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MONSTROUS OIL: THEORIZING PETROMODERNITY'S MONSTERS

By

MADALYNN LEE MADIGAR

Bachelor of Science in Biology and Society, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 2018

Thesis

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Approved by:

Ashby Kinch,
Graduate School Dean

Dr. Louise Economides, Co-Chair
Department of English

Dr. Katie Kane, Co-Chair
Department of English

Dr. Christopher Preston
Department of Philosophy

Monstrous Oil: Theorizing Petromodernity's Monsters

Co-Chairperson: Louise Economides

Co-Chairperson: Katie Kane

Petroleum, a primary global energy resource, serves as a foundation of our contemporary society. However, the pervasive influence of oil as substance, commodity, and industry in our petromodern lives often goes unrecognized. In the present moment of biogeocultural crisis surrounding fossil fuels, recognizing and understanding our multifaceted engagements with petroleum is critical. This thesis contributes to the growing field of Petrocultural Studies by considering the conceptualization of petroleum through the associated tropes and figure of the monster. Through the petromonstrous, a term that encapsulates the massive scale, haunting effects, and human-other entanglements of petroleum, cultural attitudes and anxieties about oil can be read. Looking to popular culture, literature, and film, I discuss appearances of monstrous embodiments of oil and primarily analyze three varied depictions of petromonstrosity in China Miéville's short story "Covehithe," Gracie Gardner's absurdist play *Pussy Sludge*, and the South Korean creature feature *Sector 7* (2011) directed by Kim Ji-hoon.

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Bibliography

I'm a vampire, babe, suckin' blood from the earth

I'm a vampire, baby, suckin' blood from the earth

Well, I'm a vampire, babe, sell you twenty barrels worth

- Neil Young, "The Vampire Blues"

We're trapped in the belly of this horrible machine

And the machine is bleeding to death

- Godspeed You! Black Emperor, "The Black Flag Blues"

Chapter 1 – Petromonstrosity and Culture

I. Introduction: We Live in a Time of Petromonsters

At the heart of current fevered environmental discourse, the Anthropocene is the term for the contemporary planetary age marked by humanity as a geological force.¹ The Anthropocene, proposed by Paul Creutzen and Eugene Stoermer as a formalized geologic epoch, is defined by numerous anthropogenic stratigraphic signals to differentiate the time unit from the earlier Holocene epoch. These signals/signatures include a range of indicators such as radionuclide deposition resulting from nuclear weaponry fallout, but these signals chiefly cluster around the deep time effects enabled and directly caused by fossil fuel extraction, production, and combustion.² Scholar Derek Gladwin identifies fossil fuels, drivers of key signatures associated with climate change, as fundamental to definitions of the "human epoch": "The spirit of the

¹ Many noteworthy critics have scrutinized the Anthropocene for the use of suffix "Anthropo-" to represent a generalized species-level source for planetary disruption when, in fact, the drivers of geological change have been unevenly distributed in ongoing colonial projects and caused by select segments of human societies. Criticisms of the problematic reductivism of the Anthropocene can be found in many of the sources of this project as well as in Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* and T.J. Demos' *Against the Anthropocene*. While I agree with the adoption of alternative terms such as Capitalocene and Plantationocene and wish to disseminate their use, I utilize the term Anthropocene in this work because of its pending formalization as a geologic epoch, its appearance in current criticism, and its already existing popular legacy.

² Waters, Colin N., et al., "The Anthropocene is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene," aad2622-5.

Anthropocene burns with two major accelerants: rising energy demands and exponential use of fossil fuels to meet them, both in the nineteenth (coal) and twentieth centuries (oil and gas).³ A focus on the hydrocarbon-specific facets of the current age therefore seem necessary for addressing the major contributors to geological change.

To address our lived fossil fuel era, another term has emerged not from the sciences, but from the humanities. Petromodernity describes the reign of fossil fuels, particularly petroleum, as the main source of energy and material commodification for modern society.⁴ Defined by Stephanie LeMenager as “a modern life based in the cheap energy systems long made possible by petroleum,” petromodernity reflects how, in Gladwin’s words, “...oil shapes us, informs us, and defines our very selves within a history of modernity.”⁵ Petroleum is a globalized resource with material significance that extends outside of the energy sector: petroleum and its by-products are overwhelmingly found in the materials that structure our lives and, as is becoming increasingly obvious, the composition of the planet.⁶ Plastics, a petroproduct, are so ubiquitous and long-lasting that they contribute to a signature of the Anthropocene as new anthropogenic materials that replace the use of fossils for stratigraphic dating:

[Plastic remnants] and other new materials are commonly shaped into abundant artifacts with the capacity to be preserved in and to help date future geological deposits.

³ Derek Gladwin, *Ecological Exile: Ecological Exile: Spatial Injustice & Environmental Humanities*, 73.

⁴ While scholars including Gladwin use petromodernity to describe “the fundamental links between modern life (with all of its paradoxical freedoms and injustices) and fossil fuel energy systems...” (73) others such as Nathaniel Otjen choose a more encompassing term, such as “fossil fuel modernity,” to describe modern existence prefaced on a more inclusive range of fossil fuels (i.e., coal) besides petroleum. Otjen stresses that “[O]il and coal are associated with different aesthetics, cultural moments, and material productions, and their differences must be acknowledged” (fn. 2). Although some of my analyses hold for the monolith of fossil fuels and their significance for the current cultural moment, I am choosing to utilize petromodernity in my project for my primary focus on petroleum.

⁵ Stephanie LeMenager, “The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after Oil!,” 60. See also LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, 67; Gladwin, *Ecological Exile*, 87.

⁶ See Ranken Energy Corporation’s web article “Products Made from Petroleum” for a sampling of the petroproducts surrounding us.

Analogous to biotic fossil remains, these so-called technofossils (28) provide annual to decadal stratigraphic resolution (19, 22)—far greater than what can be obtained from the first and last appearances of fossil taxa, which have traditionally been the most common means of correlating stratal sections (29).⁷

These and the other geological, biological, chemical ramifications of petroleum are the subject of much necessary scientific study. Concurrently, increasing attention to the Anthropocene and petromodernity in the humanities address Gladwin’s questions regarding the “ways oil and gas influence and infiltrate critical and creative practices”: “If fossil fuels propelled modernity, how do they also fuel culture within this period? How bound up are narratives about oil and gas in our daily lives? If they are so prevalent, then why do they remain elusive in the social discourse?”⁸ Working in ecocritical and cultural studies as well as the nascent fields of petrocultural studies and the energy humanities, I intend for this project to contribute to the larger ongoing conversation on the nuanced influence of petroleum on culture through one salient cultural figure: the monster.

Conceptualized as partially human and non-human, often of gigantic proportions, and usually capable of large-scale destruction, the monster holds a prominent place in cultural imaginings. In one of the most influential texts establishing the significance of the monstrous, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen begins the preface of his 1996 edited collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* with the declaration that “[W]e live in a time of monsters.”⁹ Considering Cohen’s statement in a context that includes the ecological, we see that our current age is full of monstrosity. Other theorists have noted the unsettling associations conjured up by current

⁷ Waters, et al., “The Anthropocene is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene,” aad2622-3.

⁸ Gladwin, *Ecological Exile*, 73.

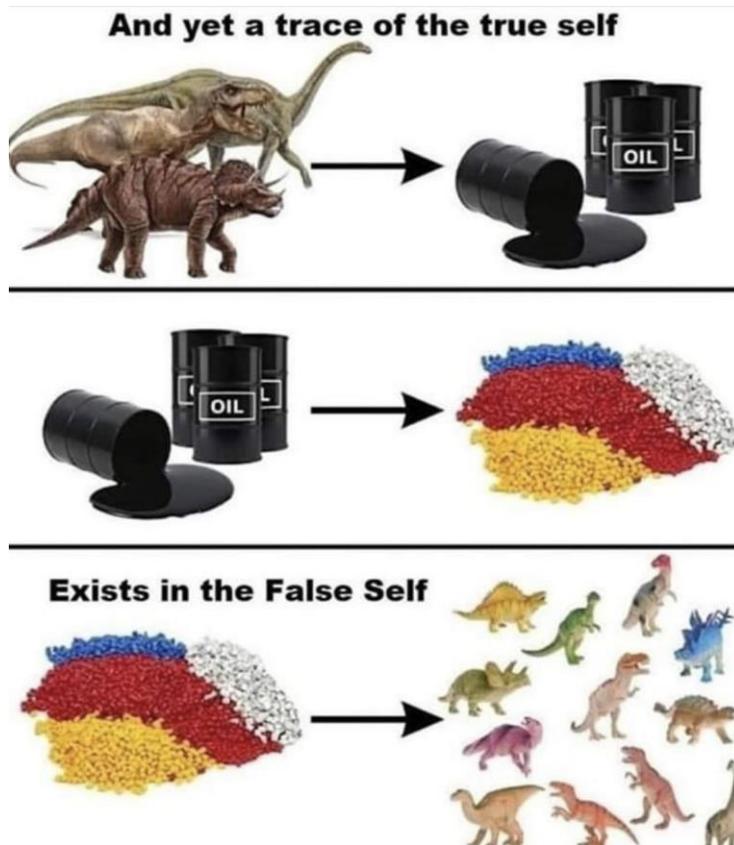
⁹ Jefferey Jerome Cohen, “Preface: In a Time of Monsters,” *vii*.

planetary and environmental justice crises: “there is something inherently uncanny, dark, and haunting about an era defined by...rising temperatures and seas, microplastics and extreme weather, the decline of the Arctic and the spread of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and the sixth mass extinction.”¹⁰ These and other environmental disruptions incorporate petroleum as a central monstrous actor as climate change, overconsumption, and extinction events largely spring from the activities made possible by the conditions of petromodernity. Tracing the cultural connection between monstrosity and oil begins at the commonly understood source of petroleum from prehistoric giants: dinosaurs. While fossil fuels lend their origins to ancient decomposed microorganisms, the direct linkage between petroleum and “fearfully-great lizards” thrives as a popular culture myth fueled by desires for a simple, easily comprehensible origin story and through imagery such as Sinclair Oil Corporation’s *Apatosaurus* mascot. The monster is an apt figure for depicting oil, a hybrid entity overwriting the human-other dichotomy as a substance intertwined with and driven by human forces. In our current petromodern landscape, petroleum reigns as a seemingly indomitable force in international markets and powers the engines of most every facet our modern experience—wherever we turn, oil is there. Gerry Canavan succinctly explains this omnipresence: “Oil is extremely local—as local as your corner gas station, as your car’s gas tank—but at the same time it is the token of a vast spatiotemporal network of seemingly autonomous actors.”¹¹ The incomprehensibly great physical existence of petroleum and the myriad petroproducts on the planet forms what Timothy Morton terms a “hyperobject”: something so “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” that it exists, much like a black hole, on a scale that is unable to be comprehended in its totality.¹²

¹⁰ Justin D. Edwards, Rune Graulund, and Johan Höglund, “Introduction: Gothic in the Anthropocene,” xiv.

¹¹ Gerry Canavan, “Retrofutures and Petrofutures,” 331

¹² Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, 1.



Popular meme format that circulated in the late 2010s. The image humorously conveys the cyclical ontology of oil in which dinosaurs (the false but popularly accepted source of fossil fuels) are remade into plastic images of themselves. In another ironic twist, plastics like these dinosaur figures may serve as technofossils and replace the purpose of actual fossils for dating stratigraphic layers.

In an interview with Morton, Morgan Meis applies a hyperobject lens to petroleum:

Take oil: nature at its most elemental; black ooze from the depths of the earth. And yet oil is also the stuff of cars, plastic, the Industrial Revolution; it collapses any distinction between nature and not-nature. Driving to the port, we were surrounded by oil and its byproducts—the ooze itself, and the infrastructure that transports it, refines it, holds it,

and consumes it—and yet, Morton said, we could never really see the hyperobject of capital—“O” Oil: it shapes our lives but is too big to see.¹³

The unfathomable damage caused by oil extends as connected hyperobjects—including global warming and pollution—that communities and individuals experience as local manifestations of larger planetary phenomena. While the deep time of the Anthropocene remains significant for discussions of entities that transcend scales of our lifetimes, the interactions of oil in human time must not be overlooked. The harmful influence of oil (via industry and the chemical itself) on both human and non-human populations may last for decades and generations, producing an effect of “slow violence” that grants petroleum the status of a temporal, as well as spatial, monster.¹⁴ This is the monster we let into our homes, cars, bodies, and livelihoods. This is oil.

The association with oil and monstrosity is not a novel connection—cultural imagination and rhetoric has long linked petroleum with monstrous descriptions. However, despite the significance of petroleum and monstrosity for culture, a sustained analysis of the monstrous in conjunction with petroleum seems to be absent from the existing literature. I am thus proposing the term petromonstrosity to encapsulate the appearance of petroleum as both a monstrous trope and cultural figure and as a way to conceptualize the many baleful qualities of oil.

Petromonstrosity surfaces as a trope in popular culture as well as in critical theory and recent petrocriticism.¹⁵ The lyrics I have used as epigraphs are two late-20th century examples of monstrous associations swirling together with petroleum in social commentary on the exposed devastation of petrocultural industry following the 1973 oil crisis and unceasing international

¹³ Morgan Meis, “Timothy Morton’s Hyper-Pandemic,” *The New Yorker*, 8 June 2021.

¹⁴ See Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, 2011.

¹⁵ See Ted Atkinson’s “Blood Petroleum: *True Blood*, the BP Oil Spill, and Fictions of Energy/Culture” and Graeme Macdonald’s “‘Monstrous Transformer’: Petrofiction and World Literature” for two recent articles incorporating the trope of petromonstrosity in their petrocriticism.

conflicts. Public news reports frequently express the connections we already make between petroleum and monstrosity; journalists often utilize rhetoric consistent with monstrousness in articles on oil's environmental toll whether they cover the substance's costly extraction or the widespread destruction from another devastating spill.¹⁶ Petromonstrosity is not exclusively employed to criticize the negatives of oil—the popularity of monster trucks as American entertainment shows the fascination with the spectacle of gargantuan mechanics and excessive power enabled by oil.

The intended connotations of petromonstrosity vary with the different forms of and reasons for the figure of the petromonster. As Cohen establishes in his introduction “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” cultures can be read through the “monsters they engender.”¹⁷ Saint Augustine elucidated the broad purpose of the monster long before Cohen, identifying from the Latin origin of the word “monstra from monstrare (to show) in order demonstrare (to demonstrate) something that we can learn from.”¹⁸ A multitude of lessons from monstrosity exist across cultures, times, and places, but whether the monster is constructed as a figure to conquer, to fear, to loathe, to rejoice in its power, or to revel in its sublimity, it exists as a symbolic portent of something we must recognize. The multivalent nature of the monster holds true for petromonsters, and as petroleum permeates through the world in nuanced ways, drawing out the underlying meanings and appearances of monstrous oil as substance, industry, and commodity is valuable for understanding petromodern experiences. Especially as monsters frequently express fears and anxieties, considering the monstrous narratives surrounding petroleum during a time of

¹⁶ Examples of this language can be found in the news articles of Richard Epstein (“Making Sense of Monster Oil Spills,” *Forbes*), Russell Falcon (“Godzilla in the Gulf of Mexico? Offshore Pipeline Explosion Draws Monster Comparisons,” *kxan*), and Elizabeth Shogren (“When This Oil Spills, It's 'A Whole New Monster,’” *NPR*).

¹⁷ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 3.

¹⁸ Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel, “Introduction: A Marvel of Monsters,” 2.

ecological crises and social panic over the looming end of accessible oil reserves may be necessary for grasping the emotions and affects currently taking shape. Approaching the petromonstrous in the spirit of cultural studies, with an emphasis on the lack of significant distinction between “high” and “low” artifacts, the goal of this project is to consider what petromonsters in all realms of the literary and popular have to say as cultural expressions.



Photo created by Dream, an artificial intelligence (AI)-generated opensource artwork app created by the company Wombo. This image was produced by inputting an earlier title of this project, “Monstrous Oil: Reading Petromodernity’s Monsters” into the app and toggling with the image generator under the “steampunk” art style. This Goya-esque picture is a paragon of a petromonster with towering flames, billowing smog, and toxic tendrils. The creation of this image is oily in itself with computer servers being made with petroproducts and consuming energy powered by fossil fuels. AI-created artwork such as this is recently controversial for stealing work from human artists. As other concerns surrounding the power and sophistication of AI grow, we might also question its petromonstrosity as well.

Generated on app.wombo.art, 16 March 2022.

The remainder of this chapter will continue to establish the theoretical groundwork for the concept of the petromonstrous. The next section considers past monsters from literature and film and their connections to other energy regimes. While oil has great cultural weight outside of its role as an energy source, considering this primary function is necessary for tracing the history of petroleum in relation to the project of extractivism. This next section intends to link together monstrosity, energy, and the notion of progress in earlier contexts for a discussion of the modern appearance of the monstrous in petromodern society. Next, I will introduce the notion of haunting as a significant concept for the figure of the petromonster. Although ghosts and monsters are often separated as distinct figures, haunting, and the associated concept that I term “hauntological oil,” is valuable for the conceptualization of petromonstrosity as the pasts, presents, and futures of petromodernity loom over the planet’s trajectory. Lastly, I will introduce the role of fiction and the humanities in petrocultural studies and the three fictional works featuring petromonsters that will comprise the majority of my analyses in Chapter Two. Living in this time of petromodern risk, we need these petromonsters and others at the forefront of our cultural imagination with our increasingly desperate need to address our attachments to and consequences of today’s greatest monster—oil.

II. An Abbreviated Literary History of Energy, Extractivism, and Monstrosity

Following Cohen's establishment of the monster as a culturally significant figure, how might considering monsters in light of the energy regimes from which they emerge serve projects of cultural analysis? Energy shapes culture—the different forms of energy employed by a society will in turn produce differing cultures and artifacts. As Frederick Buell states, “[E]nergy history is in fact entwined with changing cultural conceptualizations and representations of psyche,

body, society, and environment; it is correlated not just with changing material cultures, but with symbolic cultures as well.”¹⁹ In her influential PMLA Editor’s Column, Patricia Yaeger expounds upon the significance of energy regimes for the cultural production of literature: “The touch-a-switch-and-it’s-light magic of electrical power, the anxiety engendered by atomic residue, the odor of coal pollution, the viscous animality of whale oil, the technology of chopping wood: each resource instantiates a changing phenomenology that could recreate our ideas about the literary text’s relation to its originating modes of production as quasi-objects.”²⁰ Drawing from Fredric Jameson’s model of the political unconscious, Yaeger coins the term “energy unconscious” to describe the ever-present effects of energy on culture that often go unnoticed; she posits that an awareness of energy invisibilities is especially important for literary analysis: “We need to contemplate literature’s relation to the raucous, invisible, energy-producing atoms that generate world economies and motor our reading.”²¹ Yaeger calls for critical examinations of the energy unconscious in order to make visible the erasures of energy and, as Vivasvan Soni writes, so that “we might be able to fashion forms of collective life and patterns of energy consumption that avert calamity.”²² While Yaeger notes that “energy use is uneven,” and therefore “[l]ooking at the ‘ages’ of energy will never be a tidy endeavor, since fuel sources interact,” considering the social attitudes surrounding these interactions is a worthwhile undertaking for understanding the cultural significance of transitional, dominant, and emerging forms of energy for societies.²³

¹⁹ Frederick Buell, “A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, The Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance,” 273.

²⁰ Patricia Yaeger, “Editor’s Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources,” 309.

²¹ *Ibid*; 309, 307

²² Vivasvan Soni, “Energy,” 132.

²³ Yaeger, “Editor’s Column,” 307- 308.

The connected cultural appearance of monstrosity, energy, and a narrative of progress powered by extractivism is not a recent phenomenon exclusive to petroleum or fossil fuels. Petromonstrosity does not emerge from a vacuum but from an established line of monsters with ties to energy and resource extraction. Although the cultural effects of energy sources differ, a shared necessary factor of energy regimes is the extraction of resources. The vast project of extractivism is nuanced and entangled with many complex environmental and colonial histories; however, a driving narrative behind numerous extractive efforts is based on an ideal of progress in economic growth and national expansion. Tracing the common thread of extraction-dependent progress and how this narrative appears with monstrosity in literature provides insight into the frequent role of the monster as a barrier to or warning against civilization's interactions with the natural world. Locating the energy unconscious in certain monstrous narratives connected with non-fossil energy regimes is useful for theorizing monstrosity in the current age of oil because the overlap and succession of "ages" of energy as well as monsters show commonalities and differences in sentiments of natural resource use and extraction as well as perceptions of what constitutes both sides of societal specific nature-culture binaries. The archetypal monsters briefly mentioned here are important touchstones in monster studies that remain influential to emergent monster narratives. The resurfacing of energy monsters across regimes and cultures corresponds with Cohen's second thesis of his "Seven Theses": "The Monster Always Escapes."²⁴ While the monsters of energy and extraction re-emerge in different associations, societies never seem to successfully ensnare and make peace with these adversaries. Thus, they creep, as contemporaries and progeny of one another, as the dynamic ethics and uncertainties around resource use remain ever-precarious.

²⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 4.

The figure of the monster appears in tandem with resource extraction even in a work recognized as one of the first examples of world literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, originating from ancient Mesopotamia with earliest versions dating back more than four thousand years.²⁵ In the first part of the epic, heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel to slay the guardian of the cedar forest, the monstrous Humbaba. Once Gilgamesh defeats Humbaba, the heroic pair gets to work felling the trees; as Martin Puchner identifies in his ecocritical analysis of the tale, “[t]he mythical venture to the forest and the battle with Humbaba are in fact nothing but an elaborate logging expedition, extracting a resource that is crucial for building cities.”²⁶ The story draws a line between human and non-human: monsters live outside of civilization in places imbued with an extractive telos to provide trees to be brought “into the city to build houses and to fire kilns in which clay bricks can be hardened.”²⁷ The cedar monster is an impediment to growth, a relic of the past that must be conquered for empire to continue. However, the story also makes a point that this extraction comes with a cost; Gilgamesh and Enkidu’s actions angers the Gods who condemn one of the heroes to death. The consequences of progress are not absent from what Putner calls “one example of how the deep history of literature can be seen as so many documents that describe and justify resource extraction in its various forms of development.”²⁸

Bypassing millennia of literature, I wish to turn to another relevant Promethean tale for an analysis of energy and monstrosity.²⁹ Now celebrated as the first work of science fiction, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* bears critical and popular interpretation as a warning of the tragedies of reckless attempts at scientific progress. Through Victor Frankenstein’s natural law-

²⁵ Martin Puchner, *Literature for a Changing Planet*, 14.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 24.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

²⁹ The Myth of Prometheus can also be considered in connection with progress, energy (fire), and monstrosity (the gigantic Caucasian Eagle).

defying experiments to “give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man,” he creates a being so monstrously repulsive to him that he immediately abandons this creation.³⁰ Although the exact method of Frankenstein’s experimentation is contentious, a substantial body of scholarship agrees that electricity, in line with recent developments in the study of galvanic experimentation, is at work. The significance of electricity as a beacon of scientific and cultural advancement cannot be understated: “Through the later decades of the eighteenth century, electrical experiment became symbolically associated with revolutionary energies and ideals.”³¹ Marilyn Butler recognizes the influence that scientific discourse of the time, particularly the debate between John Abernethy and William Lawrence over the underlying vitalism of life, had on Shelley’s work: “Frankenstein the blundering experimenter, still working with superseded notions, suggests the position of Abernethy, who proposes that the superadded life-element is analogous to electricity—particularly when he uses a machine, reminiscent of a battery, to impart the spark of life.”³² Anne K. Mellor expands further upon the centrality of electricity for the novel: “To understand the full implications of Frankenstein’s transgression, we must recognize that Victor Frankenstein’s stolen ‘spark of life’ is not merely fire; it is also that recently discovered caloric fluid called electricity.”³³ Butler and Mellor’s analyses show Shelley’s awareness of electricity as an energy that animates not only Frankenstein’s Creature, but also the course and endeavors of the scientific enterprise. The progress of modern science in the hands of a humanity ill-prepared to shoulder the repercussions of their creations results in a monstrous figure that cautions Romantic hopes for an electrified future. Victor Frankenstein fails to claim responsibility as a creator and remains haunted by the effects of his abandonment both in his

³⁰ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 33.

³¹ Jane Goodall, “Electrical Romanticism,” 490.

³² Marilyn Butler, “Frankenstein and Radical Science,” 409.

³³ Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, 102.

psyche and materially by his creation. Taken as an allegorical representation of a society seeking an energy-motivated progress, Frankenstein demonstrates the risk of “being unable to distinguish the possible from the monstrous.”³⁴

Monstrous oil has surfaced long before petroleum. Oil as commodity and fuel source has long appeared with monstrosity; no other cultural work more vividly captures this connection than Melville’s *Moby-Dick* in which the juggernaut mid-nineteenth century American whale oil enterprise challenges the ocean’s cetacean goliaths. Heidi Scott identifies the significance of whaling, “the first American industry to make global economic impacts,” as a cultural forerunner for the petroleum industry.³⁵ Many facets of the whaling industry prefigure and parallel early and ongoing Western petrocultures, and heroic narratives, different in “degree, not of kind” from later rhetoric surrounding petroleum drilling, were prominent in the heyday of American whaling.³⁶ The extraction of an essential component of empire took the form of an “epic hunt” that was “difficult, dangerous, and often disgusting” but also provided the promise of individualistic progress for young men like Ishmael in the form of the “American Dream.”³⁷ Scott sketches the imagery and the stakes of the venture:

The risk and reward was extreme for the whale-men, measured by the inches in thrusting harpoons and dodging flukes, tried by the stench of a half-rendered whale on deck and the years of privation on board, and rewarded by the fragrant, pellucid, precious spermaceti that became high-quality lubricants, illuminants, and cosmetics in the

³⁴ Goodall, “Electrical Romanticism,” 506.

³⁵ Heidi Scott, ““Whale Oil Culture, Consumerism, and Modern Conservation,” 4.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

³⁷ *Ibid*; 4,9.

marketplace. Those somewhat mundane products were the spoils of an epic and sublime adventure, filled with a dual share of pleasure and horror.³⁸

The figure of the heroic whale-man must, of course, have an adversary: his formidable challenger, the Whale, is a benthic monster who tears ships apart in the struggle to resist capture and return to the vast, unknown ocean depths. Herman Melville forms a mythology of whales as monsters who must be conquered to fuel the project of American empire with the liquid from their slain corpses.³⁹ The White Whale of the novel exemplifies the most formidable of these monsters, inspiring crew superstitions “declaring Moby Dick not only ubiquitous, but immortal...that though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks, he would still swim away unharmed; or if indeed he should ever be made to spout thick blood, such a sight would be but a ghastly deception; for again in unensanguined billows hundreds of leagues away, his unsullied jets would once more be seen.”⁴⁰ Moby Dick’s haunting of Ahab resembles the insatiable American obsession with whale oil that resonated on an international scale as global trade and politics revolved around the successful conclusion of heroic whaling narratives.⁴¹

One final monster intimately tied to the processes of energy and extraction is Japan’s first Kaiju monster, Gojira, romanized as Godzilla. Debuting to Japanese audiences in November 1954, the towering reptilian monster is a direct metaphor for the immediate and long-term threat of nuclear testing. While the film was heavily edited to pacify the political content for American audiences, Godzilla embodied the terror of radiation that was a reality for inhabitants of the

³⁸ Ibid, 9.

³⁹ See *Chapter 55: Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales in Moby-Dick* for a particular crafting of whales as Leviathan beings

⁴⁰ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 155.

⁴¹ See Nathaniel Otjen’s “Energy Anxiety and Fossil Fuel Modernity in H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*” for a discussion of energy in a classic work of science fiction involving monstrosity.

Pacific living in the wake of atomic warfare and hydrogen bomb development. Godzilla, a prehistoric creature enraged and altered by nuclear fallout, is described by the original film's producer Tanaka Tomoyuki as "the son of the atomic bomb. He is a nightmare created out of the darkness of the human soul. He is the sacred beast of the apocalypse."⁴² Godzilla is symbolic for the disruption of the ancient and the natural by the arrival of the Atomic Age; as the West entered into an era of accelerated technological advancement during the Cold War, the entwined environmental and sociopolitical consequences of this "progress" were largely ignored by the world powers of the time. *Godzilla's* commentary against the weaponization of newly developed atomic energy continues in subsequent films in Kaiju cinema which also provide environmental commentary and anti-nuclear themes.⁴³ Strong Japanese anti-nuclear movements surged around the years of the film's release and influenced the formal adoption of the "Three Principles of Atomic Energy," guidelines to protect against the nation's development of atomic weapons, as the Japanese government passed funding for nuclear energy research in early 1954.⁴⁴ Additions to Kaiju cinema followed the rapid development of nuclear technology in Japan with Godzilla serving as a reminder of the horrors resulting from a misuse of nuclear energy. The understanding that the threat of atomic energy was far from over is evident in the initial film, for although Japanese forces appear to destroy Godzilla, the movie's scientific expert leaves audiences with the warning that if nuclear testing continues another Godzilla will likely rise from the ocean depths. While nuclear energy is often portrayed as an alternative solution to fossil fuels, Godzilla, portent of nuclear ruination, stands as a popular culture representation of the

⁴²Quoted in *Japan's Green Monsters: Environmental Commentary in Kaiju Cinema* by Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle, 40.

⁴³ See Rhoads and McCorkle, *Japan's Green Monsters*.

⁴⁴Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle, *Japan's Green Monsters*, 32-33.

devastating history and hazards of this energy.⁴⁵ Justified fears and skepticism of nuclear energy persist globally in the twenty-first century, but despite the ubiquity and growing acknowledgement of the risks of fossil fuels, a petromonster of the same cultural magnitude and cinematic significance as Godzilla has yet to manifest.

III. The Incorporation and Importance of Haunting for Petromonstrosity

While many theorists keep the figures of ghosts and monsters—and their respective associations—separate to a degree, which may be valuable for their intentions, I want to break down this distinction in order to demonstrate the utility of haunting and spectrality for the petromonstrous.⁴⁶ Morton's hyperobjects can be useful for this merger—while I have already noted the monstrosity of hyperobject entities, others have noted how the qualities of hyperobjects, particularly global warming, demonstrate a haunting effect.⁴⁷ The inability to immediately access the totality of climate change or oil in themselves, only their effects, lends an intangible, spectral quality to the phenomena—our experience is of the phantom repercussions of complicated interactions between many human and non-human actors. Oil is slippery to capture as just one entity; the many forms of oil cannot be relegated to one embodiment and the material fumes and immaterial traces of petroleum call for the concepts of the spectral and the monstrous to work in tandem. Although they choose to split the figures in the collection, the editors of the interdisciplinary anthology *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the*

⁴⁵ See also Toni Perrine, "The Godzilla Factor: Nuclear Testing and Fear of Fallout" and Kimmy Yam, "Godzilla' was a Metaphor for Hiroshima, and Hollywood Whitewashed It."

⁴⁶ It should be noted that many archetypal, mythic, and folkloric ghosts and monsters already combine aspects of what is individually associated with the ghostly and the monstrous. Academic separations of these figures may explore nuanced traits for the purpose of argument, but combining the spectral into the monstrous is not a radical venture.

⁴⁷ See Jeff Vandermeer's thought-provoking article "'Hauntings in the Anthropocene: An Initial Exploration'" as one theorizing of ecological hyperobjects and haunting.

Anthropocene note the importance of ghosts and monsters for the environmental humanities: “Our monsters and ghosts help us notice landscapes of entanglement, bodies with other bodies, time with other times.”⁴⁸ Incorporating notions of the spectral into petromonstrosity is thus crucial for theorizing the temporal and spatial dimensions of oil.

Other scholars envision different purposes for spectrality and monstrosity based on the ways disparate global communities experience the effects of the Anthropocene:

It can be argued that affluent communities, most located in the Global North, encounter the Anthropocene not as physical violence but as a haunting, uncanny presence, a ghost that rises out of the global landscape. The Anthropocene haunts everyday objects and practices: cars, air-conditioned houses, gardens, airplanes, dinners, trips to the beach.⁴⁹

It serves to point out that fossil fuels are a central, if not the foremost, actant in these examples of Anthropocenic haunting through their monstrous progeny of gasoline, refrigerants, fertilizers, jet fuel, and single-use plastics. The Anthropocene can be considered here as an encompassing term for the presences of petroleum in the lived petromodern conditions of the Global North.

Specifying petroleum as a crucial driver of the Anthropocene serves to identify one key ghost that is haunting us. This experience is not universal, as the authors of the above section later explain:

By contrast, to large communities of the world’s poor, most located in the Global South, the Anthropocene is not an uncanny, ghostly presence, but already a horror: an immanent and unavoidable threat and a prophesy fulfilled...the world’s poor, whether living in Indonesia or New Orleans, have long experienced the various material consequences of

⁴⁸ Heather Anne Swanson et al., “Introduction: Bodies Tumbled into Bodies,” M7.

⁴⁹ Edwards et al., “Introduction: Gothic in the Anthropocene,” *xix*.

the Anthropocene not as ghostly haunting but as monstrous horror, as an inexorable, ongoing apocalypse.⁵⁰

This analysis gives critical attention to the uneven effects exerted by global bio-geo-cultural crisis; whether considered as the Anthropocene generally or through the effects of oil specifically, the disastrous consequences of an era “engineered” by the “affluent section of humanity—the benefactors of capitalism...through the mass production of these cars, houses, and holidays” are already acutely experienced by communities in the Global South that contain the industrial sites perpetuating environmental injustice.⁵¹ However, the monstrous and the spectral do not have to be considered as entirely separate manifestations in discussions of petroleum. The rampaging violence that terrorizes the Global South and the eerie unsettling of the Global North originate in the same monsters. While the Global South has long begun to suffer the disintegrations of climate change and numerous ecological disasters in a monstrous fashion, impoverished communities are no less haunted than the wealthy populations largely responsible for producing these events. The petromonstrous pervades the Global North primarily as spectrality—until a catastrophe, such as an oil spill, further exposes the monster—but the spectral presence of oil layers on top of evident destruction in regions experiencing the petrocalyptic as a quotidian occurrence.⁵² The “ongoing apocalypse” in the Global South may be equally represented by the concept of haunting as past violences and trauma continue to afflict communities. Apocalypse after apocalypse, endings of lives and cultural worlds, has already happened for people who have been marginalized by systematic violence and oppression.⁵³ These attacks on livelihoods are also inseparable from environmental, place-based connections in

⁵⁰ Ibid, xx - xxi.

⁵¹ Ibid, xx.

⁵² See “Petrocalyptic” entry in the extremely valuable *Petrofictionary*.

⁵³ See also Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

that they force people from the places to which they are attached through destruction to the place or a separation of people from the familiar landscapes they call home. While apocalyptic narratives, including environmental apocalypses, are often represented as one all-encompassing event, these representations ignore the endings of the world that have already taken place for countless people historically and in the present moment.



Misrach, Richard. *Holy Rosary Cemetery and Union Carbide Complex*. Taft, Louisiana, 1998. Note from Wikipedia entry on Union Carbide: “Founded in 1917 as the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, from a merger with National Carbon Company, the company’s researchers developed an economical way to make ethylene from natural gas liquids, such as ethane and propane, giving birth to the modern petrochemical industry.” This picture is an example of the petroindustrial monsters that lurk in oppressed and impoverished areas. This location has parts of the petromonster on display but could also be said to be haunted by past effects of the monster. An extension of the monster that poisons the landscape and bodies remains a constant presence in this place.

In order to confront the atrocities that have ended lives for centuries, it is necessary to reframe the “apocalypse” as a process built on past injustices instead of a singular, spectacular event. The action of numerous apocalypses (many intertwined with the complex effects of colonialism) is more consistent with what Rob Nixon terms “slow violence,” or, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”⁵⁴ Nixon explains that engaging this violence, one that is “neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive” is essential yet is challenged by the difficulty of representation: “Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively.”⁵⁵ Because of this challenge, he asserts that:

To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time. The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse these symbols with dramatic urgency.⁵⁶

While perhaps not applicable to all instances, haunting may serve as one effective creative way to represent slow violence/ slow apocalypses. In her introduction to the co-edited volume of *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*, Ruth Heholt notes the work that

⁵⁴ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 10.

scholars have done to explore how haunting “is a way of presenting (in temporal terms too) and bringing to the fore the violences of the past, the terrible oppressions, injustices, and traumas.”⁵⁷ She also points out how “[T]he concept of haunting has been important in postcolonial reconciliations with past atrocities and traumas and with the violent appropriation and violation of colonised landscapes.”⁵⁸ Haunting has the capacity to engage with deep timescales and manifests in traumatized places for extended periods of time instead of occurring instantaneously; this is highly resonant with petroleum and makes the spectral immensely valuable as a characteristic of petromonstrosity.

Petroleum generates a haunting presence, a ghost constitutive of “that-which-haunts” petromodern existence. Oil can be said to haunt in a multitude of ways both materially and immaterially, representationally and literally, and with a range of meanings within different theoretical frameworks. Discourse around the so-called “spectral turn” begun by the Derridean concepts put forth in *Specters of Marx* ([1994] 2006) has prompted an evaluation of the usefulness of haunting as it is used in various contexts. Ruth Heholt argues for the usefulness of multiple engagements with haunting and brilliantly connects Affect Theory, theories of geography, and postcolonial discussions of spectrality to insist on the soundness of the many hauntings described inside and beyond the volume:

[Exclusive theories] lead to binaries and schisms, contradictions and oppositions. Yet why must we choose between ‘this’ and ‘that’? ... Derrida is useful. The use of the concept of haunting and the resurrection of a variety of ghosts for theorists and those

⁵⁷ Ruth Heholt, “Unstable Landscapes: Affect, Representation and a Multiplicity of Hauntings,” 10.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

imagining from the margins are empowering and productive. Yet the turn to affect, to the lived, the experienced, the bodily, specific and personal also provides powerful tools.⁵⁹ Rather than treat different views of haunting as antagonistic, Heholt argues for a synthesis of views to benefit from the productive contributions of each. As Heholt also notes, hauntings, and the entities they affect, are unstable and constantly reconstituted. Her position mirrors a cultural studies perspective of inclusivity, complexity, and multiplicity as a form of subversion against one single dominant narrative. Hauntings are not singular; a multiplicity of hauntings can exist alongside and merged together with one another. Thus, in this section and the next, I will begin my investigations into the many varied yet interconnected ways that oil—as substance, industry, and commodity—haunts.

The impacts of the substance of petroleum, entangled and inseparable from the oil industry, resonate across vast scales of space and time. The wide-ranging physical and cultural effects of petroleum remain largely invisible to populations and public consciousness in the habituated petromodern state of the Global North; however, the lingering presence of oil continues to haunt the present moment and promises to reach far into the future. Considering oil as a haunting presence is a valuable project for informing how we can conceptualize the entangled assemblages of human and non-human forces in our haunted time and planetary moment. While other energy sources leave spectral tracings worthy of analysis, a focus on the spectrality of oil is necessary for its instrumentalization as the world's largest source of energy today and for the widespread, incalculable impact the substance/industry has had as a shaper of planetary history, particularly over the last two centuries.⁶⁰ Oil is directly and indirectly

⁵⁹ Ruth Heholt, "Unstable Landscapes: Affect, Representation and a Multiplicity of Hauntings," 14.

⁶⁰ See Ryo Morimoto's book *Nuclear Ghost: Atomic Livelihoods in Fukushima's Gray Zone* for one example of the valuable connections between spectrality and energy.

entangled with other ghosts that haunt particular places; as Heholt notes, applications of haunting as a way of “presenting (in temporal terms too) and bringing to the fore the violences of the past, the terrible oppressions, injustices and traumas” are valuable and certainly instrumental for considerations of a haunting petroleum.⁶¹

Specters of oil loom over the shape and trajectory of modernity as it remains fueled by and in service to the continued reliance on petroleum. Taking up Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, I will consider how our past and present workings with fossil fuels determine and extinguish possible futures through a concept I call “hauntological oil.” In light of dwindling reserves of easily accessible oil, the severe environmental repercussions of plastics and petroleum byproducts, and alarming predictions of global carbon emissions, the energy-prosperous futures once hoped for in the Western world deteriorate.⁶² The future appears as a bleak monstrous narrative; as Allan Stoekl writes: “No one yet wants to think about how History should continue in the absence of an adequate supply of fossil fuels. It is too horrible to think about.”⁶³ As earlier and current petromodern ways of life are at risk of collapse, continued petrofutures/cultures appear more and more unfeasible; we are left grappling with ghosts from our lost visions of a future for society as it appears now and the narrative of progress fueled by our dominant mode of energy.

IV. Hauntological Oil: Theories and Affects of Haunted Times

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida puts forth the concept of “hauntology,” a twist on the word “ontology” that describes “a spectre that haunts society, a spectre of the future as much

⁶¹ Heholt, “Unstable Landscapes: Affect, Representation and a Multiplicity of Hauntings,” 10.

⁶² See Gerry Canavan’s “Retrofutures and Petrofutures” for a discussion of hoped for energy futures in science fiction.

⁶³ Allan Stoekl, *Bataille’s Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability*, x.

as of the past, of being and of non being.”⁶⁴ Derrida’s exposition for hauntology is brief and leaves room for interpretation, but the concept has taken hold in popular philosophical discourse. Mark Fisher, who explores the meanings of hauntology particularly as they pertain to music and popular culture, explains that the concept encapsulates how “[t]he future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production.”⁶⁵ Fisher explains that there are two “directions” contained in hauntology:

The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic “compulsion to repeat,” a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern).

The second refers to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior).⁶⁶

Thus, hauntology collapses the distinctions of past, present, and future to speak of how entities that are not there still maintain a lingering presence. Oil haunts petromodernity in a mode consistent with Derrida’s hauntology through the multitude of ways that petroleum reaches forward from the past into the present and future and how the loss of viable futures through the continued use of fossil fuels haunts, with increasing demand for attention, over the present moment.

⁶⁴ Heholt, “Unstable Landscapes: Affect, Representation and a Multiplicity of Hauntings,” 9.

⁶⁵ Mark Fisher, “What is Hauntology?,” 16.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 19, emphasis original.



Broomfield, Maurice. *North Sea Rig, 1967*. Gas Council, 1967. © Estate of Maurice Broomfield.

The current dependency on oil determines the form of the future—what will take shape out of a time of excessive fossil fuel use in the Western world and a ubiquitous presence of petroleum products across the globe? In his article, Tom Wyman quotes Fisher’s book *Ghosts of My Life*: “Fisher says that ‘What should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy [for example], but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect but which never materialised. These spectres – the spectres of lost futures – reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world.’”⁶⁷ Considering Fisher’s words in connection with

⁶⁷ Tom Wyman, “The Ghosts of Our Lives.” *The New Statesmen*, 9 Sept 2021.

the petromodern state, what should be, and what arguably is already, haunting us are the failing expectations put into place by a progress narrative built on the fossil fuel energy regime. Fisher's considerations of imperiled expectations parallel Lauren Berlant's writings on the attainment of "the good life" in her work *Cruel Optimism*. Berlant asks why "conventional good-life fantasies...of enduring reciprocities in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work" abound despite "evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost."⁶⁸ Berlant considers the affects and emotions that arise when these fantasies begin to fray including a continued attachment to these fantasies that are "cruelly optimistic."⁶⁹ In her article brilliantly connecting cruel optimism to petrocultures, Kimberly Skye Richards identifies this dangerous optimism for the petrofuturity in a concept she deems "crude optimism":

...crude optimism is a binding optimistic attachment to fossil fuel extraction, pipeline development, and consumption despite the brutal realities of extractivism and climate destabilization caused by the release of carbon into the atmosphere. Crude optimism, like cruel optimism, exists "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" [Berlant 1]. To be "crude" is to be in a natural or raw state, "not changed by any process or preparation," not manufactured, refined, tempered, etc. Crude optimism is confidence that our fossil fuel economy and petropoliticized regime will lead us to the best of all possible worlds. Crude optimism keeps us "loving oil," as Stephanie LeMenager describes our deep attachment not to the substance itself but to the "good life" fantasy that fossil-fueled modernity makes possible [102]. At the heart of the issue are the questions: Why do we stay attached to oil despite clear evidence of its instability,

⁶⁸ Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

fragility, and cost? What has led us to this cruel impasse and produced or sustained a culture of climate denial and willful ignorance?”⁷⁰



Burtynsky, Edward. *Dana Frame Plant #1*. Thorold, Ontario, Canada, 2010.

As Richards articulates, our attachment to petroleum is cruelly optimistic in the way that oil, as the object of our desire, harms our well-being and future. The realization of petroleum’s peril, which grows with each climate change report, news coverage of another oil spill, or release of data about diminishing oil reserves, creates a range of responses. Yet, even those who deny the impact of the oil industry and the global repercussions of carbon emissions must face the fluctuating commodity costs and unstable economic effects of the energy market. Western, extractive society’s continued adherence to crude optimism inhibits a serious attachment to

⁷⁰ Kimberly Skye Richards, “Crude Optimism: Romanticizing Alberta’s Oil Frontier at the Calgary Stampede,” 140-141.

energy alternatives which thus prevents a future free from the countless harms of petroleum. Staying cruelly optimistic to nonviable petrofutures and the increasingly alarming societal failure to allow for the unfolding of alternative futures means expectations are failing to materialize; the “not yet” are already haunting right now.

More than merely a fuel source, petroleum structures existence in ways that have become so accepted and naturalized so as to become invisible. Signs of our present commitment to petroleum are ubiquitous: any analysis of modern, especially Western, society would be incomplete without a consideration of the foundational petrocultural dimensions. One criticized dimension of Derrida’s hauntology is the generalized hauntings he claims haunt human history in a larger “spectrological sequence.” He addresses this critique in a footnote:

Even though, as we have remarked, every period has its ghosts (and we have ours), its own experience, its own medium, and its proper hauntological media, even though an “epochal” history of haunting poses the same problems, and not by chance, as an “epochal” history of Being, this complication ought not to forbid an historical inquiry on this subject. It should merely cause such an inquiry to be very cautious ... But one must not fail to reinscribe it in a much larger spectrological sequence.⁷¹

While Derrida’s larger discussion on his intended theories of haunting provides much to consider, his assertion that “every period has its own ghosts” is of relevance here. The ghosts, influences and shapers, of this period, which are many, must certainly include those of petroleum. Separating these specific ghosts and their hauntings of cultures from a larger spectrological history is necessary to understand just how deeply petroleum is embedded in time and space and in the entities that exist in these dimensions.

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 241-242.

In *America*, Jean Baudrillard draws petrocultures out of the shadows to address the hidden hold petroleum has on capitalist industrialized American society. In his section “Los Angeles Freeways,” Baudrillard contemplates a symbol of petromodernity, the “[G]igantic, spontaneous spectacle of automotive traffic”:⁷²

To the person who knows the American freeways, their signs read like a litany. ‘Right lane must exit.’ This ‘must exit’ has always struck me as a sign of destiny. I have got to go, to expel myself from this paradise, leave this providential highway which leads nowhere, but keeps me in touch with everyone. This is the only real society or warmth here, this collective propulsion, this compulsion—a compulsion of lemmings plunging suicidally together. Why should I tear myself away to revert to an individual trajectory, a vain sense of responsibility? ‘Must exit’: you are being sentenced. You are a player being exiled from the only—useless and glorious—form of collective existence. ‘Through traffic merge left’: they tell you everything, everything is announced. Merely reading the signs that are essential to your survival gives you an extraordinary feeling of instant lucidity, of reflex ‘participation’, immediate and smooth. Of a functional participation that is reflected in certain precise gestures ... Pure, statistical energy, a ritual being acted out—the regularity of the flow cancels out individual destinations. What you have here is the charm of ceremonies: you have the whole of space before you, just as ceremonies have the whole of time before them.⁷³

⁷²Jean Baudrillard, *America*, 55.

⁷³ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, 55 - 56.



Burtynsky, Edward. *Highway #1*. Los Angeles, California, USA, 2003

Although highways have existed for less than a century, highway driving is a routine, integrated, accepted, and “necessary” way of life in America. One cannot interact with a highway without being in contact with the ghosts of petroleum; obviously built in service to automobiles that are fueled by, built with, and continuously emitting petroleum products, roads themselves integrate petroleum by-products (specifically the oil refinery by-product bitumen). Landscapes are transformed for oil, by oil. While the spectral presence of petroleum haunts indiscriminately, some locales—highways, pipelines, oil fields, rigs—are conspicuously more haunted than others.

The past's appearance in the present, the typical mode of haunting, is also vital for considerations of petroleum as "that-which-haunts." In what Heholt describes as an argument for an "ethics of haunting," Derrida addresses the necessary considerations of haunting for addressing ongoing oppressions and colonial violence:

It is necessary to speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice ... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist racist, colonialist, sexist or other kinds of exterminations, victims of oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.⁷⁴

Derrida's recognition of ghosts entails that they be seen and engaged with in order to pay service to them and the prospects of a better future. To be fully instrumental, hauntings of petroleum must be considered in the context of Postcolonial scholarship and usages of haunting in order to present the harms and violence perpetuated by the international oil industry and inherently colonial project of extractivism. Oil is inextricably entangled with other ghosts who must be acknowledged and spoken with in order to access the larger context of the continuous destructions wreaked by petroleum. The countless human and non-human casualties of the oil regime directly (e.g., sacrifice zones, oil rig employees, stolen Indigenous land carved apart by

⁷⁴Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii, original emphasis.

pipelines) and indirectly (e.g., The Highway of Tears, Great Pacific Garbage Patch, “roadkill”) cannot be left aside as remnants of a past to be forgotten while oil continues to flow. The past is never over and continues to seep into the present and the future. As Richards acknowledges, “the climate crisis is not reducible to substances like oil and carbon, but involves complex socioeconomic, political, and cultural operations linked to colonialism”; the haunting of petroleum necessarily entails a haunting of the traumas left behind by oil.⁷⁵



Autio, Lisa. *Black Cadillac*. 2021, Oil on Panel. Note from the artist: "Jumping over this dystopian landscape of abandoned and broken-down cars is a herd of phantom deer, stomping on the hoods as they race through the sky." Autio captures the non-human deaths that occur as a consequence of, and continue to haunt, petromodernity.

Morgan Adamson, connecting Berlant’s cruel optimism to the affective concept of “anthropocene realism,” addresses the need to recognize the merged past and present for the

⁷⁵ Richards, “Crude Optimism,” 155.

future: “Naming anthropocene realism, or the sense that there is no end and no alternative to petroculturalism, requires more than recognizing our “addiction” to oil ... it requires identifying the ways that our attachments to certain versions of the good life are tied to geographies of racial exclusion and bound up in petroculturalism.”⁷⁶ Petroleum cannot be taken out of the equation when engaging with the many hauntings from systemic oppression, violence, and capitalism. Reckoning with the nexus of ghosts tied to petroleum demands a critical evaluation of petrocultural norms and a rejection of the crude optimism that permeates petromodern society. What can come about from a recognition of hauntings? Avery Gordon, in her project *Ghostly Matters*, argues for haunting to be taken seriously as a matter of cultural and sociological concern. She writes:

Could it be that analyzing hauntings might lead to a more complex understanding of the generative structures and moving parts of historically embedded social formations in a way that avoids the twin pitfalls of subjectivism and positivism? Perhaps. If so, the result will not be a more tidy world, but one that might be less damaging. It was in such a spirit that Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1987) wrote a two-page note, appended to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, entitled ‘On The Theory of Ghosts.’ Despairing at the loss of historical perspective, at our “disturbed relationship with the dead— forgotten and embalmed,” they believed we needed some kind of theory of ghosts, or at least a way of both mourning modernity's ‘wound in civilization’ (2.16) and eliminating the destructive forces that open it up over and over again: ‘Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope’ (2,15).⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Morgan Adamson, “Anthropocene Realism,” *The New Inquiry*, 30 November 2015.

⁷⁷ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 19 - 20.

Might serious engagement with the ghosts of petromodernity lead to a change in how we interact with the causes of the bleeding “wound in civilization” and the injurious actants that have directed violence toward specific bodies and entities in the indistinguishable pasts, presents, and futures? Hauntological oil attempts to name the cultural hauntings of oil so that the efforts of recognizing and confronting the specters of petroleum, and petromonstrosity more broadly, may begin.

V. The Forever Monsters of Petromodernity

Many monster narratives follow a common timeline of events:

- a. Life before the monster
- b. The appearance of the monster
- c. The conflict with and defeat of the monster as an attempt to return to *a*.
- d. A return to monster-free life⁷⁸

However, any realistic petromonster narrative acknowledges the impossibility of a successful attainment of *d.*; whatever form a post-oil future takes, the world will never be completely free from the globalized impacts of petroleum as a shaper of society and history. The hauntings from the irremediable destruction of land and peoples from petrocapiatalism; the tracings of microplastics in living bodies; the technofossils buried in sediment layers—we and the planet will long be altered by the monsters of petromodernity.⁷⁹

So, how do we understand life now forever entangled in a monstrous human-oil nexus, always in the wake of petroleum? While the petromonstrous will continue to haunt, we have the

⁷⁸ I thank talented writer and teacher Stephen Graham Jones for his informal discussion of this timeline.

⁷⁹ The recent discoveries of microplastics in human and non-human animal bloodstreams can be read about in Damian Carrington’s article in *The Guardian*; see also Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* on the permeability between bodies and their surroundings.

duty and the power to change our roles as actors with petroleum to transform the monsters, create new ways of ridding them of power, reverse as much of their damage as possible, and imagine a future where they are no longer actively causing harm. A future with/out oil remains monstrous, but determining the types of monsters that continue to exist is not yet beyond the control of us as subjects who can still reject the workings of petrocultural industry. As Timothy Morton says: “If you can understand global warming, you have to do something about it...Can you understand hyperobjects? Then you are obliged to care about them.”⁸⁰ Morton's imperative echoes the fundamental purpose for the conceptualization of the petromonstrous, which is, to serve as a way to make visible the unconscious of petrocultural relations. As Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden observe, “[o]il’s signature [is] cultural ubiquity and absence”; therefore, rendering this erasure present to our notice is the first necessary step to understanding, and resisting, the overwhelmingly negative ramifications of petromodernity.⁸¹ The petromonster, arguably even simpler to understand than a hyperobject, embodies the complexity of all that is Oil so that we can decide what to do with it.

To do this, we can begin by paying attention to narratives of petromonstrousness that depict specific monstrous emergences of oil. The threat of oil is confronted through various means across multiple forms, including in the medium of “petrofiction,” a term coined by Amitav Ghosh to refer to fictional works that substantially deal with the the “Oil Encounter,” or, the relationships and interactions with the petroleum industry that are difficult to capture and largely underrepresented in the expression of the novel and other fictional forms.⁸² Through a range of fictional genres, petrofiction writers attempt to address the notoriously difficult to capture

⁸⁰ Timothy Morton, “Introducing the Idea of ‘Hyperobjects,’” *High Country News*, 2015.

⁸¹ Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, “Introduction,” in *Oil Culture*, xvii.

⁸² Amitav Ghosh coins the term “Petrofiction” and inquires about its lack of appearance in literature in his review “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel.”

cultural anxieties, terrors, and hopes surrounding our multifaceted relationship with oil. In the following chapter, I will argue that these expressions are no more clearly and impactfully explored than in works that depict and connect monstrosity and oil. I will primarily consider three divergent and multinational depictions of the monstrous embodiments of oil found in literature and film. China Miéville's short story "Covehithe" (2011) questions the petrocultural tendency to simultaneously naturalize the practices of oil extraction while denaturalizing the product in a depiction of corporeal oil rigs that come to life. I explore how Miéville's unconventional oil monsters negotiate our dilemmas with oil and the "natural" world through a compelling vision of embodied petrosublimity. The image of an oily monster lurks in Gracie Gardner's absurdist contemporary play *Pussy Sludge* (2021) in which a woman who menstruates crude oil must navigate both internal and external threats to escape from drowning in her self-created oil seep. Also located in the play's ooze is a commentary on oil's blotting of gender and nature constructions and a need to address how we as a society escape from our own bizarre creations. Lastly, the monster of petromodernity is most explicitly on display in the South Korean creature feature *Sector 7* (2011) directed by Kim Ji-hoon. Through the sci-fi horror trope of a monster threat, the film addresses concerns of resource depletion and the ever-increasing risks of oil extraction while also bringing attention to the costs of oil on non-human lives. Via the monster, these three distinct works saliently interact with our cultural, physical, and affective connections to oil and ask us to face our fears and confront petroleum's hold on our lives and planet. These three works take on the task of luring the petromonsters, and the warnings they carry, to the foreground. The petromonsters in these works are necessary figures to jolt us out of the trance of our unexamined relationship with oil and lead us into questioning what we have come to accept—oil spills, toxic fumes, sacrifice zones—in our world built on petroleum.

Chapter 2 – Petromonsters and Climate Creeps: Depictions of Oil and Monstrosity

I. A Marvel of Petromonsters

From the industry's behemoth creation of environmental catastrophe, to the substance's haunting presence in our lives, oil is monstrous. The monstrous appearances of oil take a variety of forms; borrowing Siobhan Carroll's suggested collective noun for a group of monsters, a marvel of petromonsters lurks in the shadows cast by petromodernity.⁸³ Marvel is also an apt word to describe the Janus-faced sides of oil, simultaneously a dazzling siren's call that has beckoned forth the vast privileges of the twenty-first century as well as an insidious menace slowly poisoning bodies and the atmosphere. As petrocultural studies continue to gain momentum, exposing the energy unconscious, it serves to draw the underlying cultural forces of fossil fuels into the open. Representing and analyzing the captivation of oil in petrofiction, through the figure of the monster, draws to the surface the fears and imaginative potentials surrounding petroleum. While recent discussions on petrofiction have focused on expanding the term from a genre to a literary period, as petrocritics such as Graeme Macdonald note that "all modern writing is premised on both the promise and the hidden costs and benefits of hydrocarbon culture," pinpointing explicit petromonster depictions in literature, film, and popular culture is important even if we accept this periodizing move that all monsters born from our fossil fueled era are, in fact, seeped in petroleum.⁸⁴ As the synergistic shapes of energy and culture become increasingly transparent, engaging with monstrous embodiments of petroleum, some more shrouded than others, give a peek into the oil encounters that Ghosh meant as the original subject of petrofiction. In this chapter, I will briefly consider notable fictional

⁸³ My section title is inspired by Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel's "Introduction: A Marvel of Monsters" in which they use Carroll's suggested term (4) to establish the purpose of their edited collection.

⁸⁴ Graeme Macdonald, "Oil and World Literature," 7.

petromonsters before giving a sustained analysis of three works with petromonstrosity at the center of their narratives. The depictions discussed in short here certainly deserve more critical attention, and I hope that the limited associations between petroculture and monstrosity grow in number and prominence so that the marvel of petromonsters, and the messages they carry, do not go overlooked.

Petrocultural resonances and monstrosity often come together in science fiction. Coinciding with the beginning of the plastic age from the mass production that continued after World War II, *The Blob* (1958) is an earlier example of a sci-fi horror film which takes inspiration from the substances that shape modernity. Lisa Swanstrom identifies the oily form of *The Blob*'s titular monster: "its appearance as an ever-expanding gelatinous menace oozing through town recalls the image of crude oil escaping up from a derrick..."⁸⁵ However, prominent analyses linking the monster to Cold War anxieties of the period obscure underlying associations with petroleum. *The Blob* spawns a gelatinous legacy in other creatures, notably in Disney's comical science experiment product, flying rubber, AKA "Flubber." The elastic creation first appears as a result of energy research in *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961) and gains apparent sentience in the remake *Flubber* (1997). Both films express a hope for a magical "techno-fix" solution for a new, highly efficient energy source that will emerge from the work of technologically-advanced modern science. Oil connections are likely to slip past most viewers of any age, however, and the negative events of the film originate less from bouncy Flubber or energy problems, but from personal conflict between characters.

Several other notable petromonsters pop up in children's media. A scarier version of a petromonster appears, with obvious environmentalist undertones, as the central antagonist,

⁸⁵ Lisa Swanstrom, "From Protoplastics to the Plastiglomerate: Science Fiction's Shifting Synthetic Sensibilities," 217.

Hexxus, in the film *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992). However, while the destructive implications of petroleum are strongly represented by this oily villain, Michelle J. Smith and Elizabeth Parsons criticize the film's representation of extractive practices not being the direct underlying cause of environmental destruction.⁸⁶ Hexxus' origins are supernatural in nature, and while humans have a hand in releasing him back into the forest with their machinery, the cautionary message against environmental destruction via oil extracted and used by humans is lost. Petromonstrosity makes a reversed appearance in Disney/Pixar's *Monster's, Inc.* (2001) in which monsters are the consumers of energy in the form of human children's screams, and later, their highly efficient and productive laughter. The problem of energy crisis in the monster world is a central plot device and mirrors the imminent decline of easily obtainable fossil fuel resources since obtaining screams, the sole source of Monstropolis' energy, is becoming increasingly difficult. Although influenced by the omnipresent threat of a "post-scream" future, the film has a happy resolution that monsters are not scary and neither is an optimistic vision of a future powered by a better, endlessly renewable energy alternative.⁸⁷ Car culture and an embrace of the military-industrial complex are on display in the shape-shifting robots of Hasbro/Tomy's Transformers Franchise (1984). While the mechanized Autobot and Decepticon giants are extraterrestrial in origin, their transformations into gas-guzzling muscle cars and semi trucks glorifies the notions of power associated with industrial technology and prove that, in petrocultural analyses, there is always "more than meets the eye."

⁸⁶ Michelle J. Smith and Elizabeth Parsons, "Animating Child Activism: Environmentalism and Class Politics in Ghibli's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and Fox's *Fern Gully* (1992)," 26.

⁸⁷ For a fascinating allegorical analysis of *Monster's Inc.* that considers the film's connections with peak oil as well as petrocultural relations of children and productivity, see Paul J. Tranter and Scott Sharpe's "Escaping Monstropolis: Child-friendly Cities, Peak oil and *Monsters, Inc.*"

The figures of the robot, AI, and cyborg are inseparable from capitalist origins and deserve their own separate discussion of their petromonstrous entanglements.⁸⁸ One noteworthy work of petrofiction that features monstrous AI is Nnedi Okorafor's speculative fiction short story "Spider the Artist."⁸⁹ Set in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, Okorafor's story tells of a woman who befriends a Zombie, a spider-like killer droid deployed by oil companies in order to guard the pipelines that cut through citizens' backyards. The hundreds of Zombies embody the monster that is international petrocapiatalism, an enterprise carried out by an industry that decimates communities in the quest to attain petroleum. Okorafor's conclusion leaves the reader with a warning as well as offers a sliver of hope of the cyborgian potential for humans to join machines in non-destructive endeavors. International oil also finds expression in Frank Herbert's science fiction epic *Dune*, published in 1965.⁹⁰ As Gerry Canavan writes: "*Dune* famously transmogrifies oil imperialism into a battle for control of the 'spice' that makes international navigation possible; spice, the necessary fuel for this futuristic multiglobal economy can only be found on the desert planet Arrakis, whose indigenous Fremen resist planetary occupation..."⁹¹ Gargantuan, extremely hostile sandworms produce spice and make gathering the substance an arduous task. Guardians of the spice treasure, these worms could be considered functional petromonsters who represent the non-human resistance to resource extraction. As conventional cheap oil becomes increasingly difficult to obtain, costly encounters with hazardous environments will become more common if the drive to tap remote reserves persists.

⁸⁸ Enlightening insights into science fiction and the shape of the technological imagination can be found in Gerry Canavan's "Retrofutures and Petrofutures" and Frederick Buell's "A Short History of Oil Cultures" (particularly focusing on robots/cyborgs in fn. 49).

⁸⁹ Okorafor's "Spider the Artist" was originally published in *Seeds of Change*, 2008. The story was later republished in *Lightspeed Magazine*, March 2011, Issue 10 and can be found at: www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/spider-the-artist/.

⁹⁰ See valuable analysis by William A. Senior, "Frank Herbert's Prescience: *Dune* and the Modern World."

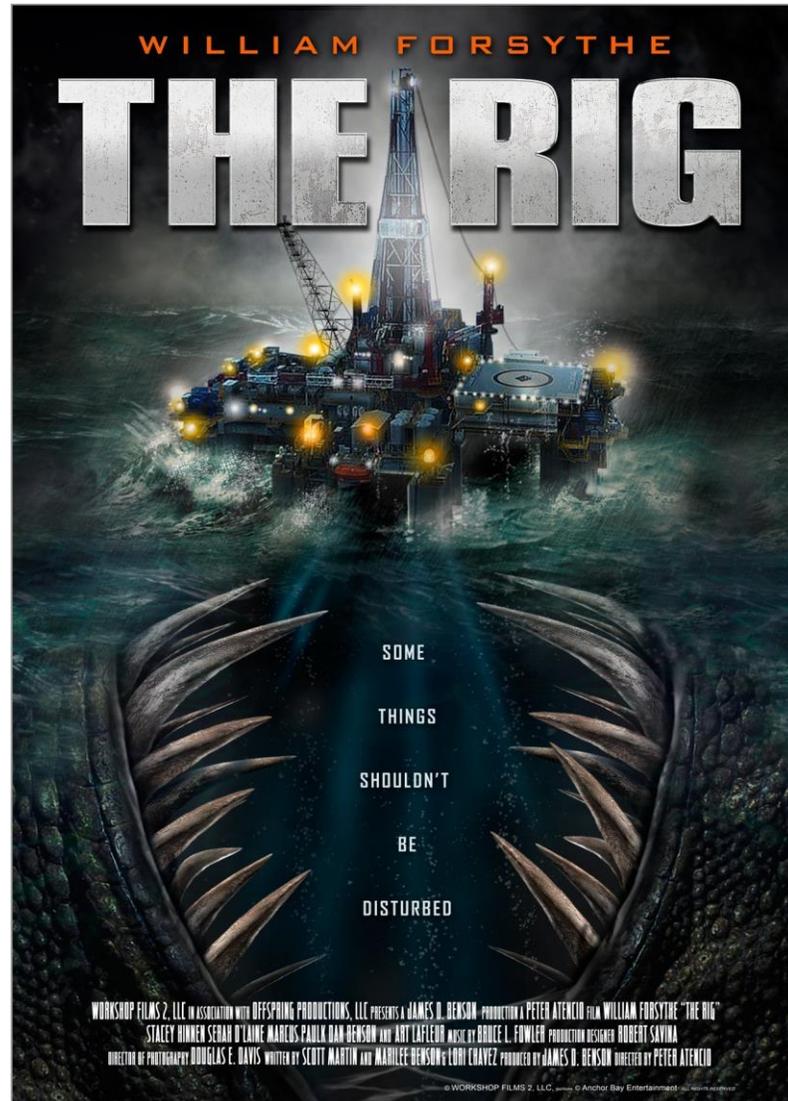
⁹¹ Gerry Canavan, "Retrofutures and Petrofutures," 340.

Monsters find a natural home in horror fiction, but petromonsters frequently evade recognition in this genre or gain prominence in critically-acclaimed films. Simon Bacon identifies the convergence of the vampire trope with car culture in two horror films: “*Christine* (Carpenter 1983) and *Blood Car* (Orr 2007) ... explicitly show the vampiric nature of humanity’s dependence on fossil fuels and the machines that consume them, explicitly linking ‘mankind’s’ sense of identity to his ability to consume natural resources.”⁹² *Christine*, based on the Stephen King novel of the same name and published in the same year, rolled into theatres on the heels of the 1970s oil crisis and exemplified the monstrous qualities of the automobiles surrounding us. Blood substitutes as a fuel source in *Blood Car* and in the similarly overlooked film *Daybreakers* (2009); the latter depicts vampiric elite who face a “peak blood” crisis with depleting unaltered humans left to consume.⁹³ *The Last Winter* (2006), set in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, is an explicitly ecohorror film that illustrates the fears surrounding global warming through spectral influences released from melting permafrost. The film depicts both the localized and global haunting of petroleum as the consequences of extractivism have lethal repercussions. Films fitting into the “creature feature” subgenre within the past decade have also emerged and disappeared relatively quietly from public notice. Despite a horrifying movie poster, *The Rig* (2010), filmed on an actual rig offshore Louisiana, is one poorly reviewed feature that failed to excite audiences with a novel monster or plot. More recently, *Underwater* (2020) adopted a similar plotline of a violent monster attacking an oil rig crew after its home is disturbed by deep sea drilling. Despite evident appeals to the culturally popular Lovecraftian

⁹² Simon Bacon, *Eco-Vampires*, 11.

⁹³ See Canavan, “Retrofutures and Petrofutures,” 346.

Cthulhu, the film was also largely dismissed as just another sci-fi thriller and swept along with the critical tide.



Movie poster for The Rig (2010). Courtesy of: imdb.com/title/tt1093906/

The three depictions of petromonstrosity I will discuss in the remainder of this chapter do not fall into common categorizations of mythologized monsters that abound in popular culture and legend: they are not traditional vampires or zombies. Each of these portrayals is situated in a

narrative with specific ties to place that make their multinational representation significant. Miéville bases “Covehithe” in the titular English village bordering the North Sea, a town he identifies with strong ties to the past that also has a predicted catastrophic future.⁹⁴ *Pussy Sludge* is set in a National Park, a location emblematic of American environmental values that are inextricable from the long history and ongoing practices of settler colonialism. *Sector 7* takes its title from the film’s fictionalized extraction zone off the coast of South Korea’s self-governing Jeju Island, a region with a history of oil exploration from both western and Asian oil corporations.⁹⁵ Place is crucial to discussions of both oil and haunting; as Ruth Heholt states in the introduction to the edited volume of *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*, most conceptions of haunting adhere to the “idea that ghosts are specific and placed. They belong to, and sometimes help to define, locales.”⁹⁶ Although oil haunts globally through climate change and other widespread manifestations, not losing sight of its localized presences is critical for understanding the varying interactions and impacts petroleum creates with humans and non-humans. Oil makes itself known in different monstrous forms depending on place; oil operations in the Athabasca tar sands produce different monsters and sets of problems than the exhaust from thousands of cars on the Los Angeles freeways. Place determines which monsters get entangled with each other and the hauntings that intermingle in landscapes. The following three portrayals of petromonstrosity occur in different regional and media contexts to capture the different emergences and significances of monstrous oil.

⁹⁴ Regardless of rising sea levels from climate change, predictions state that much of the town of Covehithe will fall into the ocean by cause of erosion: see Catherine Shiers’ “Covehithe—The Village Lost to Sea.”

⁹⁵ See “Operations” by Korea National Oil Corporation (KNOC).

⁹⁶ Ruth Heholt, “Introduction: Unstable Landscapes: Affect, Representation and a Multiplicity of Hauntings,” 7 (emphasis original).

II. Oily Hauntings and Revenant Rigs in China Miéville’s “Covehithe”

Born in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, The Guardian’s Oil Stories project is a collection of short fiction concerning oil, pollution, and climate change.⁹⁷ China Miéville’s unique contribution to this call is the science fiction short story, “Covehithe.” Oozing with magical realism in Miéville’s New Weird style, a Gothic subgenre, “Covehithe” reimagines petromonstrosity in a visceral form through animate sunken oil rigs which spontaneously re-emerge from the ocean. Miéville crafts a suspenseful piece in which a father and daughter sneak along the edge of the Suffolk coast to witness the awakening of one of these rigs, Petrobras P36, off of Covehithe cliff. Dughan, the story’s protagonist, father, and former member of the UN Platform Event Repulsion Unit, reveals that the emergence of derelict rigs is a global phenomenon that has been occurring, without known mechanism or reason, since “an autumn evening in the earlyish years of the 21st Century.”⁹⁸ Living according to their own will, the oil rigs come ashore to cause large-scale destruction in their collision with civilization and even begin to create a further existence apart from humanity by reproducing tiny rig offspring. Miéville’s short fiction functions as a petromodern ghost story; the wrongs that extractive society has attempted to bury come back to haunt us as the tangible specters of our destruction. As Derek Gladwin notes in his short analysis of the short story, “[w]ith an extensive history of accidents since the mid-twentieth century—many of which have not only led to human fatalities, loss of habitat for animals and organisms, and water pollution, but also to the destruction of many oil rigs now inactive at the bottom of seabeds—offshore oil remains one of the devastating

⁹⁷ Find the Oil Stories collection here: www.theguardian.com/books/series/oil-stories. Miéville’s original publication in *The Guardian* can be found at: www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/22/china-mieville-covehithe-short-story. Citations in this paper will be from the reprint of “Covehithe” in Miéville’s short story collection, *Three Moments of an Explosion*.

⁹⁸ China Miéville, “Covehithe,” 304.

‘anonymities’ of neoliberalism.”⁹⁹ Through his resurrected rigs, Miéville criticizes industry practices of abdicating responsibility for the machinery and aftereffects of oil as well as the resulting environmental injustice that extends far beyond isolated incidents. Petromonstrosity in “Covehithe” functions to expose the great temporal and spatial scales of oil that remain animate despite attempts to forget them—Miéville exhumes machinery bloodied with petroleum so that we can clearly hear their tell-tale beatings.

Miéville’s innovation lies in the fact that he does not have to create a new fictional monster for his story; his monsters are already in existence, their real bodies built by thousands of human hands. Miéville simply raises them to life. As towering industrial structures, “the visual and physical qualities of oil rigs present horror.”¹⁰⁰ Miéville masterfully illustrates the behemoth monstrosity of rigs in his description of the first platform to return, Rowan Gorilla I:

It shook the coast with its steps. It walked through buildings, swatted trucks then tanks out of its way with ripped cables and pipes that flailed in inefficient deadly motion, like ill-trained snakes, like too-heavy feeding tentacles. It reached with corroded chains, wrenched obstacles from the earth. It dripped seawater, chemicals of industrial ruin and long-hoarded oil.¹⁰¹

The size and capabilities of the rigs, along with their destructive potential, are terrific. Following in the footsteps of Godzilla, the “[r]uined, lost, burnt, scuttled rigs” rise from their oceanic resting places to wreak havoc on land.¹⁰² Setting aside the dangerous impact of rigs on ecosystems and built environments, monstrosity is evident in the workings and unsettling

⁹⁹ Gladwin, *Ecological Exile*, 192.

¹⁰⁰ Gladwin, *Ecological Exile*, 192.

¹⁰¹ Miéville, “Covehithe,” 304.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 305.

qualities of the platforms. Rigs demonically expel fire and hot, poisonous fumes; Petrobras P-36, the rig Dughan and daughter watch next to the Covehithe cliffs, conjures up images of mythic beasts such as dragons when it “lick[s] the air with a house-sized flame.”¹⁰³ The rigs monstrously merge boundaries as industrial entities and (undead) corporeal subjects with “deepwater carrion” adorning their dilapidated metal frames, causing them to smell like “abyssal rot and chemical cracking.”¹⁰⁴ These monsters incarnate the petrosublime as embodiments of the awe and terror surrounding the vast workings and scale of petroleum. Stephanie LeMenager writes on this concept, which she terms “petrol sublime,” in reference to a video on the “petrochemicalscapes” of Houston, Texas: “An evocation of the petrol sublime, these moving images are less reassuring than the Romantic mountain or waterfall because their movement is both humanly motivated and illegible, completely undercutting the confidence that the sublime was supposed to produce—that we humans actually could glimpse the infinite, God’s scale.”¹⁰⁵ LeMenager hints at something essential here, that the human-infused dimensions of the petrosublime do not allow for the greater aesthetic takeaways of the Romantic sublime’s transcendental awe of the external. Therefore, the representation of petrosublidity in the monster depicts this awful terror of the massive workings of the petroleum industry without resolution; we have created these grandscale horrors. As rig after rig re-emerges in the story, the massive scale of each individual rig pales in comparison to the totality of the oil industry machine composed of innumerable living and mechanical components. Each a formidable horrific figure on their own, Miéville’s petromonsters give a glimpse of the hyperobject of Oil through their collective re-appearance.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 303.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 306; 307.

¹⁰⁵ Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, 139.

Because humans are responsible for sinking these gigantic monsters of the deep, the “dead and come-back” rigs have reason to resent civilization.¹⁰⁶ Seeking a cosmic explanation for the rigs’ resurrection, Dughan and his UNPERU colleagues attempt to “decode this hydrocarbon Ragnarok” at the beginning of their emergence.¹⁰⁷ However, they are unsuccessful at uncovering answers to the mystery for national governments:

Twice, Dughan boarded pitching, stinking decks to transmit to them close-up footage, from which they learnt nothing. They tried to figure out what economies of sacrifice were being invoked, for what this was punishment. Ruined, lost, burnt, scuttled rigs were healing on the ocean floor and coming back. Platform, jackup, semi-submersible: all the lost.¹⁰⁸

The explanation for the rigs seems simple: our projects take on a life of their own, with destructive consequences, when we refuse our duties to properly control their operations from cradle to grave. Returning to plague their creators, Miéville’s revived oil rigs are akin to Frankenstein’s Creature who haunts Victor Frankenstein after the careless scientist abandons him. Derek Gladwin also compares Miéville’s petrogothic creations to Shelley’s tale, stating that “the oil rig becomes a monster provoked to devour the people who created it.”¹⁰⁹ However, this evaluation risks oversimplifying “Covehithe” as a monster-revenge story when, unlike Frankenstein’s Creature, the rigs never demonstrate intention to vengefully ruin the lives of their creators. Despite the ruin caused to infrastructure and environments, rigs journey onto land for the purpose of drilling for their own means; as Miéville later reveals, rigs come ashore to drill their eggs into the earth. Rigs, careless of humans in the same way industry neglects the human

¹⁰⁶ Miéville, “Covehithe,” 307.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 305.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Gladwin, *Ecological Exile*, 192.

life of workers and communities for the sake of unethical extraction and production, destroy as a consequence of obtaining their coveted drilling/spawning grounds. Even one specific event of a rig killing a dog, told to Dughan's daughter by a guard, places the blame on foolish human actions that allowed the animal to get too close to the metal giant.¹¹⁰ The rigs symbolize that even without intention for destruction, the current (mis)management of petrocultural operations unavoidably causes widespread, often irreversible damage. With the world forever marked by industry-made creations, Gladwin's later insight holds that the rig resurrection "serves as a vital reminder to humans: never discount what delayed ecological consequences may result from the human factor."¹¹¹

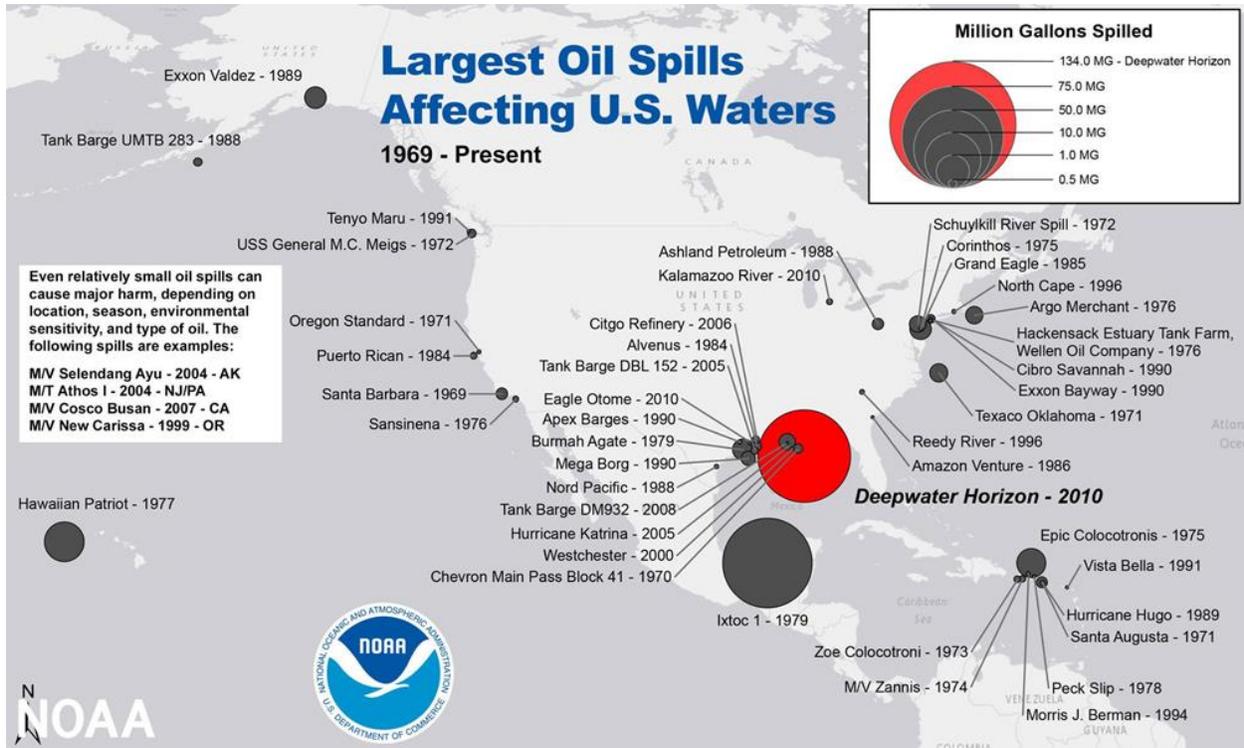
The injustice perpetrated by industry against the rigs corresponds with the harm done to ecosystems and individual non-human lives that must adapt to the presence and frequently baleful impacts of offshore operations, both during the course of rigs' lifetimes and after their sunken demises. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA): "Thousands of oil spills occur in U.S. waters each year. Most of these spills are small, for example when oil spills while refueling a ship. But these spills can still cause damage, especially if they happen in sensitive environments, like beaches, mangroves, and wetlands."¹¹² The greatest risk of devastating leaks of oil and associated pollutants comes from rigs and tankers with their purposes of extracting and transporting large quantities of the substances, as indicated in the map included in NOAA's article (copied below). Notably, the spills NOAA addresses here are only in and directly around American waters—the global occurrence of massive spills,

¹¹⁰ Miéville, "Covehithe," 309.

¹¹¹ Gladwin, *Ecological Exile*, 192.

¹¹² NOAA, "Oil Spills," 1 August 2020.

including some of the largest recorded in history, are not placed on this map or located in the forefront of Western consciousness.



Largest oil spills affecting U.S. waters, 1969- 2017. Courtesy of: noaa.gov/education/resource-collections/ocean-coasts/oil-spills.

Through Dughan’s memories of work with and against the rigs in the Platform Expulsion Unit, Miéville informs the audience that the witnessed awakening event of Petrobras P36 is not an isolated occurrence, but only one of the many resurfacings of reanimated platforms across the world beginning with the Rowan Gorilla I; in order to illustrate the frequency and lack of media coverage of “mundane” oil-related catastrophes, Miéville pointedly describes the rig as “[n]o Piper Alpha, no Deepwater Horizon; an undistinguished disaster.”¹¹³ Miéville names additional real-life rigs that have been sunk in the last several decades: Ocean Ranger, Ocean Prince, and

¹¹³ Miéville, “Covehithe,” 304.

Sedco 135F to name a few.¹¹⁴ These rigs have been sent to watery graves, each one after tragic disasters involving incalculable damage to ecosystems and the loss of human lives, as with the disaster of “the *Ocean Express*, capsized in 1976 with thirteen dead.”¹¹⁵ Rigs sunk in one part of the interconnected ocean may emerge in another portion at any time:

The first platforms had returned close to where they went down. But then Interocean II had emerged not in the North Sea but in the harbour of a hastily evacuated Oporto, stepped daintily over the seawall like someone crossing a stile. Sedco 135F rose in the Galapagos, far from the Bay of Campeche. The many-legged barge Ocean Prince came up not in Dogger Bank but Sardinia. Revisitors might come, drill, go back to the water, even come up again, anywhere.¹¹⁶

The globalized context of these revivals echoes the global impact of the oil industry, the effects of which reverberate across national boundaries. However, peoples and environments in specific regions and countries are subjected to greater harm than others.¹¹⁷ The increased presence of industry in certain areas entails rigs, accompanied by spills and the many other hazards of oil, are disproportionately distributed around the globe. Miéville takes care to feature one reanimated rig, the Sea Quest, as it clambers ashore the Nigerian coast into the “oil-fouled Delta.”¹¹⁸ Sea Quest was an oil rig manufactured for British Petroleum until it was sold and deployed to drill in the Warri Area of Nigeria; the rig was deliberately sunk in 1980 after receiving fire damage from a blowout.¹¹⁹ Miéville’s telling of Sea Quest’s afterlife involves the rig destructively crashing

¹¹⁴ Companies frequently give rigs macho-coded names or those with gigantic/fierce connotations. For example, Rowan Gorilla I draws comparison to monstrous King Kong. Naming is one example of how industry reframes petromonstrosity.

¹¹⁵ Miéville, “Covehithe,” 305.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 307.

¹¹⁷ See Nixon’s *Slow Violence*, especially Chapter 2, “Fast-forward Fossil: Petro-despotism and the Resource Curse.” pp. 69-102.

¹¹⁸ Miéville, “Covehithe,” 306.

¹¹⁹ SeaQuest’s history can be found at the website of the rig’s manufacturer. See “Sea Quest” on Harland and

inland, trackable by its “rainbow-filmed liquid spoor” and “tripod crater prints,” to drink oil before returning once more to its ocean home.¹²⁰ This focus on Sea Quest’s destructive capacity after death, only a fraction of its potential while it was still in operation, highlights the larger petroleum industry; the problematic deployment and sinking of Sea Quest was but a small part of the ongoing presence of baleful oil operations and politics in the Global South, particularly around the Niger Delta.¹²¹ Miéville draws attention to the exploitation of resources and land in the Delta by oil operations and the very real suffering of humans and non-humans in the region.



The Sea Quest under construction at Harland & Wolff Construction Company in 1966. According to Harland & Wolff, “the entire structure was 320 feet (98 m) high and weighed 150,000 tons, including three legs each 35 feet (11 m) in diameter and 160 feet (49 m) long” (see fn 37 above).

Wolff’s website.

¹²⁰ Miéville, “Covehithe,” 306.

¹²¹ See Nixon’s *Slow Violence*, particularly Chapter 3, “Pipedreams: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice, and Micro-minority Rights,” pp. 103 - 127.

As Rob Nixon records in 2011, “Niger Delta communities have suffered the equivalent of an Exxon-Valdez sized spill annually for half a century.”¹²² Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden comment on the visibility of these pervasive oil accidents: “Occurring gradually over time, these spills do not register as much as the more spectacular, sudden spills in or near the United States.”¹²³ Connected livelihoods, cultures, and ecosystems are threatened when oil companies drill and take over areas; additionally, equipment and platforms are then carelessly sunk to add further pollution to regions. The sacrifice of *Sea Quest* is symbolic of the necropolitical actions undertaken by international corporations that turn marginalized areas into “sacrifice zones,” regions of horrendous political and environmental threat, in the name of resource extraction.¹²⁴ Miéville’s many revived oil rig monsters are thus manifestations of the threats of international oil with its tentacular reach across space to devastate at-risk communities and ecosystems.

Beyond their own monstrous capacity for destruction, rigs are emblematic of the larger monolith industry of oil. As Sheena Wilson argues in her article in *Oil Culture*: “Despite the fact that the air and water pollution from daily industrial activity around the oil sands in Northern Alberta over the course of a year is equivalent to that from a major oil spill every year, this activity has been naturalized. By contrast, the monstrous oil spill is perceived as something that needs to be brought under control and disciplined.”¹²⁵ Considering Miéville’s rigs as representative of the totality of commercial oil operations widens the focus for the reader to include not only offshore impacts but also the monstrous pollution from the oil enterprise as a

¹²² Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 274.

¹²³ Barrett and Worden, “Introduction,” *Oil Culture*, fn 3.

¹²⁴ See Thom Davies’ article: “Toxic Space and Time: Slow Violence, Necropolitics, and Petrochemical Pollution” as well as Ron Nixon’s *Slow Violence* for a discussion of Achille Mbembe’s “necropolitics” and sacrifice zones, respectively. Necropolitics is a key concept for understanding the actions of government- and corporate-owned oil companies that monstrously confer the status of what Mbembe calls the “living-dead” onto entire groups and communities of people who are put at lethal risk in extraction and processing zones in order to uphold the petrocultural enterprise, specifically for the benefit of the Global North.

¹²⁵ Sheena Wilson, “Gendering Oil: Tracing Western Petrosexual Relations,” 257.

whole. The consequences of offshore oil are not limited to isolated incidents and neither are the long-term effects from all petroleum extraction activities. In this way, Miéville's revenant platforms are monstrous, tangible embodiments of the compounding results of oil that are hidden until we are forced to face them.

The global awakening of Miéville's rigs draws further parallels to the planetary hauntings of petroleum manifested through climate change. Derek Gladwin identifies this greater connection: "the oil rigs appear as the return of the repressed, haunting society as physical and symbolic reminders that although they are out of sight, they continue to exist. In this way, the story indirectly represents one of the major symptoms of climate change."¹²⁶ Ghosts of oil, resurrections of dead matter released by anthropogenic warming and extraction, are apt figures to capture the uncanniness of a changing world, dubbed in recent discourse as the environmental/ecological uncanny. Amitav Ghosh writes on this topic and connects the large-scale environmental shifts made through climate change with the experience of haunting:

There is an additional element of the uncanny in events triggered by climate change... This is that the freakish weather events of today, despite their radically nonhuman nature, are nonetheless animated by cumulative human actions. In that sense, the events set in motion by global warming have a more intimate connection with humans than did the climatic phenomena of the past—this is because we have all contributed in some measure, great or small, to their making. They are the mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms.¹²⁷

In a positive feedback cycle, the burning of fossil fuels by modern Western civilization has resulted in a changing climate that negatively impacts human enterprises. Ghosh is correct in his

¹²⁶ Gladwin, *Ecological Exile*, 192.

¹²⁷ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 32.

assertions that humans have responsibility for creating their ghosts, and addressing this responsibility requires understanding the agency of non-human actants to improve our interactions with them. Ghosh's theorizing of the environmental uncanny thus relates to Jane Bennett's discussions of assemblages; in her arguments for decentering human agency as the exclusive subjectivity in control of actions and operations in the world, Bennett asserts that "[T]he locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group."¹²⁸ As entities that involve a set of many different players in their origins and effects, storms "set in motion by global warming" fit into Bennett's description of human-nonhuman assemblages. Acknowledging the non-human agencies connected with our own leads us to understand human agency as impactful yet finite; we are not in control of the other matter in our environment and baleful consequences occur when we unthinkingly attempt to manipulate the material world. To conceptualize the entanglements with non-human actors, other scholars also support the use of ghost/monster figures in discussing the sensations of the environmental uncanny: "In the indeterminate conditions of environmental damage, nature is suddenly unfamiliar again. How shall we find our way? Perhaps sensibilities from folklore and science fiction—such as monsters and ghosts—will help."¹²⁹ Miéville's rigs play a role in addressing the uncanniness of an altered world through their portrayal of "oil as an embodied subject as well as a material product" that haunt their entangled human counterparts with the effects of poorly managed assemblages.¹³⁰

Miéville hints at later "petrospectral presences" to come from the rigs when they begin drilling on land—these hauntings are soon revealed in the form of rig offspring.¹³¹ The rigs' demonstration of corporeality reaches an apogee in their ability to lay eggs and reproduce

¹²⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvii.

¹²⁹ Heather Anne Swanson et al., "Introduction: Bodies Tumbled into Bodies," M2.

¹³⁰ Gladwin, *Ecological Exile*, 192.

¹³¹ Miéville, "Covehithe," 306.

smaller platform offspring, an ability that stuns a world still reeling from the rigs' initial reemergence:

“...over a year after the *Ocean Ranger*'s visit, up from the still-recovering Newfoundland ground into which it had pushed its drill, the first clutch of newly-hatched oil rigs had unburied themselves. They had emerged into the night, shaking off earth. Stood quivering on stiffening metal or cement legs. Tilted tiny helipads. Tottered finally for the sea.¹³²

The platforms' inexplicable propagation is a fascinating plot twist which furthers not only the notion that our productions have a life of their own, but also suggests that the long-lasting impact of oil is renewed successively per each generation. Much like the Japanese Kaiju monster *Mothra*, who is often destroyed during the course of her cinematic appearances but lives on through her larvae offspring, the rigs' reproductive ability imbues them with another dimension of immortality.¹³³ This is yet another spectral aspect of the rigs with the monstrous progeny suggesting that the future will long be haunted by the effects of oil. Miéville's creations engage with Jeffery Jerome Cohen's observation that “[M]onsters are our children...They ask why we have created them.”¹³⁴ As the rigs are the creations of human labor (motivated by petrocapiatist industry), rig offspring carry on a legacy of globalized industrial influence.

Sharing a world with reproductive oil rigs is not without tension—the same initial conflicts between rigs and human civilization persists with rig offspring. As more rigs make their way to the sea from other breeding sites, humans must make a choice on how to live with the petromonsters:

¹³² Miéville, “Covehithe,” 308.

¹³³ *Mothra*, a fan-favorite moth Kaiju, was created by Shinichiro Nakamura, Takehiko Fukunaga, and Yoshie Hotta and first featured in Toho Studios' *Mothra* (1961), directed by Ishirō Honda.

¹³⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 20.

In other coastal cities, neonate oil platforms did emerge, to gallop hectic and nervy through the streets, spreading panic. Only the most violent post-return decommissioning could stop all this, only second deaths, from which the rigs did not come back again, kept them from where they wished to go, to drill. Once chosen, a place might be visited by any one of the wild rigs that walked out of the abyss. As if such locations had been decided collectively. UNPERU observed the nesting sites, more all the time, and kept track of the rigs themselves as best they could, of their behemoth grazing or wandering at the bottom of the world.¹³⁵

The rigs reproduction further expresses the environmental uncanny as a world changed by humans results in a strange, no longer familiar, environment. Rigs are turned into a new Anthropocene species of sorts, their breeding habits uncannily echoing the migration patterns of animals such as sea turtles and salmon. This Darwinian drive to continue on their kind through laying their “slippy black rig egg” seems to be their primary purpose.¹³⁶ The procreative mission and ability of the rigs suggest that they will continue to inhabit a separate world and exist as individual subjects apart from humans. Gladwin notes that the story “underscores elements of the nonhuman and posthuman in contemporary culture by considering how human agency exists as only one category of a much larger material world.”¹³⁷ Human society in Mieville’s story must make the choice to wage costly war against the rigs, seeking their extermination, or learn how to live with them, accepting that they have a world outside of their intended purposes of carrying out the project of extractivism.

¹³⁵ Miéville, “Covehithe,” 310.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 311.

¹³⁷ Gladwin, *Ecological Exile*, 192.

Based on the short story's complicated final scene, society chooses to naturalize the rigs, culturally pacifying their symbolic and actual threats by turning their nesting habits into spectacles as if their breeding were an ecotourist attraction. Dughan and his daughter are spotted by a guard while watching Petrobras' egg-laying activities, yet, instead of remaining hostile, the guard turns friendly while escorting them from their overlook on the cliffs to where "the few lucky to have been nearby, at accredited hotels" are gathered.¹³⁸ The guard suggests a "kid's club" set up for watching underwater rig eggs cams and a guide down the beach instructs the tourist group to return in the morning since they can "bring [their] cameras then—no danger then if you forgot to turn your flash off."¹³⁹ This naturalization of rigs turns away from aesthetics of petrosublarity and monstrosity to reflect the sentiments of petrophilia prevalent in a society fundamentally built upon and centered around oil. Monstrosity is woven into the maintained status quo relationships with oil in petromodernity—we accept and learn to live with the effects of petroleum despite the costs. The uncanny, the dangerous, and the catastrophic are once more folded into the norms of petrocapiialist society that reconfigure concern and alarm into entertainment, mundane experience, or an acceptable "natural" way of the world. Being aware of the importance and ramifications of the rigs and oil requires a rejection of the hegemonic naturalization of industry, a task few, Dughan and his daughter possibly included, seem to undertake.

Miéville's petromonsters are symbols of warning for humanity to proceed with caution in our reckless construction and destruction of the machinery involved in oil. The monstrous and the spectral intermingle in "Covehithe," a work reflective of *Frankenstein*—Mary Shelley's own cautionary contribution to a ghost story competition. The rigs support the lack of a necessary

¹³⁸ Miéville, "Covehithe," 311.

¹³⁹ Miéville, "Covehithe," 310 - 311.

distinction between the figures of ghosts and monsters, helping us to grasp both “life’s enmeshment in landscapes and “life’s symbiotic entanglement across bodies” when our oil takes on a life of its own.¹⁴⁰ Yet, what is most monstrous about these oil rigs is their fallen, real-life counterparts. The many sunken rigs also provide commentary on just how common it is for rigs to be sunk, whether intentionally or as the result of disastrous incidents, and the larger issue of what to do with rigs at the end of their lifetimes. Where do we bury such monsters? Extracting such industrial giants, who labor and sink in the service of gargantuan oil, costs millions, and can also lead to great damage in the process of pulling them to shore.¹⁴¹ The devastation of Miéville’s fictional rigs gesture towards the real costs of giant platforms that include human and non-human life when accidents have fatal repercussions. The final lines of “Covehithe” end on Dughan’s ruminations on the landscape and the past, leaving readers with final thoughts of the ghosts surrounding us as civilization attempts to press onwards:

“Dughan turned and took in the length of Covehithe beach. They were out of sight, but he looked in the direction of the graveyard, and of St. Andrew’s stubby hall where services continued within the medieval carapace, remains of a grander church fallen apart to time and the civil war and to economics, fallen ultimately with permission.”¹⁴²

With our unwitting permission in the current economic system reliant on petroleum, so too have the rigs fallen. The future will remain increasingly haunted by their fallings and failings as industrial oil operations continue.

¹⁴⁰ Heather Anne Swanson et al., “Introduction: Bodies Tumbled into Bodies,” M2.

¹⁴¹ See Tom Lamont’s “Where Oil Rigs Go to Die” in *The Guardian* for a critical piece of journalism on the laborious process of rig disposal.

¹⁴² Miéville, “Covehithe,” 311.

III. Mired in Gender, Mucked up in Oil: *Pussy Sludge* and Feminist Petrocritique

Gracie Gardner wrote her play, *Pussy Sludge*, as a response to Trump-era threats to women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, but the work also stands as a unique piece of petrocultural critique. *Pussy Sludge* is the absurdist story of the titular character who begins to menstruate crude oil and relocates to a national park to wallow in her own oil seep. The character Pussy Sludge struggles against dominant narratives of gender, profit, and nature to make choices that are not dictated by others but are her own. Pussy Sludge's ability to produce large amounts of oil is monstrous in itself, but her further production of a creature inside her oil seep creates an additional point of analysis into Gardner's weavings of monstrosity and gendered oil.

Pussy Sludge's residence in a National Park, a location fraught with problematic historical and cultural constructions of wilderness, is a salient point of departure for analyzing the play. The historically-documented origins of National Parks, the epitome of American wilderness, are rooted in colonialism.¹⁴³ Following from the exclusionary principles surrounding their inception, the image of National Parks as pure wilderness, kept pristine from human influence, has continued to be pervasive in contemporary American notions of ideal "nature." This quixotic notion of American wilderness as a space to construct and preserve ideas of rugged individualism and masculinity emerged from early environmentalist movements, Progressive Era Politics, and symbolic Rooseveltian wilderness.¹⁴⁴ Stacy Alaimo considers the masculinization of wilderness as a response to the socially-changing, increasingly urbanized American landscape:

Concurrent with raging feminist and class struggles for increased social power, this 'love' of wilderness betrays a white, mainly middle- to upper-class male anxiety about

¹⁴³ See David Treuer's article "Return the National Parks to The Tribes" for a history of the settler colonist origins of the Parks.

¹⁴⁴ See Michael Egan's "Wrestling Teddy Bears—Wilderness Masculinity as Invented Tradition in the Pacific Northwest."

weakness and a drive to demonstrate and reassure men of their potency and authority.

Reacting to women's encroachment into the public sphere, men fled into the wilderness, a place ostensibly 'outside' of the political domain. Thus, the wilderness becomes an ideal place to play out—even while repressing—their political anxieties.¹⁴⁵

Through this establishment as a place for men to “reassert their virility,” American wilderness was culturally constructed to reaffirm social dominance against feminized spaces.¹⁴⁶ National Parks have yet to shed these cultural associations and largely remain standards of preserved American nature that serve as “wild” and typically “macho” escapes set apart from the constructed realm of human civilization.¹⁴⁷ Park and wilderness imagery revolves around the stereotypical “outdoorsman” who retreats to wild spaces to hunt, fish, camp, and other “manly” activities. A connection with oil emerges from these enterprises, with boating, RVing, motor sporting, and scenic roads specifically made for vehicle travel all being permitted features of many National Parks and wilderness areas. In dominant views of American wilderness, parks remain examples of pristine nature even with the inclusion of commercialized oil.

It is onto this backdrop of white, masculinized American wilderness that *Pussy Sludge* is splattered. *Pussy Sludge* contaminates the pristine notions of wilderness still ingrained in the American cultural imagination by creating her oil seep (and monster within) in a National Park. The traditional exclusionary ethos of the Parks as places for enjoyment is demonstrated in an encounter between *Pussy Sludge* and Becca, a girl scout acting as a policing figure of the Park. Becca argues that *Pussy Sludge*'s placement in the Park is enough justification to permit treating her as a “natural” phenomenon but denies *Pussy Sludge*'s identification as a spectacle :

¹⁴⁵ Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, 98.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ See Kathryn Joyce's article, "Out Here No One Can Here You Scream" on toxic masculinity and sexual harassment in wilderness spaces.

BECCA. This is gonna bring a lot of *hikers* this way.

PUSSY SLUDGE. Excuse me. Your scoutness. I don't want any more hikers walking by here.

BECCA. It's a unique part of the ecosystem. It's rare for temperate rainforests to have petroleum seeps.

PUSSY SLUDGE. It's not a petroleum seep, it's a vaginal discharge.

BECCA. Discharge, schmishcharge. You don't see crude oil on the surface in these parts, and people wanna see it.

PUSSY SLUDGE. No, people will want to see the girl with oil coming out of her vagina.

BECCA. I think you're sensationalizing it. People are interested in geology.

PUSSY SLUDGE. Listen, you little asshole. This is my body. And you can't just treat it like a scenic destination.

BECCA. Listen, you big asshole, this is my merit badge, and you're in a national park.¹⁴⁸

Pussy Sludge refuses to be sensationalized. She does not wish to be a tourist trap or take part in the construct of Parks as sites of machismo spectacle and recreation; Pussy Sludge's desire for solitude is based on her desire to escape the gaze of a critical society. Her resistance to being on display mirrors the relationship between femininity and petroculture that is staged in consumer capitalism. The gendered practice of performative resistance to petroleum through forms of "green-washing" consumerism is analyzed by Sheena Wilson: "Western women's relationships to petroleum have been constructed in the social imaginary as a site of spectacle through which resistance to petroculture is signified yet undercut."¹⁴⁹ As major consumers of petroleum products, particularly from the fashion and cosmetics industries, women are objectified as the

¹⁴⁸ Gracie Gardner, *Pussy Sludge*, 37.

¹⁴⁹ Sheena Wilson, "Gendering Oil: Tracing Western Petrosexual Relations," 249.

canvas and targets for “environmentally-friendly” commodity campaigns which function as pseudo-activism through images of an improved, green lifestyle. Pussy Sludge’s attempts to refuse the spectacularization of her body in a masculinized wilderness or a patriarchal consumer culture demonstrate a resistance to set gendered nature/culture boundaries. Pussy Sludge mucks up the cultural borders that dictate how she should interact with oil and the natural world; her stance against objectification in gendered settings makes her a monstrous threat to the established order.

Pussy Sludge’s stance against the commodification of her oil has further implications as a disruption to hegemonic expectations in patriarchal, capitalist petromodernity. In an exchange with RJ, a capitalistic manager at a can factory, she clearly states her refusal to sell her oil for profit:

RJ. You ever think about selling it?

PUSSY SLUDGE. What?

RJ. All this oil.

PUSSY SLUDGE. No.

RJ. It’s liquid gold.

PUSSY SLUDGE. I don’t want to.

Realizing:

PUSSY SLUDGE. That’s why I came out here.

RJ. Oh.

PUSSY SLUDGE. Does it seem like a waste?

RJ. Maybe. If I had –

PUSSY SLUDGE. If you had what?

RJ. Um. Well, if I had an oil well –

PUSSY SLUDGE. If you had oil coming out of you?

RJ. Well, I wouldn't –

PUSSY SLUDGE. You wouldn't what?

RJ steams.

RJ. Okay. If I had oil coming out of me, I'd sell the hell out of it.

PUSSY SLUDGE. Great.¹⁵⁰

Saliently, it is RJ, the central male character in the play, who confronts Pussy Sludge about her refusal to commodify her oil. RJ views the oil as only a money-making resource and is unable to comprehend why Pussy Sludge would throw away a lucrative opportunity. Where he sees dollar signs, Pussy Sludge sees her biological material; she questions RJ if he would sell his own biological matter, his sperm, and he balks at the idea. This inquiry exposes his lack of consideration, or care, that Pussy Sludge's oil is a bodily production that she might oppose commodifying; he sees no issues with the commodification of oil or women's bodies. While not directly supportive of the concept, RJ's views are not oppositional to petro-masculinity, a term coined by Cara Daggett to link the burning and extraction of fossil fuels with white patriarchal identities.¹⁵¹ Arising as a hypermasculine response to threatened masculinity in contemporary (specifically Western) society and becoming especially prominent during the Trump presidency, petro-masculinity is a reactionary "hegemonic masculine identity" that relies on petroculture, authoritarianism, and misogyny to reaffirm the dominant norms surrounding masculine identity and patriarchal rule.¹⁵² In the convergent views of RJ and petro-masculinity, oil is a substance to

¹⁵⁰ Gardner, *Pussy Sludge*, 21.

¹⁵¹ Cara Daggett, "Petro-Masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire," 28.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 33.

be exploited and commodified. Pussy Sludge's refusal to turn her oil and her body into an object of profit provides ecofeminist commentary on the entwined resistance to the commodification of nature, oil, and femme/feminized bodies. By choosing not to participate in an exploitative market and perpetuate entangled marginalizations, Pussy Sludge begins to claim her own power.

Pussy Sludge, monstrous in her own right, also produces a monster in her oil sludge. The symbolic representations of this monster are murky but play a crucial role in the play's narrative. At once a part of Pussy Sludge as well as separate, the monster must be overcome for Pussy Sludge to escape her predicament. The monster, never fully revealed, is introduced as a dangerous threat to Pussy Sludge:

*Something rumbles and moves in the sludge. Pussy Sludge shines a light towards it, but it's under the sludge again. She walks towards it. It rumbles. Slowly, she sticks her hand into the sludge and reaches for it. She touches it and it sends a jolt of electricity from the sludge up the vines and reincorporates with the clouds above the swamp in thunder and sets the sky alight. She withdraws her hand, electrocuted.*¹⁵³

The monster's shocking capability identifies oil as an energy source for the generation of electricity. This generation of energy does not serve Pussy Sludge's best interests; the monster uses this power against her. This negative use of electricity against Pussy Sludge, the producer of the oil, speaks to the harm of a collective reliance on oil as a primary resource to power our modern world. Oil is not our friend; although humans take charge of extracting and refining the substance for energy production, oil is not as fully under our control as we like to think (as evidenced by the runaway local and planetary consequences of fossil fuel use). Pussy Sludge's

¹⁵³ Gardner, *Pussy Sludge*, 15.

monster demonstrates its deadly potential in another encounter with Pussy Sludge and her mother, Rachel:

RACHEL (hysterical). What the hell are you talking about? There's something in there?

What's in there?

PUSSY SLUDGE. It's fine! I made it! It came from me. The worst thing it can do is: *Pussy Sludge reaches into the sludge and it electrocutes her, sending electric up the vines and into the clouds. But this time, Pussy Sludge is latched onto it, and it continues to shock her, sending her into spasms. Rachel grows huge terrifying wings, a demon from hell in her own right. She flaps her wings and bellows deeply at the thing in the sludge, shaking the whole swamp: a winged dinosaur, protecting her child. The thing in the sludge lets go of Pussy Sludge and subsides into the depths. Rachel pants, the dinosaur leaving her body, the wings folding away into arms.*¹⁵⁴

In this scene, the figure of the dinosaur, the progenitor of fossil fuels in the popular imagination, makes an appearance alongside Pussy Sludge's oil monster. The scene reverberates with convergent timescapes as the past of oil meets the present petroleum monster and its electrical progeny. Although Pussy Sludge wants to believe that the monster, a kind of offspring, won't hurt her, its actions prove that it, and the petroleum it embodies, is not opposed to harming those who produce it. The petrosublime is evoked in the scene through the intense power of the monster, its mysterious and threatening presence in the ooze, and the prehistoric origins of an oil that is far more ancient than the humanity that burns it.

At the conclusion of the play, Pussy Sludge is pulled into the depths of the seep by her monster. Pussy Sludge does not escape from the sludge monster by professing her love for it;

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 28.

there is no salvation from petrophilia here. It seems that, instead, the monster relinquishes Pussy Sludge once she comes to the realization of her own power and independence. Pussy Sludge must move on from being stuck in a dependent relationship with oil and cease wallowing in her perceptions of helplessness. Abstaining from oil commodification is one step forward in the fight against threatening regimes, be they the oil industry or the patriarchy. Escaping from her petromonster and oil seep means that Pussy Sludge does possess control of her situation. It is not too late to take charge and challenge the mucked together power structures of petromodernity; our monsters are not invincible.

IV. Petromonster Revenge and the Cost of Tough Oil in *Sector 7*

Set on a working oil rig off the coast of Jeju island, *Sector 7* is a creature feature drenched with explicit petroleum connections. Through its horrifying deep-sea petromonster, the South Korean sci-fi horror film emphasizes the harms of the oil industry visited on the workers and non-human animals exploited by oil extraction and production. Creature features, horror/science fiction films that feature charismatic creatures who clash with humanity, serve as often overlooked vehicles for expressing social and political concerns. As Bridgitte Barclay and Christy Tidwell argue in their Special Issue Introduction to *Science Fiction Film and Television*: “creature features provide a space for considering environmental issues. Through fun and fear, they often lead viewers to identify or empathise with the creatures and against the humans making bad decisions, and such responses make creature features especially fruitful texts for environmental messages and analyses.”¹⁵⁵ While *Sector 7* is cinematically unremarkable in its special effects and use of hackneyed horror tropes, it fits into an important niche of textual analysis as a work of ecohorror that fantastically presents the very real crisis we face in our

¹⁵⁵ Bridgitte Barclay and Christy Tidwell, "Mutant Bears, Defrosted Parasites and Cellphone Swarms," 270.

petromodern existences. *Sector 7* is an exemplary example of the capacity of popular film, particularly in the science fiction genre, to address societal environmental issues. The film's petromonstrosity puts the multidimensional threats of oil on full display to criticize the great damage and loss of life as the expense for the operations of and our reliance on the international oil industry.

Sector 7 opens with an ultra-deepwater repair of a damaged oil drill at 8,202 feet below the ocean's surface. A crewman, who we are later led to believe is the protagonist's father, leaves his submersible and approaches the stuck drill in a high-tech diving suit. In contrast to the aesthetic of the technological sublime surrounding the deep-sea equipment, wonder of the natural world is a central element of the scene; the crewman pauses to watch a gigantic whale swim with ease through the depths. This moment is soon interrupted when the seafloor around the drill begins to crack. For a brief moment, wonder returns when out of the crevices emerge miniscule luminescent sea creatures closely resembling sea butterflies, a type of swimming sea snail. For a minute, the crewman is captivated by the organisms who appear to harmlessly flutter through the water; however, the situation quickly takes a turn for the worse when violent currents rush up from the ocean floor the instant he tries to touch one of the creatures. As he clings to the drill in an attempt to hold on, the creatures, shrieking menacingly, converge upon his helmet; his screams close out the scene as the screen blackens.

Twenty years later, a new crew is unsuccessfully drilling for oil on a rig in Sector 7, the same area of open ocean where the accident took place. Although extraction efforts were shut down after the event, demand for oil has motivated the oil corporation of the region to resume operations in the sector. The protagonist, Hae-joon, is a hard-headed, high-ranking member of the crew who is personally invested in finding oil as a way to honor her father's death in the

accident.¹⁵⁶ Importantly, the rig’s lab is keeping some of the sea butterfly-like organisms and studying them outside of their chemosynthetic environment; besides stinging a crew member in self-defense, however, they seem to be innocuous in their contained setting. When the corporation calls for the crew’s resignation and removal from the rig after a failure to strike oil, Captain Jeong-man, former Sector 7 crew member and Hae-joon’s uncle, returns to the platform. Jeong-man convinces the company to extend the time to find oil in Sector 7 and the crew rallies around, and shortly achieves, a successful drill. Months later, the good times end with a sudden succession of violent crew member deaths. The monster culprit soon reveals itself, and the crew enters into a lethal dance to try to kill the creature before it kills them on the isolated oil rig.



Sector 7’s deep-sea petromonster. Image courtesy of “Monster (Sector 7)” on Villians Wiki, user BigBadSquid.

¹⁵⁶ Oil becomes a family identity and intergenerational business for characters in the film, similar to the central oil careers of the father-daughter duo in the 1998 sci-fi thriller *Armageddon*. While *Armageddon* prominently features oil in its narrative, the monster of this movie, an earth-bound asteroid, is arguably too far removed from the petromonstrous to give *Armageddon* the status of a petromonster tale.

Sector 7's killer oil monster explicitly embodies petroleum both in its characteristics and its capabilities. Mixed with both mammalian and invertebrate traits, the creature seems to be amphibious—much like the substance of oil that resides in and impacts both terrestrial and aquatic environments. Originally tinged with bluish-gray and pink shiny skin, the monster later survives attempts to ignite it; in its damaged state, its horrific burned appearance mirrors the corrosive damage oil exacts upon biological matter. Its many tentacles suggest kinship with other deep-sea creatures, but also with oil rigs themselves with their many pipes and protruding equipment. Reflecting this imagery of the rig setting with its massive scale and sheer power, the monster represents the concept of the petrosublime as an aesthetic evoked by the immense, pervasive, and consuming nature of industrial oil operations and infrastructure. Similarly to the rigs in “Covehithe,” the monster corporealizes the grand size and reach of petroleum operations that dwarf the size of the human. However, as a typical trait of creature feature films, human folly and actions are truly at fault for the mass destruction and tragedy exacted by the wronged non-human monster in the film. The monster is not on the rig by accident; Captain Jeong-man has been secretly experimenting with the sea butterfly-like creatures and grew one to enormous, and dangerous, proportions. Jeong-man unveils that he knew about the creatures twenty years earlier and discovered that their body fluid is “flammable like petroleum” and each individual can burn for over 30 hours at 1,200 degrees Celsius.¹⁵⁷ While Jeong-man marvels at the prospect of exploiting the creatures as a self-reliant energy source for their country, his brother is quick to object to the ethics of the matter: “But it’s a living organism. This isn’t right.”¹⁵⁸ Jeong-man’s unethical actions, with the intention of maximizing the potential yield from the creatures, lead to

¹⁵⁷ All quotes from the movie are from English subtitle translations; Ji-hoon, 2011, 0:57:28.

¹⁵⁸ Ji-hoon, 2011, 0:59:18.

the classic creature feature reversal: the true immoral monster is the human. The creature wreaks havoc on the rig following the typical revenge trope of wronged non-human monster versus baleful humans. The rig's monster avenges a twofold harm against itself and its kind; the petroleum industry, acting through its workers, not only disturbs the organisms' natural habitat, but as "the oil itself," the creature resists its exploitation as a resource.¹⁵⁹ In the end, revenge is exacted upon the crew, but at the cost of the monster's own life. Hae-joon gruesomely kills the creature with one of the rig's drills—its excessive spillage of blood looks like crude oil.¹⁶⁰

The film relies on the monstrous creature to depict the destructive effects of oil on both non-human and human lives. The figure of the supernatural monster operates as an effective vehicle for transmitting these environmental justice concerns. As Barclay and Tidwell assert: "With no attempt to prettify audiences' and creators' fears (and desires), creature features provide a direct (though not uncomplicated or consistent) representation of and response to social issues."¹⁶¹ With its livelihood and environmental flourishing impeded by the oil industry, the creature's enactment of "nature's revenge" represents growing anxieties surrounding the environmental costs of increasingly risky oil extraction. Internationally, humanity is entering further into what Michael T. Klare calls a "Tough Oil World," a period in which the age of easily accessible oil reserves has dried up.¹⁶² The film's depiction of Sector 7's ultra-deep oil reserves more than 8,000 feet below the surface corresponds with the tough oil reality that remaining oil on the planet must be extracted from "ever deeper and more geologically or politically hazardous

¹⁵⁹ Ji-hoon, 2011, 0:58:52.

¹⁶⁰ Hae-joon is the only crew member to survive the petromonster rampage. As several online reviews of the film have (critically) noted, this trope of "the Final Girl" who is charged with killing the monster threat resonates with Sigourney Weaver's triumphant character, Ripley, at the end of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). The comparison between the two films extends further since the crew members in both narratives, under the influence of industries, attempt to commodify and instrumentalize both monsters.

¹⁶¹ Barclay and Tidwell, "Mutant Bears, Defrosted Parasites and Cellphone Swarms," 273.

¹⁶² See Michael T. Klare, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy*.

locations.”¹⁶³ The vast, gnawing desire for oil is increasingly morally fraught when it calls for going further into unknown oceanic regions and disrupting even more deep water ecosystems.¹⁶⁴ *Sector 7*'s monster puts the ethical tensions of tough oil on display in its horrific portrayal of the consequences of destroying the natural world to satiate society's petromodern thirst.

Sector 7 further represents the vast implications of tough oil through the monster's explicit embodiment of petroleum. The monster's catastrophic rampage, which creates further environmental hazards with the destroyed rig, results in the tragic death of almost every crew member. As Stephanie LeMenager writes in her introduction to *Living Oil*: “Tough oil is tough not just because it's hard to get, but because of the devastating scale of its externalities.”¹⁶⁵ Increasingly threatened by the conditions of tough oil, worker health and life are other salient costs of petroleum. The film establishes the hazards of rig work early on as a possible foreshadowing of the petromonster's later destruction. In one scene, the crew compares the scars from injuries they have sustained as a result of laboring in the oil industry. Later, the monster causes the death of the youngest crew member when it sabotages equipment during a routine dive to fix part of an underwater pipe. This scene depicts the potential for equipment malfunction during oil extraction and processing, a hazard that only increases in a tough oil era. Finally, as an experiment on the platform, *Sector 7*'s petromonster delivers the statement that oil rigs, apparatuses of the encompassing industry, are producers of immeasurable suffering and death. Petroleum is a killer; entangled human and non-human life is put at risk by the resulting pollution, emissions, and physical dangers of oil and its industry. The film's petromonster

¹⁶³ Quoted from Terry Gross, who summarized Klare's ideas of tough oil during a broadcasted interview with Klare. See the transcript of the interview in the *NPR* article “Michael Klare: Grappling With The Age Of 'Tough Oil.'”

¹⁶⁴ The crew's insistence on finding oil in *Sector 7* shows through their efforts to strike oil. As one of the crew's scientists states, they should all go home since they had “tried everything to the point where the entire underwater terrain morphed” (Ji-hoon, 2011, 0:15:55). This reflects the potential damage from desperate searches for tough oil.

¹⁶⁵ LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 3.

manifests the lethality of oil in a spectacular display of horror that conveys the terrifying true atrocity of petroleum.

Sector 7 ends with Hae-joon in a dive suit on the seafloor re-reading the messages her fallen companions carved into a drill pipe. The camera follows the length of the tube rapidly to the surface, providing viewers with a view of the enormity of the pipe, platform, and entire operation of oil extraction. The final shot ominously expands on this massive perspective as the camera pulls further away, exposing rig after rig across the ocean horizon in another evocation of the petrosublime. The scene captures how the seemingly limitless operations of oil extraction approaches the scale of the infinite and suggests that the never-ending hunger for fuel resources will not cease despite the recent tragic events. Drilling for petroleum in a Tough Oil World will undoubtedly result in future monstrous encounters; the cruelty of oil persists. Via the medium of the creature feature, *Sector 7* addresses the petromodern endeavor to procure oil no matter the costs. Human greed in the form of limitless demand for a limited product results in massive devastation and tragedy for the film's characters. *Sector 7*'s oil monster forces an evaluation of the monstrousness of the petroleum industry and how humans in turn become monsters through the horrendous actions we will allow for "a drop of oil."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Ji-hoon, 2011, 0:59:08.

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