‘fantasy’ of working-class victory (even nationalisation cannot guarantee such a triumph, as the experience of Venezuela underlines) but it does raise a question about the logic of the oil encounter that encloses, so to speak, oil wars in the current conjuncture. To address this problem, which is also in the form of a missed encounter, we must think differently about its substance. Or, as Ghosh revealingly puts it: ‘Try and imagine a major American writer taking on the Oil Encounter. The idea is literarily inconceivable’. Let’s try anyway.

In 1927 Upton Sinclair published *Oil!*, an extended novel which so closely imagines American being through oil, that the latter seems the quintessence of Americanness.²² A muckraking extravaganza in the tradition of Sinclair’s own *The Jungle*, *Oil!* is the story of Bunny Ross and his father, a rags to riches oil tycoon J. Arnold Ross. No aspect of the Southern California oil boom in the early twentieth century is excluded, whether it be the chicanery used to secure land leases, the bribes doled out to maintain sympathetic policies in Washington, or the American oil industry’s ability to extend American power through exploration and extraction around the world. Sinclair’s descriptive powers are every bit as visceral here as in his work on the meat industry and, if anything, he displays a more nuanced understanding of the political battles at stake in an oil economy. True, the novel embraces industrial prowess as central to a vibrant modernity (the opening chapter, for instance, is an extended paean to the automobile and the desire for velocity) but its critique

20. Claire Chambers, ‘Representations of the Oil Encounter in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 41, 1 (2006): 33-50.

21. Ghosh, ‘Petrofiction’, op. cit., p31.

22. Upton Sinclair, *Oil!*, New York, Penguin, 2007.

of capitalism far exceeds Munif's reading, that often clings too closely to economic integers insufficiently elaborated within a cultural logic. And, if Munif (and to a lesser extent Ghosh) impresses with his sensitivity to class discourse, it is Sinclair who permits a creative ambivalence in class tension that cannot be resolved by oil encounters alone. On this score, Ghosh is simply wrong: the Great American Oil Novel is contemporaneous with the emergence of oil in American history. Sinclair's oil encounter may be focused more on the oil industry's impact on American families and communities rather than oil economics as a logic of American imperial need, but it nevertheless directly confronts the transformation any discovery of oil produces in the modern period, this time within the very infrastructure of the American state.

The formal challenge of the oil encounter remains, and if *Oil!* resonates today it seems that it is more because of the prescience of its content than for its lessons about degrees of inexpressibility in building its narrative from the raw facts of Unocal's rise to prominence in the Californian oil boom. Here, perhaps, Sinclair trusts his satirical eye more than his novelistic verve, for *Oil!* suffers from a kind of breathless Op-Ed stylistic, great for pillorying public figures but less incisive when it comes to the generic peculiarity of oil's impasse for imaginative prose. Sinclair's writing chases the plot from paragraph to paragraph and reduces the possibility of reflection arising from the underlying themes of economic justice and moral clarity. Like Munif, however, Sinclair has a passionate interest in the process of oil extraction and this may provide clues to its substance as a missed encounter (that which cannot be represented as understanding or as a knowledge in representation - the weight between these two aspects is also part of its aesthetic impasse). Sinclair will often explain oil's process while setting off its meaning, a division with tragic consequences for J. Arnold Ross, if not for his love-blind son.

Chapter Three of *Oil!* contains extensive details about the process of oil extraction: 'Far down in the ground, underneath the Ross-Bankside No.1, a great block of steel was turning round and round. The under surface of it had blunt steel teeth, like a nutmeg-grater; on top of it rested a couple of thousand feet of steel tubing, the 'drill-stem,' a weight of twenty tons pressing it down; so, as it turned, it ate into the solid rock, grinding it to powder' (p65). This phallic power both consumes nature and forces it into a new configuration. Mud is pumped through tubes then back up to the surface with the detritus of the bore itself. Oil, of course, can flow naturally to the surface (in the novel, Ross's interest in the Watkins ranch is derived from this observation), but nothing quite collapses inside/outside like the apparent ecstasy of a successful well: 'Then they would go down for another fifty; and presently they would find they didn't have to go so far, the pressure was shoving the column of water up in the hole. Then you knew you were getting near to the end; one or two more trips of the bailer, and the water would be shot out of the hole, and mud and water and oil would spout up over the top of the derrick, staining it a lovely dripping black ... There she came! There was a cheer from all hands, and the spectators went flying to

avoid the oily spray blown by the wind' (pp77-78). While the obviousness of the sexual discourse is reminiscent of another American epic of industry, *Moby Dick*, this might actually support Ghosh's contention that for Americans oil is dirty. In puritanical eyes, Sinclair's orgiastic celebration of oil extraction surely sanctions a questionable desire and, when coupled with the corruption he finds at almost every turn, offers an American dream sullied by the rapacity of exploitation and objectification. Yet Ghosh is attempting to explain why the oil narrative has not come to light in American fiction, not why evidence to the contrary might be deemed objectionable to the American way (interestingly, Munif answers American objectification by depersonalising oil businessmen in his quintet - for the most part they are simply nameless 'Americans').

Sinclair, on the other hand, wants to make oil more intimately American. In the passage just quoted, note how he switches from third person to second so that we shift from a bland spectatorship of the workings of oil extraction to the moment you know it stains you too. This comes close to Bakhtin's sense of double-voiced discourse: here the interpellation of the reader in the event questions the objectivity of the primary description. The internal polemic is about what exactly is being celebrated. If Sinclair never puts a finer point on his prose, these shared experiences come close to imagining a community of oil, hierarchical but nevertheless bound to a common destiny in the ability to make as if from nothing. Sinclair always loved that special American necromancy; he lamented, however, that it only seemed to flow through the most crass and greedy forms of capital accumulation. This is not just the moral and ethical dilemma of Sinclair's novel (materialist and spiritualist options are equally reprehensible in the narrative) but a significant tension in how we gauge the emergence of an American century.

What Sinclair fathoms is how an American experience of space as freedom cuts against the necessity for enclosure in its exploration. The car enables the joy of movement Sinclair describes in the opening chapter of *Oil!* but also represents a logic of production and a privatisation of space in its realisation. It is worth remembering that Sinclair comes to petrofiction because his wife owned land at the edge of Los Angeles where oil had been discovered. When he attended meetings of landowners attempting to fashion sales to oil companies, Sinclair began to understand up close the synergy between the promise of mobility and the rapacity of the business model it embraces. Oil revolutionizes space in California (as it had done in Pennsylvania and Texas) but suspends the capacity to imagine beyond its logic. That some of the richest people in modern world history, (John D. Rockefeller, [Standard Oil], Andrew W. Mellon [Gulf], and J. Paul Getty [Getty Oil]) embody this freedom/enclosure nexus is hardly a coincidence. From this strata of American business Sinclair draws a composite figure in J. Arnold Ross, one who is not mean-spirited but nevertheless believes that accumulation through oil legitimates his ruthlessness. Sometimes, as in his procurement of the Watkins Ranch, it is guile more than greed that serves Ross's purpose, and here Sinclair makes good use of Bunny, and to some extent Paul Watkins, as ethical foils.

In general, however, the strategies pursued are read as American frontier industrialism, with oil as its most generous and powerful assistant. There are several ways in which *Oil!* writes itself into the genealogy sketched above and we can only begin to indicate this fateful pre-scription on this occasion.

American power, for instance, is premised not just on the discovery of oil as a domestic resource used to 'cover' its vast spaces but on an articulation of geopolitical and geocultural reach. While Sinclair may seem to squeeze this narrative into the confines of a social-realist Bildungsroman based on Bunny's coming of age, from the title onwards another form of elaboration is at stake, one where a town called 'Paradise' becomes a veritable sea of oil derricks and resource extraction affects every level of socialisation, whatever the crisis (Paradise is the counterpart to Sinclair's own missed encounter, his socialist experiment in New Jersey called Helicon Hall). When 'the greater part of the civilised world had gone to war' (p114) in 1914, the United States maintained neutrality, which to Ross means 'they would make money out of both sides; they would sell to the Allies direct, and they would sell to the Central powers by way of agents in Holland and Scandinavia, and they would raise a howl when the British tried to stop this by the blockade' (p115). Ross has a principle: when representatives of the warring parties ask him to sign contracts to deliver oil he is willing to do so, 'but they must change their European bonds into good US dollars' (the days of 'as good as Sterling' were over). The thirst for oil during the First World War begins the great age of the American dollar, a safe haven whose decline is linked directly to control over and access to oil. The 'Great War' is not usually considered an oil war but it greatly enhanced America's global standing, particularly since America's economic infrastructure was untouched and its capacity for oil production was maximised. F. William Engdahl suggests oil played another role: from the late nineteenth century on the Germans exploited the ailing economic conditions of the Ottoman Empire to satiate directly Germany's rapidly increasing demand for power reserves.²³ The Deutsche Bank signed an agreement in 1899 with the Turks (plus subsequent agreements through 1904) that permitted the German-financed company, the Anatolian Railway, to plan and construct a railway to link Berlin with Baghdad. While the British had sought to gain access to Mesopotamian oil resources (in part to power their navy's conversion from coal to oil) the Boer War divided their attention (they wanted gold as well) and the loss of access was a major setback politically and economically. By 1912, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, put the need for imperial command succinctly: 'We must become the owners or at any rate the controllers at the source of at least a proportion of the oil which we require'.²⁴ Given access to proven reserves at the time, this could only mean struggle somewhere in West Asia. Through the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (the predecessor of BP) the British secured concessions over Persian oil and tried their best to limit German expansion in the region but, because of prevailing alliances, Britain, France, and Russia on one side and Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire on the other,

23. F. William Engdahl, *A Century of War*, London, Pluto Press, 2004. For those who prefer a visual representation of this history, see the 'comic' monologue, 'A History of Oil' by Robert Newman: <http://video.google.com/videosearch?q=history+of+oil+robert+newman&emb=0&aq=0&oq=history+of+oil#>.

24. Winston Churchill, quoted in Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: 1914-1932*, London, Ithaca Press, 1976, 103-4.

it was highly unlikely a propitious rapprochement would be found. The last chance was the formation of the Turkish Petroleum Company that potentially could have solidified cooperation between British, Dutch, and German oil companies, but Britain had already stacked the deck by secretly negotiating Kuwaiti oil rights away from the Ottomans. The war, of course, did not wholly settle these issues, except to exclude the Germans from negotiations in its aftermath (similarly, the Iraq War permitted the United States to void those Hussein-brokered agreements noted by PNAC). After playing both sides, American oil companies were encouraged by the Wilson government to pursue an open door policy on regional oil concessions. This indeed is the contextual contrast that gives *Oil!* its formal characteristics, the measure of a specific oil encounter as American.

The sharp increase in oil prices during the war made American oil magnates both wealthy and even more politically influential. Here again, Sinclair attempts to portray a society driven by oil logic. Ross, for instance, sees no reason why local officials should not be bribed so that public money can be used to build a road to his oil wells. And, with other oil company owners, the business demands lax taxes and dubious lease contracts from the government. Sinclair bases this critique on the famous Teapot Dome scandal in which members of Harding's government were bribed to lease, without competitive bidding, oil-rich land in Wyoming and California to oil entrepreneurs like Edward L. Doheny (a model for Ross) and Harry F. Sinclair (no relation to Upton). Harding had been heavily financed by Big Oil to dislodge the less cooperative Wilson from the presidency. Ross and his business partner, Vernon Roscoe, viewed bribery as patriotic, since it convinced recalcitrant government officials to see what was best for the country. Harding's Secretary of the Interior, Albert B. Fall, would eventually be convicted of accepting bribes for oil land leases and spend a year in jail. In the novel, while Roscoe is a fugitive from an investigation very much like the Teapot Dome scandal, he continues to do the work of the United States abroad, by seeking to secure land concessions for oil exploration from foreign governments. One of these deals sees him visiting Constantinople for a parlay with the Turkish government 'as a means of squeezing a bigger share of the Mosul oil out of the British' (p471). Is this not the beginning of a geoculture of American oil encounters in West Asia that ends with an American occupation of Mosul in 2003?

As noted, Sinclair shares an interest with Munif in workers' political opposition to the substance of oil economics. Much of *Oil!* details a growing resistance to the oil companies' labour practices, whether through strikes at oilfields or through the promulgation of alternative modes of economic justice, principally inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917. The difference in the meaning of the word 'strike' for the oil industry and for labor activism is the essence of what is at stake in the American oil business. Paul Watkins is a sounding board for these events and movements, a worker and organiser whose political consciousness is piqued by his service in the First World War

and his subsequent re-deployment to fight a secret US war against Bolsheviks and Bolshevism in Siberia. Indeed, the last part of the novel increasingly focuses on the struggles over the meaning of the Russian revolution in American political life. For his part, Ross obviously views socialism and communism as bad for business and is happy that 'Red Scare' reporting is keeping oil magnate machinations off the front pages of the newspapers. Paul sees the oil industry as labour versus capital writ large in American life but is convinced that the greed of the oil barons will only produce more war and little long-term benefits for the American working class. In many respects Paul embodies the oil encounter as a missed encounter for, despite his perspicacity about labour's need to break the logic of the oil industry, his dying words (in Russian) - 'All power to the Soviets' - are themselves a displacement of the confrontation possible in the United States at the time, a space in which any labour gains were subsumed by a government desire to maximise oil accumulation. Sinclair, like Munif, is not wrong to wish this otherwise, for this is also the truth of fiction, but to this extent the American oil encounter meets the same impasse as its subsequent West Asian correlative: the imaginative writer cannot figure the concrete demise of the accumulation process predicated in an oil economy. Labour opposition is a counter-discourse, and an appreciable one in light of the Rosses of this world, but one might also begin to wonder about the appropriateness of the novel as a geocultural form within the representational complexities of oil logic.

Interestingly, the question of an appropriate cultural form is also symptomatic in Sinclair's novel. While the narrative of Bunny's entry into manhood often resonates with the implied reader's naiveté about the realities of the oil business, his role is more than just that of being his father's storyteller. He is not only a representative of moral ambivalence between the competing claims of capital and labour (figured in his oscillation between Ross and Paul) but he is also a keen observer of the cultural life of Southern California. This is played out in Bunny's relationships, particularly in his love for Vee Tracy (a star of silent film) and Ruth Watkins (Paul's sister and arguably the better leftist activist). Vee is well drawn (Sinclair had much experience with Hollywood; indeed, a version of Sinclair's *The Jungle* was made into a movie in 1914) and her relationship with Bunny permits Sinclair to consider the interrelationship of cinema and oil in the formation of Southern California's economy, and Los Angeles (Angel City in the novel) in particular. Sinclair's naturalism is well-suited to characterisation as a heady mix of effects and affects. The prose can also be cinematic in its ability to conjure the visual and visceral action of his story (one thinks of the stunning description of a derrick fire). Yet beyond the fact that oil money often funded early Hollywood cinema and its real estate ventures (the Bell of Bel-Air fame combined all three attributes), Sinclair does not ponder whether the problem of oil geoculture for the novel is precisely oil's visual register. By way of conclusion I want to offer this aspect of the oil encounter as a missed encounter while maintaining

its historical parameters.

Almost eighty years after the publication of *Oil!* Eric Schlosser, something of a muckraker himself, bought the film rights to the novel and was approached by Paul Thomas Anderson who in 2007 made it into a film, *There Will Be Blood*. For those whose experience of Sinclair's novel was a rigorous lesson in the battle of labour and capital that oil waged in Southern California and beyond, Anderson's star vehicle (for Daniel Day-Lewis, who won an Oscar for his role) must have come as something of a shock. Everything about the history of the industry that had galvanised Sinclair's prose and given the struggles over oil vibrant kinesis is simply blacked out in the film. There are no strikes, Red Scares, or American anti-Bolshevik machinations in Siberia. There is no Great War as a distraction, nor any direct sense that oil has a history in America beyond the eye of its beholder. There is no Paul Watkins to speak of, and barely any Bunny. Anderson, who has had his Robert Altman tableau moments in *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*, decides that the Americanness of the narrative comes down to family differences between a frontier capitalist (Daniel Plainview, Day-Lewis's character) and a frontier evangelist (Eli Sunday, played by Paul Dano), differences that come to a head in the bowling alley of Plainview's mansion (in a nice touch, the sequence was shot at the house of Edward Doheny who, as we have noted, was an inspiration behind both Ross and Roscoe). Anderson, like Sinclair, is a consummate storyteller, and for him the moral rot of Plainview and Sunday is all the epic he needs. But this is also what makes the visual economy of oil logic in the film so provocative.

Anderson's story begins at the end of the nineteenth century with Plainview, like Doheny, prospecting for silver. There is no dialogue, just Day-Lewis shot against an impressive Western landscape. Anderson had been watching *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) and borrows from John Huston's fairly basic American tale of rugged individualism turned to greed. The biggest influence is in the stripped-down moral universe that sees Americanness as primarily an effect of individual characterisation. True, Anderson's film pays attention to the process of oil extraction, but the genealogy I have indicated would block characterisation with a kind of documentary heft which Anderson otherwise studiously eschews. For Anderson, what is dirty about oil in this period is its politics and the Americanness that links it to economic power. The film also displays an aversion to Sinclair's thoughts on Bunny's sexual awakening and any representation of Hollywood culture in the early twentieth century. But in seeming to construct its own missed encounter, the narrative ingeniously reveals oil's hold on American consciousness. First, with a strong allusion to Ash Wednesday, a baby is marked on the forehead with crude oil (a sacred oil, used in baptisms, was/is often mixed with ash to help it stick). At the beginning of Lent the mark evokes both sin and mortality and the film is certainly replete with both (Plainview asks at one point, 'What's my sin, the sin of drilling?'). When the father is killed in a mineshaft accident the baby boy is adopted by Plainview and dubbed 'H.W.' (a boy who would eventually

make millions in oil, just like the H.W. behind the moniker: George Bush). The mark of oil is echoed almost immediately by an overhead shot of the makeshift pond used to collect oil. It sits on the surface like a glimmering stain, a sign of what is to come. Further baptisms occur: Eli is baptised in mud by Plainview, and Plainview is baptised by Eli before his congregation. Finally, Eli lies baptised in his own blood by Plainview. No blood for oil, the slogan goes? There will always be blood for oil, the film replies.

But beyond the Christian imagery (minus any hint of crusades to the East) America's geoculture of oil is symbolised by Plainview himself. He is, in his own way, the *objet à* of oil, the only way in which the Real of oil's violent logic might appear (a process underlined by his name). In one scene we see Plainview staring behind us at an oil blow-out that has caught fire. He is covered in oil and this accentuates his gaze, as his face also reflects the fire. We do not imagine his awe: we are essentially constructed by it. But surely it is the oil we desire that constitutes our separable self in this algebra of the modern? Indubitably; yet oil is only present by its reflection and not in its essence, in its logic of accumulation and violence. Plainview embodies this visual conundrum: he is oil's medium but simultaneously its lack (interestingly, lack is conveyed by a struggle in filiations: he disowns H.W. [not the son], kills the impostor Henry [not the brother] and finally kills Eli [not the brother, but the brother-in-law]). Yet the use of lack is itself an inadequate explanation for the genealogy we have examined. Plainview does not reveal oil's relationship to the making of the American subject; he floats merely as its banalised symptom, and if the film feels disconnected from the history we have intimated that is precisely the order of this history's founding fiction. The metonymic disjunction between blood and oil in its title is forced, but consistent with its material foundation. When Eli desperately wants a reward for bringing in Bandy's tract for oil extraction, Plainview says he's already taken it: 'I drink the blood of lamb from Bandy's land'. The displacement is pronounced but not exactly American, so Plainview explains how he got the oil via Anderson's adaptation of Albert B. Fall's archived congressional testimony: 'I drink your milkshake!' And this, along with the H.W. quip, is as close to political history as Anderson's film will get.

If Sinclair's *Oil!* is one bookend of America's century, then Anderson's adaptation of it in *There Will Be Blood* is its other. The latter celebrates the decline of America's power through oil while suppressing as best it can what this power has meant (the symptoms are everywhere, including the massive black cloud of an oil fire so strongly reminiscent of the darkness that befell Kuwait). Anderson announces film to be appropriate to the articulation of such an elision not simply because of its visual economy but because Hollywood was oil's industrial 'brother' in making southern California a template for American modernity. Hundreds of American films take up oil's absent presence (most famously, of course, *Giant*) but perhaps it is only now, when the empire has overreached its geopolitical desire, that such obsessive consanguinity could take the form of a deadly missed encounter. I have only

begun to detail the epistemic extent of oil's geoculture, but even so one must simultaneously acknowledge and challenge the acuity of Ghosh's verdict on the American oil encounter. That is, the force of oil in American fiction is at once the contradictory task of an encounter as missed encounter, the *tuché* in its political unconscious that struggles to name the tragic history which is its very possibility. After crushing Eli's skull with a bowling pin, Plainview's last words are 'I'm finished'. Individually, perhaps, but as a representative of the age of oil, not quite.

The significance of oil's geoculture is both its permeation of economic and political logic and its relatively autonomous persistence, as if it sits on the social as its truth in fiction. Activism against its sordid production of history, as our consideration of both oil wars and imaginative narrative affirms, has been co-present with the logic of oil and has attempted to dissolve its cruel antimony. But because capitalism is compelled to be revolutionary in order to subsist, it is not beyond attempting to facilitate by itself the dissolution of oil geoculture even as it is enamoured of the massive surpluses that accrue from scarcity and oligopoly. Thus, while one must acknowledge the emergence of peak-oil speculative fiction like Kunstler's *World Made By Hand* and Eschbach's *Ausgebrannt*,²⁵ it too is not beyond the prospect of a missed encounter when one considers how contemporary oil companies are attempting to reinvent themselves as the key to a green future. Even as oil economies must fade within peak oil predictions, oil fiction remains to elaborate its persistence, posed as an alternative to itself (think, for instance, of the cloying ads of BP or Exxon-Mobil as they save the planet from hydrocarbons).

Finally, oil's geoculture must address its deep history in the exploitation of the South and of labour. These are both first encounters, as Munif's fiction affirms, and a present conjuncture, as the tale of appropriation in Iraq continues to underline. Because of Ghosh's brazen challenge we are increasingly witnessing pertinent critique from creative work that either answers or contradicts his initial thesis. Work like Wenzel's (see note 11) also underlines the fact that approaches to oil in decolonisation need not pivot on oil's specific ontology within culture. Nevertheless, because the ecological impact of fossil fuels is no longer an industry secret there is an increasing necessity to rethink the complex ways in which oil economies have fashioned cultural formations (and foreign policies) bent on curtailing or displacing opposition to the rationale of oil extraction. In the case of the United States this has often led to oil encounters as war, but between *Oil!* and *There Will Be Blood* what is missed in geopolitics finds an encounter of a different order that fights silence or the inexpressible at every turn. Articulating this imaginary is, whatever else it is, the prospect of the end of oil itself.

25. James Howard Kunstler, *World Made By Hand*, New York, Grove Press, 2009. Andreas Eschbach, *Ausgebrannt*, Bergisch Gladbach, Luebbe Verlagsgruppe, 2008 (in German).