

The Cultural Politics of Oil: On Lessons of Darkness and Black Sea Files

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Capitalist production has not yet succeeded and never will succeed in mastering these (organic) processes in the same way as it has mastered purely mechanical or inorganic chemical processes. Raw materials such as skins, etc., and other animal products become dearer partly because the insipid law of rent increases the value of these products as civilizations advance. As far as coal and metal (wood) are concerned, they become more difficult as mines are exhausted.

—Karl Marx, Theories of Surplus Value¹

For the past two years I've been receiving news feeds from the *New York Times* and other magazines and newspapers alerting me to articles dealing with oil. In some weeks, the number of articles I would receive was staggering: seven or more in a day, fifty or more in a week, and all from a single newspaper. Many of these articles were (predictably enough) about the rise in gasoline prices (which peaked in the U.S. at \$4.11 per gallon in July 2008) and its impact on airline ticket sales, the driving habits of suburbanites, and the price of anything that needed to be shipped to market—which is to say almost everything. Others dealt with existing and emerging geopolitical challenges connected to the cost of oil and the problem of its increasingly limited supply: the rise of petro-oligarchies (from Russia to Venezuela, from Kazakhstan to my home province of Alberta), the stresses placed on energy supply by the expansion of developing economies, (especially China and India), and the impact of oil on global food supplies. Finally, there were articles that dealt in a broad way with the ecological impacts of the ever-increasing use of dirty energy such as crude oil. These articles stressed the need to develop new sources of energy and tried to draw attention to

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the necessity of reshaping, in a fundamental way, our daily habits and practices in order to save the planet.

Oil was everywhere, connected to everything—and yet there was something missing. Despite all that has been and continues to be written about oil, it still seems to be difficult to capture the fundamental way in which access to petrocarbons structures contemporary social life on a global scale. Oil is not one energy source among others—a bad habit that needs to be overcome through the creation of the energy equivalent of a nicotine patch that would slowly wean people off their 84-million-barrel-a-day habit and put us the path of cleaner living and healthier lungs. Oil is not just energy. Oil is history, a source of cheap energy without which the past century and a half would have been utterly different. And oil is also ontology, the structuring “Real” of our contemporary sociopolitical imaginary, and perhaps for this reason just as inaccessible as any noumenon in the flow of everyday experience from the smoggy blur of sunrise to sundown. When one discusses the end of oil and imagines the main issue to be the possibility of replacement fuels—basically, energy from the sun, in whatever form—one fails to grasp that we are not dealing with an input that can easily take other forms, but with a substance that has given shape to capitalist social reality, perhaps as much as the division of labor or the dance of commodity reification.²

The cosmic joke is on us: the last two centuries of capitalist social development has burned through energy resources which are the product of 500 million years of geological time. As M. King Hubbert, of the famous Hubbert’s Peak, writes:

When these fuels are burned, their precious energy, after undergoing a sequence of degradations, finally leaves the earth as spent, long-wavelength, low-temperature radiation. Hence, we deal with an essentially fixed storehouse of energy which we are drawing upon at a phenomenal rate... The release of this energy is a unidirectional and irreversible process. It can happen only once, and the historical events associated with this release are necessarily without precedent and are intrinsically incapable of repetition.³

The arcs of population, gross domestic product, and energy consumption over the past century and a half all swoop upward in perfect harmony when graphed against one another. It is the massive increase in per capita energy consumption that “has enabled classical industrial, urban, and economic development.”⁴ Too bad that what is a temporary source of energy has been treated as permanent and fundamental to our growth economies, and that, even on the brink of a looming disaster, the end of oil tends to disappear over the horizon as the result of indifference, long-established habits, or the difficulty of imagining that things could really be as bad as all the geologists and ecologists say they are; the decrease in the cost of a gallon of fuel due to the global financial crisis has resulted in the immediate return of older patterns of driving.

In an earlier paper, I identified three dominant narratives through which the crisis of the end of oil has been described and comprehended to date: *strategic realism*, *techno-utopianism* and *eco-apocalypse*.⁵ Discourses of strategic realism deal with

the problem of oil as being primarily about the ways in which governments secure ongoing access to diminishing supplies of energy. Techno-utopianism recognizes that the continuation of our current global social and political reality requires a high level of energy use, and imagines technological solutions that would substitute new forms of energy for those on which we currently rely. Finally, eco-apocalypse discourses—the main form of oil discourses on the Left—focus on the need to fundamentally reshape contemporary social life. These discourses are aware of the absolute dependence of society on petrocarbons and try to generate an alarm loud enough to produce a social awakening regarding our plight. They are apocalyptic in a double sense: first, because they are aware of the real nature of oil—that oil is history and social ontology—and are anxious about the implications of its decline for human populations and the massive fixed infrastructure of cities and transportation systems in which they live; second, because despite the ability of these discourses to name the problem, to describe it in detail and with great complexity, they confront a political and cultural impasse that is seen, finally, as being nearly impossible to overcome. Increasingly sophisticated charts detailing the use of land and sea resources, overviews of the coming future mapped through Peak Oil charts and photo-essays showing the impact of the economics of oil on human communities and nature—there is a sense that none of these will do what one might hope they would, i.e. help produce new political circumstances and a clearer idea of the challenges we collectively face.⁶ Which is to say: apocalyptic environmentalism is as traumatized by the failure of social rationality—the Enlightenment and its promised forward march from immaturity to maturity—as it is by the material consequences of current patterns of energy use. Or rather, the real limits such discourses confront concern the politics of representation—of producing social and political change from the narratives about the future that they paint—in the face of the positivism of technological thinking or political imaginaries which see resource usage primarily as a problem of national security and the health of domestic economies.

Are these the only ways to think about oil? Or are there are other narratives that go beyond the stubborn Realpolitik of strategic-realism, the magic of technological thinking, or the guilty pleasures of the coming end times? It would be helpful to have as a fourth discourse a Marxism which is engaged not just with ecology (à la Joel Kovel and others) but with the political, economic *and* conceptual significance of raw inputs into the shape of capitalism.⁷ With the exception of some attention to resource scarcity (e.g., the work of Michael Perelman), the tendency, especially with the rising interest in creative or cognitive labor, has been to affirm Marx's view that nature is subsumed directly into production without mediation.⁸

In the absence of such a fourth discourse, but with the problem of political representation in mind, I want to consider the way in which the politics of oil are addressed in two films—Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) and Ursula Biemann's *Black Sea Files* (2005).⁹ Both usefully complicate my typology of oil narratives and their sterile politics, and offer some insight into both what is missing and what is all too present in each of them. Strategic realism and techno-utopianism are narratives which insist on maintaining the status quo at any cost; eco-apocalypse

understands that oil is history, ontology, and culture, but can't see the way forward given oil's omnipresence just below the skin of society (even as it is disappearing beneath the skin of the Earth). Current ways of thinking about oil either ignore or affirm an antinomy which they know to exist even if they can't name it, as opposed to trying to think their way through it. Might these films about oil, and about the way we represent it or fail to represent it to ourselves, give us some ideas about how to generate other narratives about the future to come—an ecological politics which abandons the comforts of either apocalypse or business as usual?

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Given the social and economic importance of oil and its strategic importance since at least the First World War, it comes as somewhat of a surprise that there are so few films or other cultural narratives which address it head-on. The oil crisis of 1973 produced many more cultural artifacts than our current encounter with steep oil prices—everything from board games to presidential addresses on the need to severely reduce fuel consumption.¹⁰ The two most common filmic forms in which we encounter oil today are geopolitical thrillers, in which oil takes the place vacated by ideology in the Cold War, and documentary films, which carry out a hoped-for pedagogic function in bringing to light the problems caused by our dependence on oil. In thrillers like *Syriana* (2005) and *The Deal* (2005), oil is central to the plot and yet nevertheless incidental. Narratively arranged with multiple storylines which take place in numerous locations—a now common, overly literal attempt to represent the new reality of globalization—the struggle over oil resolves into a fairly standard storyline about the links between corporate and political power, and the ways in which greed and money deform social life. In this respect, it is no different than the television serial *Dallas* (1978–1991), and equally belated. Of slim importance to the plot, oil in *Dallas* is merely the source of the Ewing family's wealth and the reason that they live in Dallas (though one would have thought Houston to be a more appropriate site for oil moguls); a telenovela *avant la lettre*, money, power and family strife drive the narrative (Lucy won't go to school! J.R. is sleeping around!), which is otherwise so disinterested in geopolitics as to miss the fact that after 1973 oil wealth springs not from the soils of Texas but from other parts of the world (those smart Ewings wasted a lot of money on state senators who were unlikely to be able to help them with oil claims in Saudi Arabia).

On the other hand, documentaries such as *A Crude Awakening* (2006) or *Fuel* (2008) follow a pattern traced out by other recent docs on a range of topics.¹¹ The consequences of our dependence on oil are analyzed by experts, alarming statistics are trotted out concerning the years remaining in the life of oil and our levels of CO₂ emissions, and we are implored to do something before it is too late. Oil thus becomes the latest in a long list of social problems which could be resolved except for a lack of political will (which seems to be in shorter supply than even hydrocarbons), which the documentarians hope to kick-start by informing the public. Documentaries on oil tend to follow the script of eco-apocalypse; so, too, do oil thrillers, although they do so through a fascination with the blind self-confidence and violence of strategic realism, which offers irresistible resources for drama and characterization.

Black Sea Files and *Lessons of Darkness* undertake comparatively novel explorations of the politics of oil. In part this is because they attend to oil as a social problem which still needs to be puzzled out rather than as a lesson about the fact that corporations want money or that driving produces CO₂ (neither an especially shocking insight). It is also because each engages in experiments in documentary form in order to make sense of the place of oil in our lives. Herzog's better-known *Lessons* is an example of his ongoing work in a genre that has been called "nonfiction feature." Deliberately pushing against the indexical qualities of documentary cinema, he has repeatedly intervened in the construction of purportedly "real" films by staging scenes or inventing story elements to enhance dramatic narrative (as in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* [1997]), and has made use of documentary and found footage to construct fictions out of documented realities. *Lessons* is modelled on his earlier *Fata Morgana* (1972), a more poetic, less linear film based on footage shot in and around the Sahara Desert, linked together by the director's voice-over reading of a Mayan creation myth and songs by Leonard Cohen. The images in *Lessons* come from footage taken over a month-long period of oil fields left burning in Kuwait at the conclusion of the first Gulf War in 1991. More than 700 wells were set on fire by Iraqi troops at the conclusion of the war; it required eight months to fully extinguish the fires due both to their scale and intensity and because land mines left around the wells had to be identified and defused before crews could move in. An estimated 6 million barrels of oil per day were burned off by the fires; the total cost of putting them out ran to \$1.5 billion U.S. The twelve chapters of Herzog's film drift over the hellish landscape produced by roaring, jetting flames of oil, white sand turned black in every direction, the machines and bodies of insect-like humans rendered insignificant by the scale of the devastation.

Black Sea Files is also arranged into sections: ten "field notes" (numbered 0 to 9) taken as part of a visual exploration of the development of a British Petroleum pipeline running from Bibi-Heibat in Azerbaijan through Georgia and Turkey, where it ends at an oil terminal on the Mediterranean. Biemann's film is both video and art project: while the ten field notes can be shown successively as a documentary, they have also been exhibited in museums and galleries on separate monitors which can be viewed in any order. In *Black Sea Files*, images appear on a split screen, both halves in constant motion so that it is difficult to follow either; voice-overs and right-to-left streaming text complicate matters even more. As in Herzog's film, its episodic character interrupts but doesn't entirely displace a narrative trajectory; Biemann's visual journey from source to mouth of the pipeline jumps forward and backward in space and time as a way of deferring a linearity that would reduce her investigation into mere exposé, but the overall movement is still from source (0) to mouth (9).

If there are similarities at a formal level, the approaches of the two films to the subject of oil are starkly different. *Lessons* is set up as a science-fiction film—a visual document narrated by a visitor to Earth (a trope reused by Herzog in a different way in 2005's *Wild Blue Yonder*). Over steaming oil-soaked piles of sand, the film opens with a voice-over: "A planet in our solar system. White mountain ranges, clouds, a land shrouded in mist." Cut to a workman in a white moon suit, gesturing at the camera: "The first creature we encountered tried to communicate something to us."

What we are presented with is thus the view of the Earth and of humanity as a whole as it appears to alien eyes studying and trying to comprehend what organizes the life activity of the creatures it encounters. A city, strangely empty; a war fought over oil which leaves behind the husks of cars, trucks, and the bones of animals on oil-soaked sand; bombed-out refineries and pipelines so rusted that their color seems to have been leached by the sun over centuries. Much of the rest of the film is made up of endless aerial shots of oil deserts and oil lakes, oil bubbling and boiling on the surface of the Earth, recovery teams laboring with saurian machines to stop the spray of oil into the air, not to plug it up for good but so that they can suck it out of the ground on their own terms. The concluding voice-over makes Herzog's aims evident: "Two figures approach an oil well and set it ablaze again. . . . Has life without fire become unbearable for them? Others, seized by madness, follow suit. Now they are content, now there is something to extinguish again." Oil is at the center of the activity of these creatures; without it, even given its evident destruction of nature and culture, they would not know what to be or how to live.

Lessons brings our dependence on oil to light quite literally: never has the inky black stuff been made so visible, raining from the sky after a well fire has been put out, draining off of workers' helmets in streaks across their faces, shown in Borgesian fashion as equivalent to the territory of the Earth itself. Oil is also at the center of Biemann's film, but what she wants to make visible is not its physical substance, but the social and human geographies it produces. As in previous projects, such as her investigation of gender politics in the structuring of labor in the maquiladoras in the video *Performing the Border* (1999), *Black Sea Files* sets itself the project of writing "the hidden matrix of space," of mapping the lived material realities and everyday experiences produced out of the abstract language of contracts, company planning maps, and handshakes between politicians. On a map, a pipeline runs straight across territories that look empty, devoid of life; Biemann wants to understand what has been pushed aside in order to make this emptiness real and what new space its previous inhabitants are now forced to occupy. The introductory segment (File 0) makes explicit her project: to explore geography as an ordering system, one now organized not around weapons technology but the power of resources. The BTC pipeline project exhibits the geographic and political power of oil in condensed form, as new petroc capitalist states rush to put in the necessary infrastructure to bring product to market. Even on a map, existing ethnic tensions and political legacies are embodied in the path followed by the pipeline. While it runs in long straight vectors, it also takes sharp turns to circumnavigate Armenia and to skirt Kurdish territory in Turkey.

Each of the files in *Black Sea Files* fills in the story of the new geographies of resource. File 1 consists of images of the primary oil extraction site, while File 2 jumps ahead to Istanbul to show a family of Kazakhs who have been displaced from China for ethnic reasons before doubling back to the shallow oilfields of the Caspian Sea; these apparently distinct movements are somehow related. In File 3, we see the pipeline being laid into the ground by a multinational group of engineers and geologists (mostly Colombians), who are creating not just a pathway for oil but a curious

geopolitical space: an 80-meter wide, 750-kilometer long strip of land subject to no national laws for 40 years. File 5 visits farmers across whose land the pipeline runs. In the sixth file Biemann interviews two prostitutes who have traveled the routes taken by oil tankers from Azerbaijan to Turkey. Oil riches obviously don't trickle down; the completion of the pipeline will endanger even this precarious form of employment once the truckers disappear. The final three files investigate areas around the pipeline's terminus. In File 7, Biemann learns from a social anthropologist who is advising BP that part of the rationale for the project is to reduce the environmental impact of oil tankers traversing the Black Sea and the Bosphorus. The last two files try to make sense of the political and signifying gap that exists between sites of oil production and oil consumption.

Biemann's closing voice-over brings the project to an indeterminate conclusion: "Throughout my investigation, I was bound to visit the secondary scenes of current affairs, roaming around the lesser debris of history." Secondary, lesser: do the visual and geographic investigations in *Black Sea Files* complete some picture of geopolitics that we would otherwise understand only in parts and so not grasp correctly? Is she offering up (in line with a fairly typical documentary imperative) the small picture obscured by the bigger one of geopolitics—a document of a desire just to render visible the minute, invisible processes by which a resource reshapes geography (and so politics, too)? What exactly are we supposed to do with the materials assembled in these files? Biemann herself isn't sure. The video is meant as neither investigative report nor aesthetic artefact; her struggle with the project's political and artistic commitments are made explicit in File 4:

[voice-over] What does it mean to take the camera to the field, to go to the trenches? How did it get to the point where she stands at the front next to the journalists at the very moment of the incident? Without press pass or gas mask. What kind of artistic practice does such video footage document? That of an embedded artist immersed in the surge of human confrontation and confusion. How to resist making the ultimate image that will capture the whole drama in one frame? How to resist freezing the moment into a symbol?

Is an image made under dangerous conditions more valuable than material found in libraries and archives? Is better knowledge that which is produced at great risk?

It sounds odd, but it's risky to simply record a pipeline. Oil companies run a severe image regime. During construction, image making is prohibited; later it will be invisible anyway. What is the meaning of this tube in the hidden corporate imaginary of this space? What function does it have in their own secret ordering system of the Caucasus?

To generate images of oil infrastructures is not an aesthetic project, it is an undercover mission. The challenge is to go undetected when probing for hidden, secret and restricted knowledge. Are these cognitive methods any different from the ones used by geologists, anthropologists or secret intelligence agents?

They all probe different sorts of sediments and plots that give meaning to the space. What is the sediment I should be probing in my artistic fieldwork? What role do I play in this plot?

“To generate images of oil infrastructures is not an aesthetic project, it is an undercover mission,” Biemann says. Herzog’s *Lessons* would seem to occupy the other side of this dichotomy. We are meant to be impressed, awed, and seduced by the scale of the oil disaster, its stark colors (red on black, white on black), and the dynamic visual energy of shooting flames and roiling clouds of smoke. The film paints the present as an apocalypse we are not only fated to live in, but in which we apparently find comfort as well: without the burning oil, social life would lose its dynamic force, its animating rationality. The narrative voice of the film (an alien, remember) struggles to make sense of what it sees: can there really be such creatures for whom oil is an object of worship? But Herzog can’t resist commentary, and so in parts of the film we get excerpts from Revelation (e.g., 16:18: “And there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake, *and* so great”), which direct us back to the film’s epigraph, attributed to Blaise Pascal but actually an invention of Herzog’s: “The collapse of the stellar universe will occur like creation—in grandiose splendor.” This seems to be the judgment of history and thus, strictly speaking, outside of politics—an expression of a profound gloom about human possibility that confirms the conservative inclination of the alien metaphor, which has become an increasingly common device in recent art (not to mention the remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951 and 2008], now also about nature rather than the Cold War). The view from an alien perspective—the making literal of a meta-perspective—is intended to allow structural truths to emerge without the intervention of morality, ethics or political confusion. But this can often backfire: instead of insight, a radical incommensurability between subject and object opens up, resulting in a disavowal of the human as such, what J.J. Charlesworth, writing on the alien, calls “a pessimistic apprehension of impending disaster; a profound sense of uncertainty and disorientation regarding human society’s claim to progressive agency; and a kind of post-historical estrangement from the experience of modernity.”¹²

The passages from Revelation aren’t the only breaks with the science fiction narrative established at the beginning of *Lessons*. There is the music, for one thing: selections from Grieg, Mahler, Pärt, Prokofiev, Wagner, and others, which amplify the visual scale and lend the film its romantic gravitas. The chosen scores are ones now cemented into social consciousness through their use in popular cinema to gesture

to sublime experiences—the overwhelming encounter with fate, fear or otherness. In this instance, however, consciousness does not return to itself empowered, but with a sense of the impossibility of overcoming humanity’s oil ontology. Then there are the two chapters—Chapter IV “Torture Chamber” and Chapter VI “Childhood”—in which the camera shifts its focus from the oil fields to the victims of the Gulf War, that is to say, to the victims of oil. “Torture Chamber” begins with a tracking shot over what are presumably a collection of torture devices found after the war: knives, pliers, vices, whips, electrical devices, even a toaster. The chapter ends with the mute testimony of a woman who tries to talk to the alien narrator about the horror of watching her sons tortured to death in front of her—but she has lost her ability to communicate. “Childhood” is also about the inability to communicate the experience of a trauma. A young boy whose head was crushed beneath the boot of a soldier says to his mother “Mama, I don’t ever want to learn how to talk” and remains permanently silent thereafter. It may not be an “undercover mission” in the way that Biemann imagines *Black Sea Files*, but, like that film, *Lessons* betrays an uncertainty about how to explore its topic and best make sense of all the footage collected in Kuwait. Herzog makes this failure of communication explicit diagetically so that it doesn’t appear as an aesthetic limit or failure of his approach, but as the very problem which he hopes to foreground in the film.

On a straightforward reading, Biemann’s seems to be the more politically astute film—the one which avoids the grand drama and pretense of metaphysics and speaks about the complex shapes of life lived under the reign of oil. What connects the projects is the joint frustration they exhibit about the object which they want to represent and better comprehend. Both Biemann and Herzog take oil as the name for a complex problem which requires formally innovative methods of exploration if one is to do more than produce an already known object lesson about fuel consumption and the evils of SUVs; it is simultaneously a problem which raises questions about the function of an aesthetics with political aims and intentions. It is as interesting to take note of what is absent from these films so as to assess the ways in which oil is thematized and visualized. There is no state to rail against, and no weak politicians in the pocket of big business to expose: they make a brief appearance in *Black Sea Files*, but only as part of a larger system which exceeds them: the need for oil to flow. It is not the animation of (that fantastically suspect concept of) political will, whether of audiences or of public figures, which is the objective here. Even in a video which takes its project to be an investigative one, the results of the investigation are indeterminate: Biemann generates an analytic of Black Sea oil geographies, but we’re given no sense of how or even *if* we are supposed to use this knowledge for some form of political intervention. The traumatic futures to come as a result of the end of oil are also nowhere evident. One billion barrels of oil disappeared in flames in Kuwait—which simply means that more secure access to oil is needed (such as the BTC pipeline) in order to avoid the expense of future wars over the resource.

There is one other thing missing: Nature. It seems that all discussions and analyses of our use of resources and of oil inevitably bring natural systems into play. It is Nature that is seen as bearing the cost of a global social system built on oil. The

sites and spaces of oil production generate enormous amounts of pollution; tanker spills—widely underreported—leave behind the bodies of dead animals and zones of ocean and shoreline no longer fit for animal and plant habitation. It is of course the larger, systemic effects that raise the greatest alarm. Oil is a problem for Nature because the emissions released from burning it produce changes in the atmosphere whose impact on both natural and human systems are likely to be significant and difficult to undo. Oil narratives are thus often about what humans must do in order to mitigate or limit these effects. Yet neither film seems to have much interest in pursuing this script.

Biemann is interested in social and political geographies as opposed to physical ones, in the way in which social systems are bent to make the flow of this commodity possible. And Herzog? A desert drowned in oil might seem to be a direct comment on the human impact on the environment. But I think this would be to misread the film, especially given Herzog's view of Nature. The human relation to Nature has emerged as a theme in a number of Herzog's films, the most well-known being *Grizzly Man* (2005). In Les Blank's documentary on the making of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), Herzog expresses the contrarian view of Nature which has guided his filmmaking up to and including his most recent film, *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007):

Taking a close look at what is around us, there is some sort of harmony. It is the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder. And we in comparison to the articulate vileness and baseness and obscenity of all this jungle, we in comparison to that enormous articulation, we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out of a stupid suburban novel—a cheap novel—and we have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery and overwhelming fornication and overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order. Even the stars up here in the sky look like a mess. There is no harmony in the universe. We have to get acquainted to this idea that there is no real harmony as we have conceived it.

But when I say this I say this all full of admiration for the jungle. It is not that I hate it, I love it, I love it very much. But I love it against my better judgement.

Lessons treats Nature in this way: both with admiration and suspicion, insisting on its disorder, its mess. Oil is Nature here, not something that should be banished from it as a foreign element. What the spew of oil draws to our attention are the problems that exist in our comprehension of Nature that would see the bodies of zooplankton and phytoplankton as something completely other, an alien substance which just happens to lie below the surface of the Earth and which fulfills—what luck!—two key requirements for its use by capital: it can be easily transported and stored, and it generates a significant amount of energy per unit of fuel. In Herzog's imaginary, we love oil, and we love Nature, too: both organize our activity and sense

of human purpose. For him, it is the desire for harmony and purpose in Nature that fuels our love for it; it is a desire which must be guarded against if we want to understand our deep cultural and political imperatives—the how and why of the bodies shuffling across the black sand who can't help but worship the black ink and the heat and light it generates.

Unbehagen in der Natur: a play on the original German title of Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (“The Uneasiness/Discomfort in Culture,” translated in English as *Civilization and its Discontents*). This is the title of the final chapter in Slavoj Žižek's *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008). For Žižek, our contemporary uneasiness about Nature is certainly justified; and it is a productive discomfort—as long as we understand it for what it is. He expresses worries that the “ecology of fear”—our worries about everything from the potentially disastrous outcome of biogenetic experiments to anxieties about the exploitation of Earth's resources—“has every chance of developing into the predominant form of ideology of global capitalism, a new opium for the masses replacing declining religion.”¹³

Why might this be the case? Like Herzog, Žižek views the treatment of Nature within most forms of ecological thinking as fundamentally conservative. Nature is treated as the ultimate form of order that (in the last instance) offers security to human social life; there is also an insistence on the fact that the natural world is complete unto itself and that any change with respect to it “can only be a change for the worse.”¹⁴ The position Žižek argues for is that of “ecology without nature,” since he feels that “the ultimate obstacle to protecting nature is the very notion of nature we rely on.”¹⁵ This ecology without nature would be one that starts from an acceptance of the fact that “‘nature’ *qua* the domain of balanced reproduction, of organic deployment into which humanity intervenes with its hubris, brutally throwing its circular motion off the rails, is man's fantasy; nature is already in itself ‘second nature,’ its balance is always secondary, an attempt to bring into existence a ‘habit’ that would restore some order after catastrophic interruptions.”¹⁶ It is in the chaos and groundlessness of “second nature” that any political act that has a hope of radically confronting ecological catastrophe has to take place.

Might we not see these films as attempts at producing “ecologies without Nature”? Oil seems like the most basic of substances; worries about what we might do without it seem as easily addressed as the placement of ads for wind and solar power in the pages of magazines, or shifts in public policy (which have been taking place, if not in the U.S. or Canada, then in Germany and France). If I have treated oil as something stranger, full of metaphysical mystery and subtlety, it is because it is in a very real way absent from social life—despite the fact that it is all around us in physical form in plastics, fuels, fertilizers, and so on. In both the labor theory of value and in the language of economics, the resources we depend on are strictly speaking without value: for capitalism, nature always comes for free. It is only the cost of extracting resources—the cost of ground rents, labor, and materials—that appear on ledger sheets, which is why it has proven so difficult for ecological economists to give a number to nature's contribution to economic processes. Estimates of the economic contribution of Nature range from \$36 trillion annually to infinite; the point of such

calculations is to generate changes in social behavior by making the real “costs” of our actions on the ecological system part of the system of value.¹⁷ But how do you “price” a finite input that is essential to the operation of the whole system? Aren’t oil and capitalism in a sense one and the same? These questions are difficult enough to properly pose, much less to answer. No grand conclusions, no mysteries solved: *Black Sea Files* and *Lessons of Darkness* draw attention to the desperate need for contemporary left theory to engage in the difficult work of making oil and other natural resources a central part of our political imaginings and strategizing, and of the need to do so without the comforting ease of dreams of transcendence and salvation. ■

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- 1 Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963–1971), 3:368.
- 2 For what it’s worth, in an effort to highlight our reliance on energy, Jean-Marc Jancovici has (provocatively) invented a “slave equivalent” measure to point to how many laboring bodies worth of energy (calculated quite precisely in kilowatt-hours) an average person makes use of in her daily activities. The energy consumption of the average French person is equivalent to each owning 100 slaves to work for her (cooking, cleaning, generating heat, moving them around, etc.); the average American would require closer to 200 slaves. See http://www.manicore.com/anglais/documentation_a/slaves.html.
- 3 Quoted in William Marsden, *Stupid to the Last Drop* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008), 49.
- 4 Jacob Lund Fisker, “The Laws of Energy,” in *The Final Energy Crisis*, ed. Andrew McKillop with Sheila Newman (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 74.
- 5 Imre Szeman, “System Failure: Oil, Futurity and the Anticipation of Disaster,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (2007): 805–823.
- 6 For examples of all of these, see John Knechtel, ed., *FUEL* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).
- 7 Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* (New York: Zed Books, 2007).
- 8 “As soon as he has to produce, man possesses the resolve to use a part of the available natural objects directly as means of labour, and, as Hegel correctly said it, subsumes them under his activity without further process of mediation.” Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 734.
- 9 *Lessons of Darkness*, dir. Werner Herzog (Hemispheric Pictures, 2002) and *Black Sea Files: Video Essay in 10 Parts*, dir. Ursula Biemann (2005).
- 10 Cf. Giovanna Borasi and Mirko Zardani, *Sorry, Out of Gas: Architecture’s Response to the 1973 Oil Crisis* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture/Corraini Edizioni, 2008).
- 11 Other examples include *The End of Suburbia* (2004), *Peak Oil: Imposed by Nature* (2005), *The Curse of Oil* (2005), *The Power of Community—How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* (2006), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006), *Blood and Oil* (2008), etc.
- 12 J.J. Charlesworth, “Any Other But Our Selves,” *Mute: Culture and Politics after the Net* (September 25, 2008), http://www.metamute.org/en/content/any_other_but_our_selves.
- 13 Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 439.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 441.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 445.

16 Ibid. 442.

17 For the oft-cited former figure, see Robert Constanza, et. al., “The Value of the World’s Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital,” *Nature* 387 (1997): 253–260. For a contrary view, one which emphasizes (among other things) that possible stresses to the natural world are already accounted for by standard measures in capitalist economies, see Bjørn Lomborg, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also Jacob Steven’s insightful review of Lomborg, “Monetized Ecology,” *New Left Review* 16 (2002): 143–1.