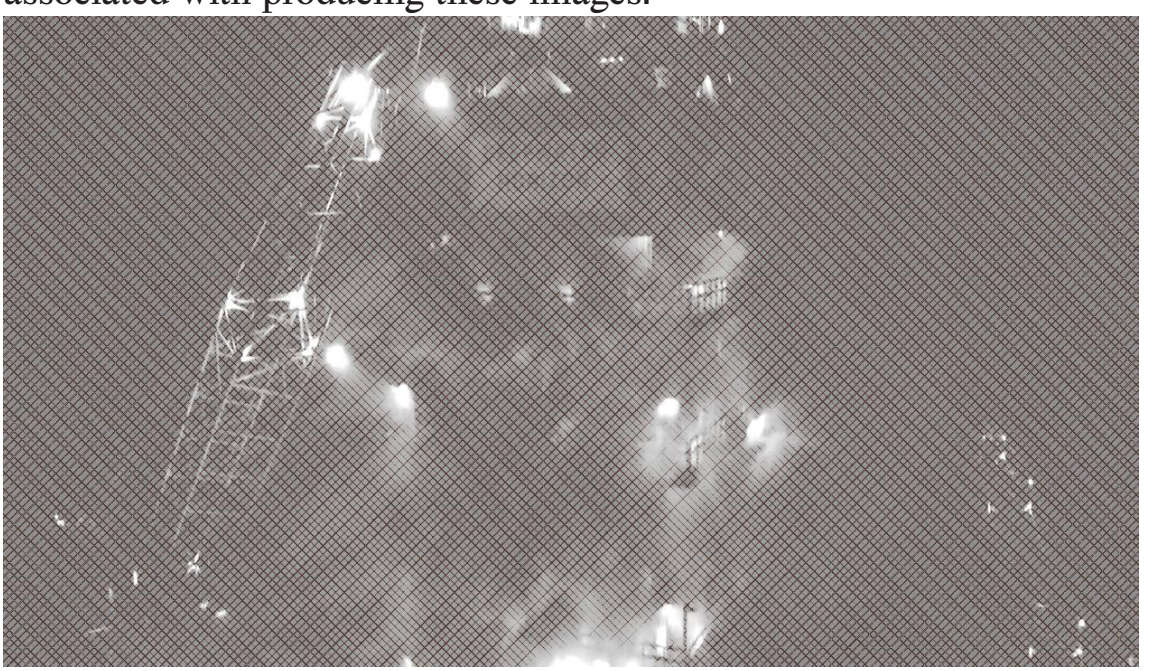
# EXTRACTION-DESTRUCTION-PRODUCTION

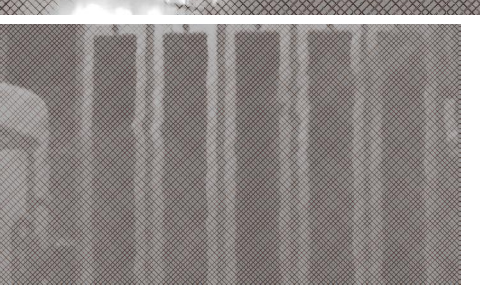
On the Contradictory Productivity
of Oily Images

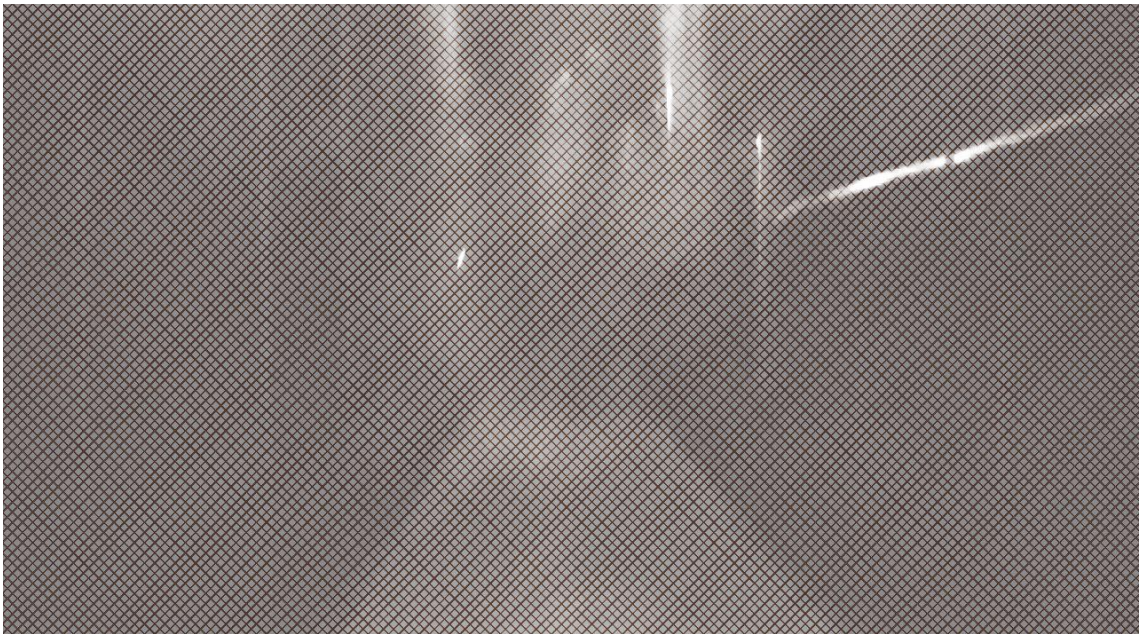
Alexander Klose

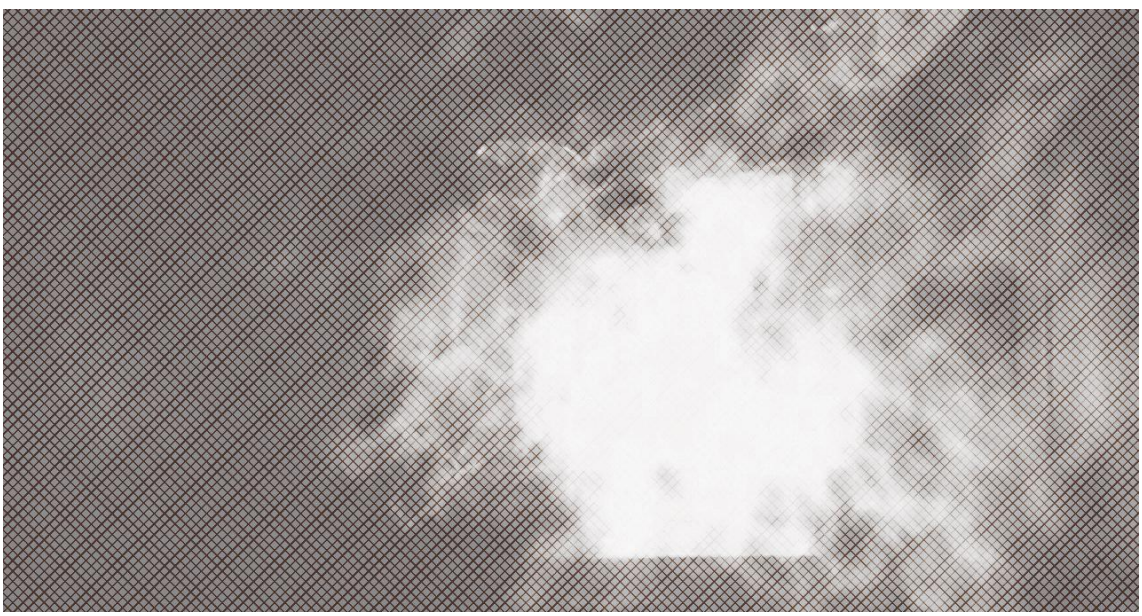
17

Thinking about the roles images play in the production of knowledge around anthropogenic damage to ecosystems, one stumbles into a meshwork of contradictory relations. Principally, it is possible to distinguish between two different categories of images: those *about* situations of extraction/destruction (with images of disasters being the most popular) and those brought forward or made *by* the situations themselves. The latter is a relatively new (or newly recognized) type of images that Susan Schuppli refers to as "dirty pictures," a way in which "anthropogenic environments are documenting their own damaged condition."[1] Both types of images share a problematic condition: as they formulate a critique of extraction, destruction, and pollution, they are also a part of or the result of the circumstances they depict. In the following text I will concentrate on image-making related to the extraction and uses of oil (and the products it is used to produce) as being probably the most important and momentous of all anthropogenic substances shaping the contemporary condition of the earth. I will track some of these contradictory constellations and try to elaborate an understanding of the dialectical yet calamitous dynamics associated with producing these images.







## IMAGES AND IMAGINATIONS OF DISASTER

The image of oil disaster is as old as cinema itself. A film of burning oil wells in Baku, taken by a local licensee of the Lumière brothers' studio in Paris in 1896, can be considered the first catastrophe film in history.[2] As Azerbaijani philosopher and film theorist Rahman Badalov put it, "of course, blazing oil gushers make marvelous cinematographic material... As a medium, only cinema can capture the thick oil stream bursting forth like a fiery monster. Only cinema can display such an awesome inferno in its terrifying beauty and majesty."[3] The benefits stream in both directions, it seems: cinema profits from the visual as well as the energetic potentials of oil and the technologies it fuels, and oil profits from its reproduction, spectacularization, and

ubiquitous dispersion as images. The docudrama *Deepwater Horizon* (2016)[4] covers the catastrophic incident of the blowout and subsequent explosion of the BP-run oilrig by the same name in the Gulf of Mexico, 66 kilometers off the US Gulf Coast, in April 2010. Eleven oil workers died and approximately 4.9 million barrels of crude oil spilled into the ocean, the worst oil spill ever. A 'blowout' happens when the underground pressure in a well can no longer be contained and the precious subterranean load gets out of control. Such outbreaks threaten and regularly wreck complete drilling facilities, causing damages amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars, not to mention the environmental costs. In the worst cases (as with the Deepwater Horizon disaster or the no-less traumatizing Piper Alpha catastrophe in the British oilfields of the North Sea in July 1988 that caused 167 fatalities but a much smaller oil spill), the gases that usually accompany subterranean oil storages catch fire, producing a vast explosion.

A blowout can be seen as the catastrophic equivalent of a 'gusher', the image of oil shooting high into the sky out of a newly-drilled oil well. Almost from the beginning of modern oil extraction, this image has served as an icon for the prospect of never-ending wealth that is linked to oil, an elementary force serving our culture, a modern cornucopia. It has been reproduced thousands of times in photographs and on picture postcards, in magazines, newsreels, motion pictures, and on TV.[*5,6] Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the film *Deepwater Horizon* puts an emphasis on the climax of the rig's explosion and concentrates on the technical and social aspects of the accident above the water. However, severe as the explosion and

[*]The most emblematic image probably being the scene in *Giant* (1956), in which James Dean, alias Jett Rink, finds oil. For an analysis of the gusher as a core element of "the aesthetics of petroleum" see also Stefanie LeMenager's 2014 book *Living Oil. Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (see endnotes 5 and 6).

destruction of the rig may have been, the worst effects of the catastrophe lie in what happened—and is still happening—underneath the rig in the ocean's depths and along the nearby coastlines. Deepwater drilling was still relatively new, risky, and therefore highly controversial. 1600 meters of water had to be bridged before the drill of the exploration well could enter the bottom of the sea and to make its way towards the oil reservoir some 5600 meters beneath the ocean floor. When the blowout happened and the rig exploded, the connection to the wellhead was cut, resulting in an underwater gusher. It took eighty-seven days before specialists from BP and the oil field service companies responsible for the drilling site managed to close the hole in the ocean ground. The long-term consequences of the oil spill will probably last decades or even centuries.[7]

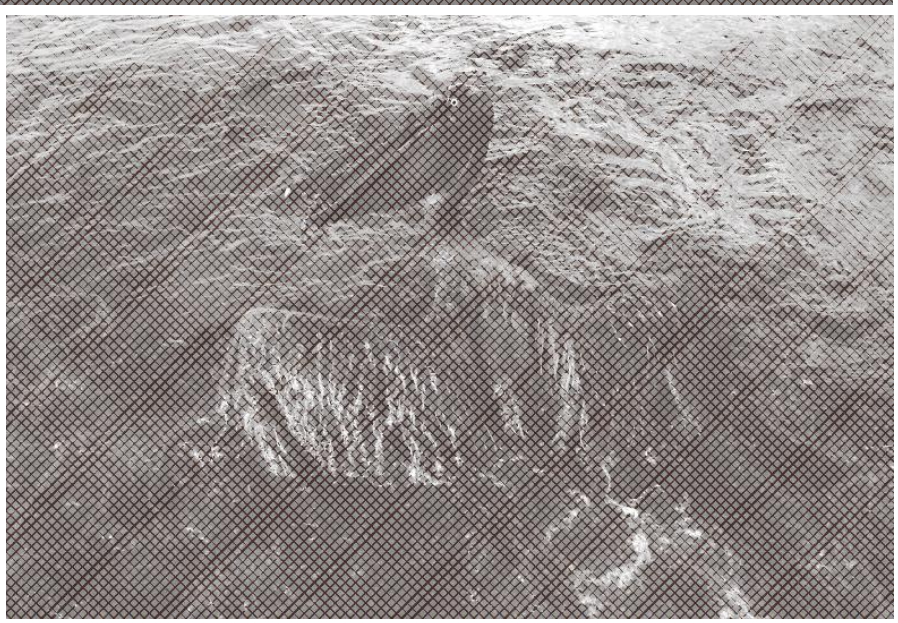
By ignoring the larger context and concentrating on the short-time spectacle, *Deepwater Horizon* stays within the tradition of disaster movies, a genre going back to the silent movie-days and which peaked in the 1970s with films like *Airport* (1970) and *The Towering Inferno* (1974). Typically focused on technical details, with the underlying message that the mistakes that happened could have been prevented and will be prevented in the future, the ultimate function of these 'imaginations of disaster', as Susan Sontag has famously put it, is not critique but catharsis.[8]

Additionally, since the advent of the classic disaster movie in the 1970s, the (re)construction of catastrophic events is often based on state of the art analyses by forensic experts. It works with unseen and (for human eyes) mostly impossible images. In *Deepwater Horizon*, we see from within a ventilation shaft through which gas is fuming how a fan is blocked by metal debris caused by the blowout and produces sparks that ignite the gas, thus causing the explosion. Such images could be called objective images, because they are taken from a non-subjective technical standpoint. As such, they tend to obscure the view on larger frameworks, social and historical backgrounds, and the long-term effects on natural environments.

## PETRO PORN AND THE SPECTACLES OF OIL

Hollywood's most prominent and beloved scenes (the aerial shots, the car chases, the plane rides) would hardly be possible without petro technologies. Moreover, since the beginning of the twentieth century,

oil companies have used film to document their operations abroad and as propaganda material to convince governments and populations of the beneficial impacts oil modernity would have on them, the documentaries commissioned by the then Saudi Arabian and US-American company Aramco and by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in the late 1940s and 1950s being a key example.[9] Aside from the countless celebrations of 'petromodern' lifestyles in motion pictures around the world, the cinematic oil archive largely consists of documentaries commissioned by the oil industry itself. Depicting its advances into countries in the Middle East, Africa, or South America, and the implementation of its high tech equipment almost in real time, these films resemble a civil equivalent to war reporting. As Patrick Russell, head of the non-fiction team at the BFI (British Film Institute) National Archive points out: "No sector of society made more enthusiastic use of the sponsored film than the oil companies" and "no medium was more enthusiastically embraced by them than the documentary film."[10]



The subgenre of the oil documentary found an equivalent in the work done with photography—its technological 'older sister'. Historically, this kinship of oil documentation in film and photography follows a certain pattern. After the film teams showing and staging the glorious beginnings had left, the photographers moved in to document the often disastrous continuations and outcomes of oil extraction: corruption, exploitation, terrorism, civil war, pollution, and environmental disaster.

Some photographers have specialized on 'oily' environments, the most well-known probably being Edward Burtynsky, whose monumental tableaus of sites of extraction, production, and consumption of oil products (along with other mining and terraforming activities) have been shown in museums and published in magazines around the globe.[11] Burtynsky prefers to take an elevated standpoint for his shots, trying to stage what he himself has called the 'industrial sublime'. This aesthetic move works well as a formal strategy. But as a method of radical distancing, it seems to fail to establish a cognitive or emotional connection between the terribly beautiful images of 'man-made ruin' and its recipients. Literary scholar Clint Burnham even suspects "it would not succeed so well in the art world if it were not possible to *stop* thinking about those chemical and ecological realities." [12]

Other photographers like Ed Kashi or Steve McCurry are going the opposite way, focusing on the psychological and emotional detail. Long before the stereotypical imagery for raising awareness of climate change, like the starving polar bear on a melting ice floe, had made its appearance in the early 2000s, the genre of oil pollution accusation had produced its most valuable icons: oil-smeared seabirds, whose eyes gaze tortured through the black cavities of the infernal substance with which they were covered, into the cameras of that global public whose consumer habits have been making the accident-prone mobility of oil profitable in the first place.

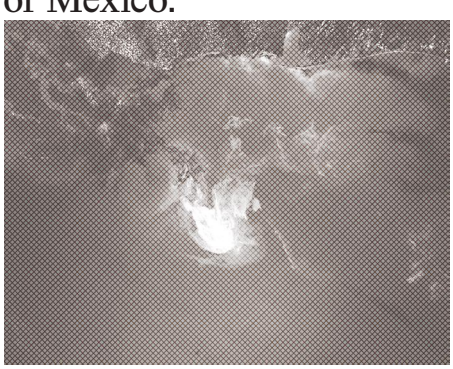
In this respect, the 'fashion story' *Water & Oil* by photographer Steven Meisel (published as the August 2010 cover story for *Vogue Italia* on the occasion of the Deep Water Horizon accident) can be considered a high point (or rock bottom) of petrocultural self-awareness. A very white supermodel in mostly black clothes is shown on an

oil-covered seashore with an oil-covered face in poses alternately reminiscent of a zombie or a tattered bird. “This photo editorial does not call for any action, but merely aestheticizes the female corpse and the female victim of violence—only that this time big oil is glorified as the aggressor,” writes petroculture researcher Sheena Wilson.[13]

The more the extraction/destruction/production dynamics of the oil industry have been moving forward, the more the photos they produce entail. Previously-unseen images of terraforming planetary technology, of suffering and abyssal beauty, images that even seem to depict a world long before, or after, mankind. None of them, it seems, escape the exploitative logic of the “traffic in photographs.”[*14] When looking at images of infernal fires, suffering workers, or dead seabirds, an ambivalence comparable to that of pornographic image practice emerges. While pornography oscillates between the liberation and autonomy of sexual desire and its subordination to a market logic, with images of oil the question arises whether the critique that is to emanate from these images addresses political subjects capable of criticism, or whether they effect an easily consumable sense of catharsis.[15]

## THE PENCIL OF THIRD NATURE

The second category of images that are analyzed in this text are those made by anthropogenic environments and their disasters. This category is the result of an even deeper entanglement with the dialectical logic of destruction-production. Susan Schuppli, who dedicated part of her work at Goldsmith’s Forensic Architecture Group to the research of these kinds of images, calls them ‘dirty pictures’ or, with those more closely related to oil-pollution, ‘slick images’. As case material she investigates the effects of the Deepwater Horizon disaster on the Gulf of Mexico.



[*] Photographer and art theorist Alan Sekula analyzed the claim to neutrality and universality of documentary photography, and the (post-)colonial and hegemonic dynamic working underneath in projects such as Edward Steichen’s globally distributed exhibition and book *The Family of Man* (1954). See Sekula’s *The Traffic in Photographs*, pp. 15–25 (see endnote 14).

The problem is not only the sheer amount of crude that was released into the ecospheres of the ocean but the fact that the oil spilled from the bottom of the deep sea. Only parts of it could be contained utilizing skimmer ships, floating booms, controlled burns, and oil dispersant, which is a highly poisonous chemical compound itself.* According to estimates, 50 to 75% of the oil remained in the sea. A portion of it diffused into tiny particles, another portion formed large bubbles, and still another part sank down and clumped in a thick carpet covering hundreds of square kilometers of ocean floor, apt to produce further damages and mutations for an unforeseeable period of time.

To make visible the directions and the amount of diffusion of the oil, advanced surveillance techniques were deployed, underwater and from the sky. This is where Schuppli's analysis takes its starting point. The specific chemical and optical characteristics of petroleum are such that even when it dissolves into molecular particles, it reflects light in distinct ways. Therefore, it can be seen and captured with optical devices both on the surface from above and underneath the water. This is also why, in the beginning of the twentieth century, major insights into the geohistorical nature and molecular structure of oil compounds were gained through the spectral analysis of their optical behaviours. Schuppli concludes that what we refer to as an oil slick or film really is a film, in the sense of a medium, a "form of image production" through which the anthropogenic intrusion into the ecosphere makes itself visible and receivable, "a new form of cinema organised by the found footage of 'nature' itself." [16] She asks, "Have we entered a geo-photo-graphic era in which polluted environments operate as vast photosensitive arrays that register and record the changes brought about by industrialisation and its contaminating processes? An epochal shift that demarcates a photographic condition rather than a metaphoric attribution in which environments are merely read as inscriptive surfaces?" [17]

The notion of nature producing an image of and by itself conjures up the classic rendering of photography as a 'pencil of nature', of images "impressed by nature's hand," as Henry Fox Talbot famously put it, or

* It has produced a lot of collateral damage both in the marine environment and populations along the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida—including the human inhabitants of this area.

as a means "to help nature to picture itself," [18] as Louis Daguerre wrote in 1839. Schuppli's paradigm shift raises the classic questions about the authorship of photographs in an entirely new way, their realism and their epistemic and ontological status—chemical process of self-depiction, or social construction? Nature or culture?[19] These questions fade into the background as they are radically shifted towards the necessity to achieve awareness about the nature of photography's entanglements. The decisive difference here being that it is not 'nature' as the idea of an untouched other of culture, which represents itself, but a highly transformed and contaminated state of nature, an industrialized one; and yet not in the form of the controlled and artificially reproduced environments of 'second nature', which are characteristic for the classical period of the industrial age, but as a kind of 'third nature',[20] in which pollutants and all kinds of debris of the industrial culture serve as probe heads or contrast agents to understand the complex dynamics of uncontrollable and often little understood ecosystems like the oceans (or the human organism).

Of course, such images are part of a larger anthropogenic context. Not only have the 'natural' elements that produce an image of themselves—oil, for example—been put there by human activity, but the means with which they can be recognized as images are part of a complex and immense technological and epistemic setup; technologies of underwater exploration and the 'vast machine' [21] of satellite-based data and image capturing and its meteorological interpretation. The underlying dynamic of this image production seems to correspond to the overall dynamic of the modern industrial and colonial civilization project that meticulously documents the beings and things it stirs up, adding knowledge about everything it claims as prey to its ever-growing epistemic hoard, transforming life into knowledge and images.

From the perspective of the 'discovered' indigenous people, animals, plants, or microorganisms it seems clear that they were much better off if they hadn't been recognized, analyzed, and catalogued in the first place, if the forests, deserts, and plains were left untouched, the resources were left in the ground, the images weren't taken. From the perspective of the project of the Western Enlightenment, of which photography and film are central elements, the situation looks different. Even if the circumstances of discovery are calamitous, they are what

produces the surplus value, not only of economic wealth, but also of knowledge. Without the enormous amounts of energy and money spent on the exploration and extraction of petroleum and natural gas and the ubiquitous consumption of its products, we wouldn't have the understanding of geological formations, paleontological evolution, and 'deep time', nor the knowledge of the microbial processes triggered by hydrocarbon compounds that form the basis of today's environmental awareness. They are, for the time being, the collateral effects of the never ending, ever deeper, ever more refined activities of the oil industrial complex and, to a certain degree, also of the consumption and pollution cycles it has been enabling.

1 Susan Schuppli, "Dirty Pictures," in: *Living Earth: Field Notes from the Dark Ecology Project 2014—2016*, eds. Mirna Belina and Arie Altena (Amsterdam: Sonic Acts, 2016), 189—208.
2 Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, "The First Eco-Disaster Film?," *Film Quarterly* 59, No. 3 (Spring 2006): 44—51.
3 Rahman Badalov, "Oil, Revolution & Cinema," *Azerbaijan International* 5, No. 3 (Autumn 1997): 57.
4 *Deepwater Horizon*, directed by Peter Berg (2016; Santa Monica, CA: Summit Entertainment).
5 *Giant*, directed by George Stevens (1956; Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers).
6 Stefanie LeMenager, *Living Oil. Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 92ff.
7 See also Peter Galison and Caroline A. Jones, "Unknown Quantities. On Oil Spill Imaging," *Artforum International* 49, No. 3 (November 2010): 49—51.
8 Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," in: *Against Interpretation and other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1979), 209—225.
9 See Mona Damluji, "The Image of Middle Eastern Oil," in: *Subterranean Estates. Life Worlds of Oil and Gas*, eds. Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason, Michael Watts (New York: Ithaca, 2015), 147—164.
10 Patrick Russell, James Piers Taylor, eds., *Shadows of Progress: Documentary Film in Post-War Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 88.
11 Burtynsky's website offers a good look. See section "Oil," *https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/oil*
12 Clint Burnham, "Photography from Benjamin to Žižek, via the Petrochemical Sublime of Edward Burtynsky," in: *Petrocultures. Oil, Politics, Culture,* eds. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 464—465.
13 Sheena Wilson, "Gendering Oil. Tracing Western Petrosexual Relations," in: *Oil Culture*, eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2014).
14 Alan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal* 41, No. 1 (Spring 1981): 15—25.
15 For a further discussion of the notion of 'petro porn' see also Alexander Klose and Benjamin Steininger, *Erdöl. Ein Atlas der Petromoderne* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2020) 155—163.
16 Schuppli, "Dirty Pictures," 193.
17 Id., 191.
18 Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Pearson Longman, 1844—46), *https://www.thepencilofnature.com/introductory-remarks/*
19 For a discussion of these opposing interpretations and their implications, see: Peter Geimer, "Fotografie als Fakt und Fetisch. Eine Konfrontation von Natur und Latour," in: *Ganz normale Bilder. Historische Beiträge zur visuellen Herstellung von Selbstverständlichkeit*, eds. David Gugerli and Barbara Orland (Zürich: Chronos, 2002) 186—187.
20 For an approach to the concept of third nature, see Hartmut Böhme, "Ökologie, Ästhetik und Technik in der dritten Natur," in: *Dritte Natur. Technik. Kapital. Umwelt,* eds. Steffen Richter and Andreas Rötzer (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2018) 7—22.
21 Paul Edwards, *A Vast Machine. Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2010).

IMAGES
p. 16—17 *Deepwater Horizon*, Summit Entertainment/Lionsgate, 2016.
p. 18 *Oil Wells of Baku*, Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1896.
p. 20 A Brown Pelican is seen on the beach at East Grand Terre Island along the Louisiana coast. AP Photo/Charlie Riedel, 2010.
A cormorant soaked in oil from the Exxon Valdez oil spill sits on the beach of Green Island in Prince William Sound, Alaska, Getty Images/Bob Hallinen, 1989.
p. 23 Al Ahmadi oil field, Kuwait. Steve McCurry, 1991.
A bird coated in thick fuel oil on a beach after the 2002 Prestige oil spill off the coast of Spain. AP file/Denis Doyle, 2002.
A brown pelican coated in heavy oil wallows in the surf on East Grand Terre Island, Louisiana. Getty Images/Win McNamee, 2010.
p. 24 *Water & Oil*, Steven Meisel, Vogue Italia, 2010.
p. 25 *Deepwater Horizon oil spill*, NASA's Terra Satellites, 2010.

Illustrations in this magazine have been printed in black and white with a bronze Pantone. They have also been treated with Color Assimilation Grid, an open source algorithm created by Øyvind Kolås which reduces image file sizes, video streaming bitrates, and ink usage. The process is similar to halftone printing techniques: the original images are turned into grayscale, apart from a thin, oversaturated color grid, which creates a partial but functional illusion of color.

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