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A SCALE THAT EXCEEDS US:

THE BP GULF SPILL FOOTAGE AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF EDWARD BURTYNSKY

LANCE DUERFAHRD

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

Notre fascination devant les images vidéos du déversement pétrolier causé par British Petroleum (BP) dans le Golfe du Mexique en 2010 exprime le paradoxe voulant que nous n'ayons aucun contrôle sur le progrès technologique entrepris en notre nom, et qui est apparemment mené dans notre intérêt et en fonction de notre demande. Ces images nous présentent un modèle pour les désastres de l'avenir : quelque chose a lieu sans que rien ne change. Ce portrait d'un désastre sans progression et sans syntaxe n'est pas quelque chose de nouveau; on l'a vu sur scène avec *En attendant Godot* et *Fin de partie* de Samuel Beckett. En dépit de cela, l'art n'a suscité qu'une faible réponse à la trépidation silencieuse causée par la vidéo BP. Une même fascination est présente dans notre réponse à *OIL* d'Edward Burtynsky. Dans son travail photographique sur l'industrie pétrolière, Burtynsky retranche la dimension humaine, nous montrant ainsi l'énormité seule (liée à la grandeur et au crime) de l'industrie. Pourtant, contrairement à la vidéo de BP, ces images amenuisent notre horreur devant l'ampleur de ce qu'elles montrent. Au lieu de réagir à l'œuvre de Burtynsky, on s'apaise en appréciant le contrôle de l'artiste sur son milieu et sur son langage symbolique.

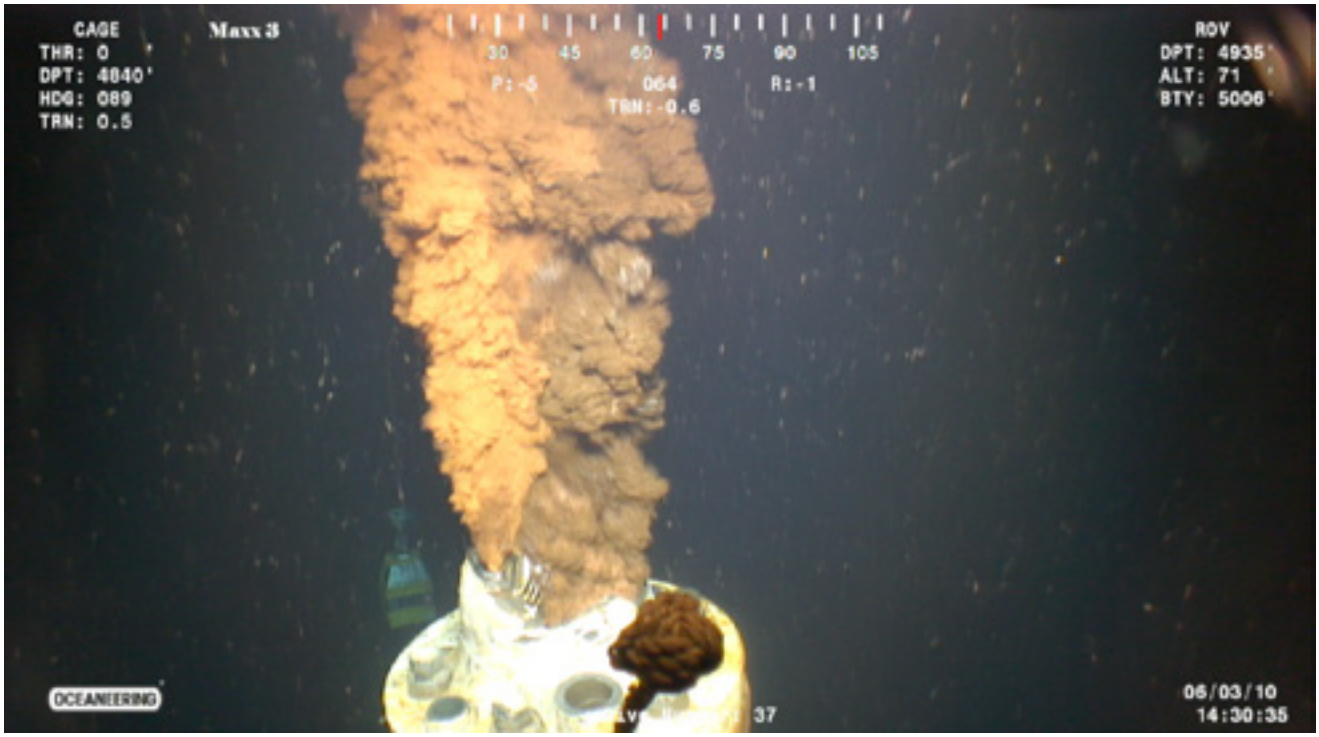

Fig. 1

The footage of the Deepwater Horizon disaster is not art. It is nothing more than grainy technical video captured by cameras attached to BP's Remotely Operated Underwater Vehicles (ROV's). The video ran almost nonstop from April to May in 2010, while oil gushed from the broken wellhead. Edward Burtynsky also treated the subject. Styling himself in the tradition of the great 19th century artists/landscape photographers Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson, Burtynsky uses a large format view camera that fosters a contemplative approach to his subject and exhibits his images in galleries and glossy books.[1] Despite their distinct objectives and formal aspects, the BP video and Burtynsky's photographs elicit an eerily similar response from us as viewers: hypnotic awe. How do these images activate our wonder? What is the outcome, in each instance, of our spellbound state? Burtynsky's images seemingly invite awe about the photographic medium itself, thereby utilizing the oil industry to confirm our role as consumers and critics of the images. By contrast, the video of the BP catastrophe fascinates us because it expresses a paradox: our ultimate irrelevance to technological progress apparently undertaken for our benefit, in our name, and in response to our demand.

The facts surrounding the explosion of the floating rig Deepwater Horizon in April, 2010 are mostly familiar.[2] Less well understood is the spell exerted by the footage and the massive circulation in online and newsmedia networks. In contrast to disasters which are spectacular in both their implications and their imagery, the BP disaster in the Gulf is notable for the caesura or chasm that separates the dire consequences of the disaster from the rather unremarkable images of its unhaltable progress:

A compressed violence literally characterizes these images. Miles beneath the surface of the ocean, the oil occupies a fraction of the cubic space it will upon

rising to the surface. This made it difficult for engineers using velicometry to precisely measure the quantity of oil gushing from the pipe.[3] BP purposefully fed the first ROV images back into a computer in order to lower their resolution. (See, for example, this video from The Guardian for a deliberately imprecise image[4]). The first footage released to the newsmedia had a deliberately smudged and blurry quality that made it impenetrable to experts and less incriminating to BP. BP conveniently circulated a 'compressed' file, one with compromised information that would facilitate its internet circulation.[5] The confluence of two types of compression, both within and of the image, guaranteed simultaneously the quick circulation of the image and its indistinctness. Its horrifying inscrutability became a part of its mesmerizing appeal.

We are hypnotized by the BP footage because we sense grave consequences to what we are seeing, yet we can't fathom what these consequences may be. The BP images, on the news for three straight months, provide few clues. German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht once observed that "less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupps works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit" (qtd. in Benjamin 526). Brecht asserts that the reification of human relations has implications for images as much as it does for the commodity. In the same way the commodity conceals all traces of the labor that went into it, a photograph only partially illuminates the true workings of monolithic institutions (the arms manufacturer, Krupps, and the energy giant, AEG). Brecht's point is that though we sense their power, photographs ultimately are powerless to capture, express, or understand the reality forged by massive industrial enterprise. In the footage of BP's Macondo spill Brecht's point is both demonstrated and alarmingly escalated. The BP footage seems to divulge the *dysfunctionality* of industry, the breaking of a reality at home with the equipment of technological progress. It seems very different from Brecht's example of a photograph of the functioning Krupps plant (an image we can easily imagine circulated by Krupps' PR firm).

We are transfixed by the BP footage because the image excludes us. In the BP footage we witness a crisis from which we ourselves—and any intervention either by our critical awareness or by our government—have been absented and rendered irrelevant. Brecht could not have seen the extent to which reality remains *inexplicit* in the image of technological breakdown. Much of modern thought proposes that truth emerges when things stop working. [6] Not only did the footage of the Deepwater Horizon spill not make actual reality more legible to us or more accessible to critique (as hoped for by Brecht's own effort to 'expose the mechanism' of theater) but it retained and even *exceeded* the fascination exercised by functioning industrial technology. The nightly image of oil gushing from a pipe provides an accelerated and perverted version of the hypnosis exerted by the aptly named 'nodding donkey' oil rig movement (the petroleum industry's version of the swinging stopwatch).[7] Our estrangement from the technologically mediated reality of the BP images is measured by the unarousal with which we register that they are pornographic images. Deeply illicit images that its maker, BP, could not want revealed or reviewed, the footage constitutes a peep show for the machines and for the whole technological apparatus behind global industry and the global environmental crisis, rather than for us. It is clear that we are seeing something we are not meant to see, something violent, and this is exciting. But unlike pornographic images intended for a human audience we do not understand the prohibition, the significance of this imagery or the bodies involved. Even the violence is more theoretical than actual. An interesting split occurred as the live feed continued over the course of three months: on the one hand, audiences staring at the image grew more silent and more inarticulate. Meanwhile the language wrought by the petroleum industry proliferated, devising terms such as 'top kill,' 'top hat' (to cap the well), 'relief well, 'shot of mud slurry,' and 'blowout preventer.' The technical language intended to reinvoke control over the well became more salient to the image of the crisis than the language of analysis.

Without syntax or escalation, the Macondo footage has an alarmingly generic quality. (A generic image describes the family photograph of a family we do not know, for example). Staring at the live feed we learn little about specific consequences of damage to the environment let alone about the web of human relations that constitute the reality of the oil industry and its relation to us. The footage lacks the direct emotional and formal impact of other iconic images (for example, Nick Ut's 1972 photo of Kim Phúc, running with her arms outstretched, her back burned after a napalm attack during the Vietnam War). Nor does it display the compact narrative trajectory of recent catastrophic images: the twin towers falling on 9/11 or the arc of slowly dissipating smoke following the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. Lacking these traditional contours of an 'event,' the Macondo footage instantiates a new model for future disasters: one in which we are not sure what is taking place, a disaster without progression and that unfolds on-screen in such a way that it could in fact be looped (rather than live) footage. Part of our fascination derives from our desire to spot a shift, a sign of alteration or a change in rhythm that would satisfy our desire to ascertain whether the situation is worsening or improving, whether it is the same image or a new image that we see.[8] The footage is time-lapse photography without the lapse. It evokes the monumentally boring insistence of non-narrative experimental cinema. It most closely resembles Andy Warhol's film *Empire*, an immobile eight hour long take on the Empire State Building over the course of a single evening. Both BP and Warhol document *in extremis*, and in the process the object loses its self-evidentiary status and outflanks our stare. The BP footage could aptly be renamed *Empire*.

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

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

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

These photos helped us configure something we cannot glean from our ongoing view onto the scene of the crime (a view furnished by the perpetrators): the effects of the

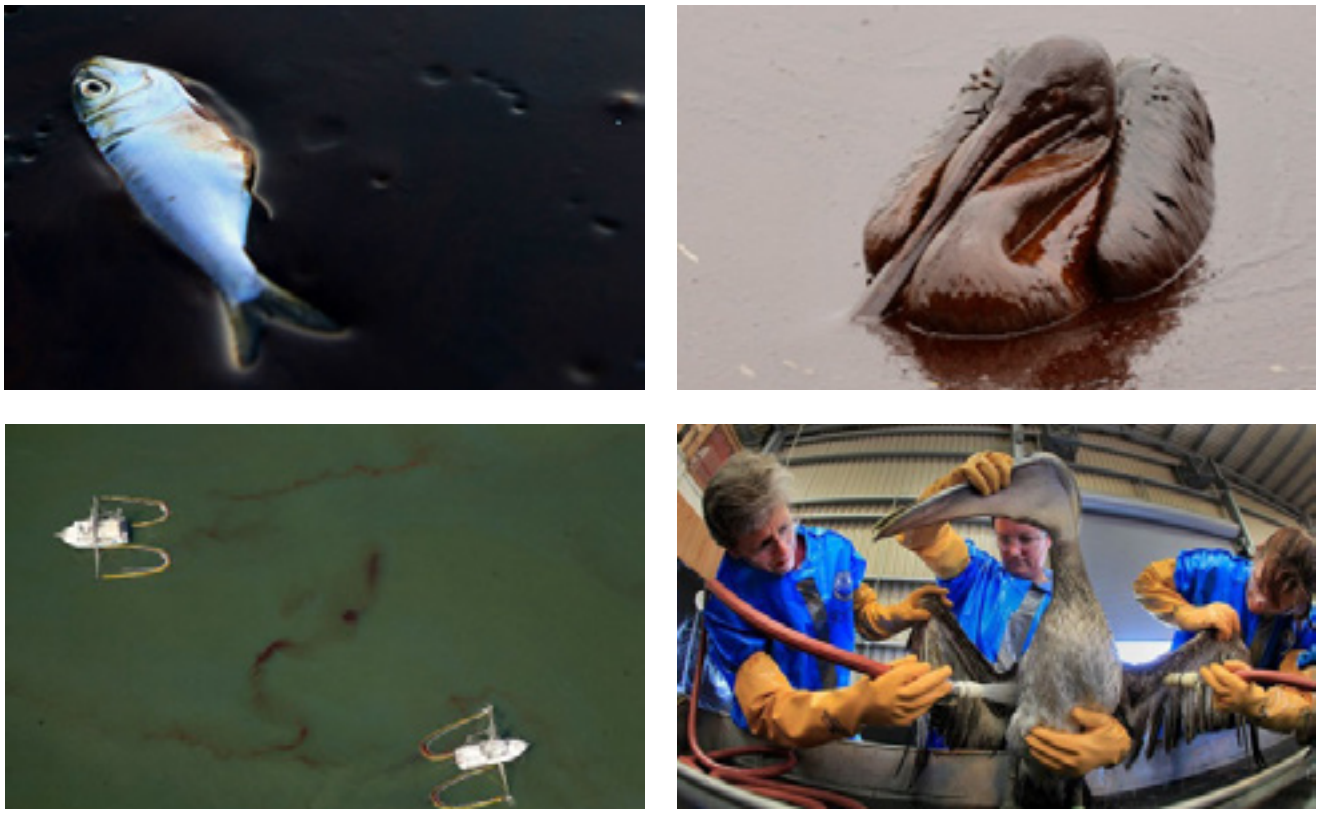

Fig. 2

disaster. These effects are difficult to fathom from the BP footage alone but in their combination provide that image with visual power. Aftermath photos such as dead fish floating in an water the color of chocolate syrup, aerial images of refunctioned shrimp boats skimming oil off the ocean surface, oil soaked pelicans seen first in the water and then scrubbed by technicians, and safety crews strolling incongruously past beachgoers, function as a kind of explanatory debriefing of our protracted stare at the raw footage at the disaster's source.

These three factors add up to a comment on what Brecht called the "functional" reality of the world. The image of the damaged well head spewing oil into the Gulf compels because it reveals what Brecht knew and we all know: that functional reality of massive industry—whether a Krupps plant or the high-tech oil extraction from the depths of the ocean—has leaped past our consciousness and awareness, and while it is done for us and for our cars and our furnaces, it ultimately excludes us. The BP footage is for video what the National Debt Clock is for number.[9] The science of the extraction of resources through the oceans from the earth is so cutting edge that it is developed and technically understood essentially by the private group of specialists engaged in its extraction. The government and media's attempt to understand and to deal with the situation, especially insofar as they focused on the 'causes' of the disaster, was at times ironic, at times even comical. CNN's footage shifted between spokespeople for industry, environmental and political pundits, the dangers of oil dependence, threats of lawsuits, the whole complicated apparatus for the

assignment of blame—between BP as owner of the well and oil service contractors Slumberger and Cameron, the mistakes of the Minerals Management Service. The cycle would complete itself with the inevitable return to video of the broken pipe, where despite all the talk the oil continued to spew, apparently without change to the image.

The oil industry literally operating increasingly in regions difficult to access, unexplored and invisible, also operates in part beyond the regulatory eye of the U.S. government and every government. In his book *Private Empire*, Steve Coll suggests that Exxon Mobile, rather than as a corporate 'citizen,' conceives of itself as a nation state all to itself (15). The BP footage provides this private empire with its anthem. Exemplified by behemoths like Exxon Mobil and BP, Big Oil have naturally formulated a subjectivity associated more with prices and demand for oil measured by markets than by political groupings and boundaries. This does not mean in any way that Big Oil ignores or disregards the governments with which it cooperates. To the contrary, it is expert at working with them. But as Coll points out, often operating in politically problematic parts of the world, Exxon has seen dictators, political parties, whole nations come and go. Political divisions and borders have been drawn and redrawn, but one thing has not changed: demand for oil. Transnationalism is of course not unique to the oil industry. The financial derivatives-products that nearly brought down the credit system in the fall of 2008 and spring of 2009 have been called 'weapons of mass destruction' and the companies that engineered these instruments called 'too big to fail.' Nations are dependent on banks as they 'depend' and 'are dependent' on oil. The regulatory maneuvers of any single nation, even the world's largest consumer of oil, the United States, are less important to oil producers than the world market for oil as a commodity, which can be influenced by governments or cartels of governments but not controlled, just as the oil spill too is beyond control.

Governments are behind Big Oil because governments are structured politically—by people, rather than according to the imperatives of a technological or industrial endeavor. This trend, nascent in Brecht's time has especially since the fall of the Soviet Union become increasingly common and even obvious. Fifty years ago, the space race, the attempt to go where no man has gone before was a competition between Soviet Russia and the United States, a moment for national pride and identity. Today it is not a government but Hollywood's James Cameron who is exploring the Mariana Trench, the deepest part of the world's oceans previously unobserved by humankind. Cameron's objective is to make a movie and he has convinced his private supporters that there is a market demand for images from the deep.[10] Meanwhile the US government has stopped sending the shuttle into orbit and future manned trips to space. If there is to be US-based space technology the plan at this time is that this be conducted by private companies, funded at times by the very rich who see leaving earth as their touristic privilege. [11]

But it is not the mere privatization of technological advance that is so uncanny about the video of the BP spill; it is the helplessness and indeed irrelevance of ourselves and the United States government to the technological endeavor that sustains us. Unlike political crisis in Sarajevo or Libya a technical crisis like the damaged BP Macondo well supports no sanctions, dialogue, diplomacy, or military action. Oil is extracted by an alliance of technology and capital that while it benefits from the sanction of governments and depends on them for its operational permissions, operates day-to-day with cutting edge instruments and methods that political entities have extraordinary difficulty monitoring and managing. The image of the oil gushing from a broken pipe at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico is a reminder that we do not comprehend the functioning of a technological infrastructure on which we depend, and which overwhelms and ultimately displaces our subjectivity. Mostly our technologies (phones, computers, automobiles, electricity, the internet, etc.) appear to us to be instruments that we use, control and manage. Oil gushing from a broken pipe in the ocean is fascinating because it suggests that although technology and capital are synthesized in an endeavor

to provide us with resources, the mobilization of these technologies occurs in a manner that we as individual subjects can neither understand nor control. Not only we as individuals but also our representatives—our government—is powerless. The calls from an irate public to politicians to 'do something' about the seeping oil make it only more clear that if anything is to be done then it will be done by the private sector, industry. This is an image of neo-liberal governance. The government has authority but without either equipment or expertise this authority is useless. The government cannot intercede to stop the oil spewing into the Gulf. It has no choice other than to rely upon the same engineers that drilled the well. The image of the wellhead spewing oil into the Gulf is as profound a statement as the public has ever seen of the impotence of the governmental body in the face of technological disaster.

The panic underlying our fascination with the BP video accompanies the strange celebrity of the company's CEO, Tony Hayward. In addition to the camera trained on the well head, the media trains its camera on him, on his head, as if he were a politician or representative of the people. So confusing is this role for the 'human face' of the company that he asks famously and pitifully "for his life back" in a widely circulated CNN interview (CNN). And yet, it is not the catastrophe itself that has proved too much for Hayward, so much as that he is thrust into an impossible role of an individual human being made responsible before a technological marvel gone wrong. Hayward is, of course, the scapegoat. He preserves for us the fiction that there is someone in charge, some face responsible and accountable for our condition.

Unlike the films of Warhol which have art and form as an object, the BP film is wrought by a question of what the video might ultimately mean (for us, for the environment). We are restless in the face of the BP footage but unlike for the film *Empire*, we dare not act on our restlessness. During a 1964 projection of Warhol's *Sleep*, an 8 hour film that features a man sleeping, an audience member driven to impatience ran up to screen and shouted in the character's ear, "WAKE UP" (Mekas 50). The BP footage provides no agent toward whom we could address this injunction, no relay station for allowing our screams, even hypothetically, to facilitate submerged consciousness towards the surface. The BP film is not made for us and any restlessness we experience is not owned by us as it is in the Warhol movie. Instead our restlessness is a question of its resolution, of when it will stop. Our restlessness may express a desire to find someone who will explain the image to us, or, alternatively, verify our suspicion that such a person does not exist. One remarkable trajectory of the BP footage is the way it required an audience of experts to be deciphered.[12] Activists who call for more government scrutiny, asking them to "WAKE UP" miss that even if the government were in the possession of all the technical protocols it would still be unable to act.

The BP video can perhaps be described as the clash between two idealized consciousnesses: a political or *explicit* consciousness and an industrial or *inexplicit* consciousness. Idealized political consciousness is moral. It creates and enforces the social contract. Political consciousness through government provides a stable ethics. It deals with the dilemmas of individual versus social will, with individual liberty and its alignment with society as a whole, with individual liberty, its risks and its limits. But industry and technology are aligned with something else: an *explicit* or human consciousness typically in the form of a human aggregate, as described by total demand or the market. For Martin Heidegger, technology becomes threatening when it "slips away from human control." This happens when humans fail to "listen" to technology, when thereby technology determines its own truth rather than having that truth "revealed" by humans (Heidegger 17). Perhaps one way to think of this is that technology in itself, in its own revealing does not operate within any ethical sphere, which can only be unknown to it. Human listening is required for that revealing to remain as an instrument of human control. Of course, technological development can be constrained by depriving it of resources (either human or capital) and by its own laws of growth. The BP spill stages the drama of the relative powerlessness of the human or explicit consciousness in the face of the inexplicit gone wrong. Heidegger claims that

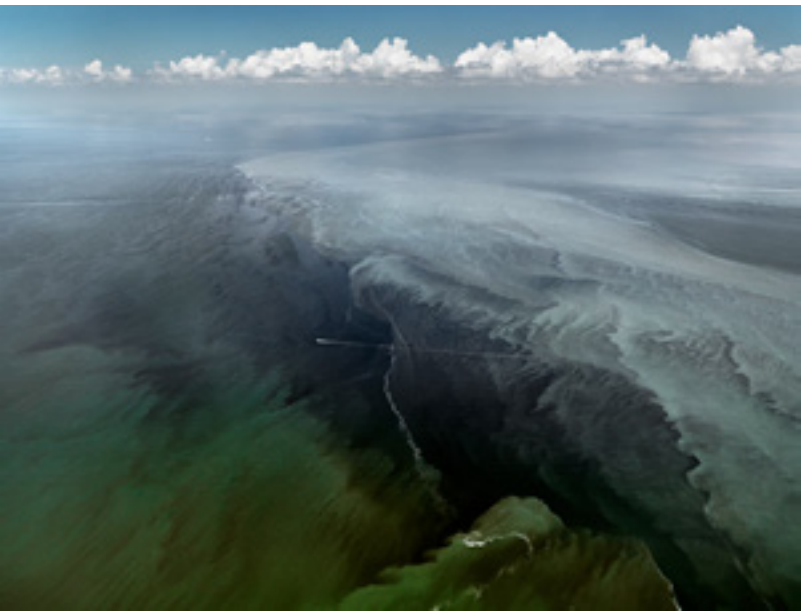

Fig. 3 Edward Burtynsky, *Oil Spill # 13*, *Mississippi Delta Gulf of Mexico, 2010*

human control over technology depends on how the stored resource (*Gestell*) is utilized, whereby it can be used for "either destructive or peaceful purposes" (15). Accordingly, an unstoppable spouting of an oil well, unable even to become a *Gestell*, is technology divorced from a human means. The imagery of the drama, incomprehensible to anyone other than a board of experts, suggests that oil drilling in the Gulf accesses and defines reality in a way that seems to deny us and our explicit consciousness a role other than as abstract or theoretical victims.

Burtynsky's Photographs

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

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

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

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

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

Like the photographs of the BP spill, Burtynsky's photographs in *OIL* do not celebrate the petroleum industry and monumental grandeur of its products

Fig. 4 Edward Burtynsky, *Ground Zero*, *Gulf of Mexico, 2010*

but they accept it by situating it in relation to the viewer's consciousness and understanding. Seeking to withdraw the "awe" channeled through his earlier images, the work in *OIL* asks us to soberly reckon with the petroleum industry. In this sense, despite the large format in which his prints are exhibited in galleries and museums, they are right-sized to human consciousness. Burtynsky's photographs, including those that document the petroleum industry's impact on the environment, contain a serene calm of a world perhaps depopulated by people but still 'beautiful' and recognizable to us.

Burtynsky in this photograph hands us a grand receipt for our cultural dependency on oil. The image offers us no *terra firma*, in a way that perhaps befits a scene of ecological plunder. Burtynsky gives us a bird's eye view but without its omniscience. His hovering and vertiginous viewpoints suggest the extinction of this bird whose eye once permitted knowing surveillance. In making his photographs, Burtynsky uses a mechanical crane and helicopter to access the angle from which to explore the

Fig. 5 Edward Burtynsky, *Alberta Oil Sands #9, Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, 2007.*

enormity of the petroleum industry: *enormity*, not only in the sense of largeness but in the sense of *enormity of the crime*. His images scrupulously delete anything in the landscape (a human figure, for example) that might help us assess the scale of what he documents.[13] That is, Burtynsky aims for enormity without, however, being drawn in comparison to either man or his instruments. Appearing in galleries as oversized prints, Burtynsky's images enforce a distinctly strange phenomenological response: they make us squint at what is right in front of us. Our efforts to distinguish road from dirt, oil from water, even a puddle from a lake, seem to evoke the work of a prospector shaking out his pan for something of value. Perhaps Burtynsky wants to show us that there is no valuable outcome to our excavation of this landscape: no detail, no contingency, no surprise, rewards the eye that sifts through it. His work signals a sorry day for the dialectic in which both man and nature, water and waste, have lost their antonyms. The situation in this image evokes an insight by Werner Herzog in his documentary *Lessons of Darkness*, about the burning oil fields after the first war in Iraq: "The oil is treacherous because it reflects the sky. The oil is trying to disguise itself as water" (Herzog). Unlike chemistry, photography cannot distinguish oil from water. This is another way of remarking the longstanding debt that the photographic medium itself has to oil. 'Bitumen of Judea' is a derivative of bitumen, currently being excavated in the Alberta oil sands. This tar-like substance provided Nicéphore Niépce with the light-sensitive coating used in the making of the first known photograph in 1826, an image of Niépce's backyard that developed after an 8 hour exposure.

Burtynsky's images seem to actively deplete the act of critical excavation in his work and to block any windfall from the extraction process. In this way he tries to maintain the epiphany that occasioned it: he obstructs the viewer's effort to comfortably grasp the proportion of the oil industry (and thereby dismiss it). In the outsized prints of the Socar oil tanks in Azerbaijan, we squint at the items around the tanks to offer us some access to scale.

The tank is braced by the frame of Burtynsky's photograph. Never before, perhaps, have we wanted to so desperately to count the number of steps in a photographed set of stairs, so as to help us measure the scale of the tank. By documenting the tank without such reference points, Burtynsky suggests the hugeness of the tank and yet this hugeness remains abstract. Because it offers only the idea of hugeness, our mind is permitted to shuttle in the opposite direction. The tank seems at once oversized and miniaturized, like the souvenir gas trucks that stations sometimes sell.

Though Burtynsky seeks to purvey enormity without awe, his work sometimes transfers this awe onto the photograph itself. The fields of oil rigs, the way an oil pipe cuts through a swath of forest in Cold Lake, Canada, the innumerable Choppers and Harleys of *Parking Lot at a Kiss Concert*, are recorded with such formal grandeur by Burtynsky's large format camera that these images freeze up in our eyes like symptoms. They block any cultivation of either outrage or critical

afterthought in the spectator. A strange dignity befalls even the lowest subjects of Burtynsky's viewfinder. As one critic notes (seemingly in approval), "As we apprehend the magnitude of environmental degradation captured in Burtynsky's images, we also experience an aesthetic thrill in looking at them" (Pauli 22).

Too often Burtynsky substitutes our response, our 'thrill,' to the image for our sense of the 'environmental degradation' it depicts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the photograph that punctuates the final page of *OIL*:

Following the images of industrial production, Burtynsky's series of shipbreaking and recycling in Chittagong, Bangladesh introduces the human figure, as if to show that real people in the third world recycle the debris of the first world. Though he only depicts these workers at great distances and always within vast wastelands, Burtynsky does not hesitate to use their footprints filled, almost cast, with oil.

The image concludes the book because it successfully anchors our conceptions to the photograph rather than to the disaster it portends. Burynsky does not want us to care that his workers, for example, *do not own shoes* while performing their toxic cleanup. Instead, this picture assuages us by filtering an array of images already familiar to us from footprints on the sand in greeting cards to the mark made by man's first step on the moon. Burtynsky creates a successful allegory of photography for our era in which the image of conquest has been reversed: man has made of the earth into something as desolate as the moon and steps not onto firm ground but into leftover crude. The photograph even literalizes the notion of the 'carbon footprint.' The image configures man's legacy, something that can only be bequeathed by a deceased party. As it seems to resemble the first images of a man's hand in the caves of Lascaux, the image also portends man's disappearance. In his celebrated essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," André Bazin observes that photographs "preserve the object, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber" (14). Burtysky's image links the

Fig. 6 Edward Burtynsky, *SOCAR Oil Fields #5, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2006*

Fig. 7 Edward Burtynsky, *Recyling #10, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2001*

medium of photograph not to amber but to something closer to the La Brea Tar Pits. *Recycling* #10 underscores not the preservational capacity of the photograph but rather the extinction of the creature whose trace it records. In this way Burtynsky creates a photograph in the future-perfect tense, where man's footprint will have ensured his destruction, his proleptic fossilization.

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

As an artist, Burtynsky works *on* his medium and not only by means of it. Since his work is intensely about form and divorces scale from our assessment (until this final image), critics frequently claim his photographs evoke the work of other photographers, and even sculptors and painters.[14] The connections are sustained by the abstraction of Burtynsky's work: they are all efforts at interpretation and these interpretations, in turn, encourage us to become art historians. By contrast the footage provided by BP baffles our aesthetic contemplation and questions the relevance of an ethical or human perception. Over the image of oil gushing boundlessly from the Macondo break we do not hallucinate the work of other artists. Rather we superimpose images borne by the generic quality of the BP footage: a smokestack belching fumes, an endlessly blowing lunch whistle, even (with the plankton and floating debris around the wellhead) a kind of infernal snow-globe one might find on the desk of a BP executive. Yet the BP footage also forces us to revoke each of these associations: the smokestack, for example, is an icon drawn from an earlier era of industrialization and has come to signify the triumph of technology over nature (a situation emphatically reversed in the BP footage). We cling to these associations to give some shape to the generic outlines of a drama we can watch but not evaluate: the endless murmur or scream of oil from the ground. The 'free associations' that we cobble together before the BP footage indicates in fact how the world is being transformed into an ink blot of catastrophic proportions, one that is visible from space. Unlike the traditional Rorschach test, this new one is formed by multiple plumes over the Gulf of Mexico, and does not inform us of our individual psyches, inclinations or private desires. Rather, this new Rorschach is a symptom detailing our dependence on technology and its horrific relation to the natural environment.

Image Notes

Fig. 1 "4:34 PM on 06/03/10." *Oilspillhub.orb*. 2010. Web. August 20, 2012. <http://oilspillhub.org/video.cfm?video=10>.

Fig. 2 Top Left: Gardner, Sean (Reuters). "Dead Fish Lie in Oil from the BP Oil Spill." Photograph. *The Guardian*, July 25, 2010.. Web. August 22, 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/jul/25/bp-oil-spill-sole-blame>.

Top Right: Ridel, Charlie (AP Photo). "Brown Pelican sits in heavy oil on the beach at East Grand Terre Island along the Louisiana coast Thursday, June 3, 2010." Photograph. *The Big Picture*. Boston.com. Web. August 20, 2012.

Middle Left: Cole, Carolyn (LA Times). "Shrimp Boats Skim Oil from the Water's Surface in the Gulf of Mexico. May 17, 2010." Photograph. *From the Photo Desk*. the star.com, May 18, 2010. Web. August 22, 2012.

Middle Right: Riedel, Charlie (AP Photo). "Erica Miller, left, Heather Nevill, center and Danene Birtell clean a Brown Pelican at the Fort Jackson Wildlife Rehabilitation Center at Buras, La. May 15, 2010." Photograph. *From the Photo Desk*. the star.com, May 18, 2010. Web. August 22, 2012.

Fig. 3 Burtynsky, Edward. *Oil Fields #13, Mississippi*

Delta Gulf of Mexico, 2010. Photograph. Edward Burtynsky Photographic Works, 2001. Web. *August 20, 2012*. <*edwardburtynsky.com*>. Fig. 4 Burtynsky, Edward. *Ground Zero, Gulf of Mexico, 2010*. Photograph. Edward Burtynsky Photographic Works, 2001. Web. *August 20, 2012*. <*edwardburtynsky.com*>.

Fig. 5 Burtynsky, Edward. *Alberta Oil Sands #9, Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, 2007*. Photograph. Edward Burtynsky Photographic Works, 2001. Web. *August 20, 2012*. <*edwardburtynsky.com*>.

Fig. 6 Burtynsky, Edward. *SOCAR Oil Fields #5, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2006*. Photograph. Edward Burtynsky Photographic Works, 2001. Web. *August 20, 2012*. <*edwardburtynsky.com*>. Fig. 7 Burtynsky, Edward. *Recyling #10, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2001*. Photograph. Edward Burtynsky Photographic Works, 2001. Web. *August 20, 2012*. <*edwardburtynsky.com*>.

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(Endnotes)

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

"I remember seeing my first Carleton Watkins prints… they were remarkable, with an aliveness in the images that is hard to find in contemporary work…I've often thought that if I had been born in that era that would

have been the kind of photography I would have loved to do. Going out, and bringing back something the world had not seen before. The New West. It must have been an exhilarating time for photography, full of exploration and adventure" (qtd. in Torosian 46).

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

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

4. http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/video/2010/jun/10/eel-deepwater-horizon-oil-leak

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

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

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

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

8. This suspended state of the disaster evokes people's fascination with trapped miners. Recent mining accidents in Chile (2010) and Peru (2012) initiate an inaccessible and technologically mediated drama that evokes the BP disaster. One might say the drama of these men begins only when they are accessible only by technology, when technology becomes the arbiter of their fate, when

their sequestered state (like the Macondo site) is both mediated and maintained by technology.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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