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The writing of the disaster poem: Knowing oil through global apocalypse movies

Abstract:

Based on a chapter of my dissertation's exegesis, my paper will discuss using disaster as a theme and motif in my petropoetic project as a way of mediating and renegotiating the ways hegemonic petrocapiatalism is experienced in the Global North. Oil extraction leads to disasters across very different spatial, temporal and visual frames. Oil spills, for instance, may be localised and devastating, while all "successful" oil consumption draws us incrementally closer to global catastrophe. In the meantime, disaster cinema often positions oil use as both exciting, for its implied role in both narrative and visual effects, and as a saviour, for its ability to get protagonists out of trouble. The challenge, as Graeme Macdonald puts it, is "how to demonstrate the catastrophic in the everyday life of 'banal' oil, to advocate that the fundamental disaster inheres in the productive volume of the 'efficient,' operative, and regularized extraction-emission cycle" (2017, p. 55). Poetry can act as a critical space to observe these lived contradictions, while drawing a reader's attention to the prominence of both petroaesthetics and oil's prominent materiality in popular screen entertainment.

Biographical note:

Connor Weightman is a late-stage PhD candidate at Charles Sturt University, where he has been working on a volume of long poetry provisionally titled *Five Hundred Swimming Pools* and an accompanying exegesis titled "Oil, Long Poetry, and Other Disasters". His poetry has previously been published in Australian literary journals such as *Cordite*, *Plumwood Mountain* and *Westerly*. In 2021 his poem "Perpetual Cataclysm Machine" was shortlisted in the Newcastle Poetry Prize.

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In an article titled “A Short history of oil cultures” (2012), Frederick Buell maps the rise of the oil industry from the 1850s into the present moment to posit that oil’s influence on culture has been characterised chiefly by phases of catastrophe and exuberance alternating with brief periods of stability. According to Buell, these periods alternated with increasing frequency until the periods of stability disappeared altogether, while catastrophe and exuberance have fused into a mutually reinforcing symbiosis. This symbiosis can be seen not only in the catastrophic consequences which intensive petro-dependence have led us to – climate change, resource wars, plastics contamination, the spectre of peak oil, among others (what Buell terms “a portfolio of dread problems”) – but the exuberance through which oil manifests in (particularly US) popular culture and the increasingly risky ventures of late-stage capitalism.

If catastrophe and exuberance are an expression of petroculture, what does this mean for poets (and other creative writers) looking to represent humanity’s relationship with oil? This question remains pertinent because for the most part, despite its material and energetic saturation in modern human lives, oil remains under-represented in most forms of creative writing. There are numerous obvious reasons that the oil-reliant societies of present humans are unsustainable, yet transition into more sustainable modes of living have either not happened or are happening too slowly to avert catastrophic consequences. This condition is what Imre Szeman and other scholars have termed oil’s impasse:

Oil is so deeply embedded in our social, economic, and political structures and practices that imagining or enacting an alternative feels impossible, blocked at every turn by conditions and forces beyond our understanding or control. Impasse understood in this way, invites paralysis and reinforces the status quo. (Petrocultures Research Group, 2016, p. 16)

Part of resolving oil’s impasse requires understanding these ways that oil-reliance has shaped present realities as well as imaginative possibilities. As Szeman asserts elsewhere, “Only by knowing oil can we start to understand fully what and who we might become without it—a task that needs to be at the heart of our political thinking today” (2013, p. 163).

The task of “knowing oil” is seemingly not a straightforward one, however. Like other “hyperobjects” (Morton, 2013), oil is massively distributed, but for most people, only ever experienced indirectly. This has made it difficult to pin down in conventional narratives, where it has mostly either appeared as a metonym for power and evil, or (in a speculative sense) by its absence (Kerber, 2017). As Ghosh (1992), Hitchcock (2011), Szeman (2017) and others have observed, oil appears surprisingly rarely in creative literature given the extent of its material and energetic presence in contemporary life. In an example of what Rob Nixon has termed “slow violence” (2011), many of oil’s deleterious consequences happen at scales that are too small or too large to be easily represented visually, while also disproportionately impacting Global South communities and marginalised voices. Knowing our present relationship to oil is also difficult in the sense that, for many 21st century humans, it is all we have ever known. It’s hard to write about or draw attention to something that is, experientially

speaking, “foundational and ever present, yet it is also secreted away” (Barrett & Worden, 2012, p. xvii) – but this is exactly why there is a great need to write about it.

This brings me back to Buell’s characterisation of the oil age as one of “catastrophe and exuberance”. That oil is all these things simultaneously – exciting and boring; exceptional and normal; dangerous and safe – creates an antinomy that poses a significant obstacle for critical representation. At a quotidian level, we may constantly oscillate between both these viewpoints, yet the space between them remains unreconciled. It is difficult to really understand oil as disastrous when in the Global North it is also “simply what makes the country ‘go’, and in a way that doesn’t necessitate comment or concern” (Szeman, 2017, p. 282). Perversely, we may often end up seeing the oil disaster as an exception that proves the rule: most of the time, oil arrives “safely,” so life as we know it continues in petromodernity – to use LeMenager’s term for “modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil” (2014, p. 67). Graeme Macdonald puts the subsequent interpretative challenge for environmentalist representation as “how to demonstrate the catastrophic in the everyday life of ‘banal’ oil, to advocate that the fundamental disaster inheres in the productive volume of the ‘efficient,’ operative, and regularized extraction-emission cycle” (2017b, p. 55).

In thinking about poetry as a tool to reduce the conceptual and experiential space between ideas and experiences, and particularly in response to Macdonald’s challenge to advocate for the disastrous of everyday, banal oil, I composed a long poem about oil, oil disasters, and disaster movies. The poem, “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine,” is too long to reasonably reproduce in full here, but I’ve included an excerpt of the current working version here to give a sense of it (an earlier version was published in the anthology, *Any Saturday, 2021* [2022]). The poem begins like this:

saved. nearly
seven minutes into
Deep Impact (1998) when
the astronomer – actor uncredited
– swerves his jeep to avoid a truck, tumbles
off the side of the road. the vehicle goes up in
flames. he realises first that the newly discovered
comet is on a collision course with the earth and dies
carrying the sacred floppy disc. for the course of the narrative
his death doesn’t particularly matter, though imdb trivia suggests
the scene was a tribute to comet-hunter eugene shoemaker, whose life
ended in a head-on vehicular collision on the remote tanami track, outback
western australia. hale-bopp was still visible. it was july 1997. at mauna loa 367
parts of carbon dioxide per million were measured and noted. *that thing is carrying*
five hundred thousand pounds of fuel remarks an extra watching the rocket propelling
the shuttle carrying the astronauts away from the earth to blow up the comet and rescue
humanity. they fail
so traffic banks to a standstill across multiple lanes of highway. the scene took 2100 extras
driving 1800 cars and trucks over two days of filming on an unfinished bit of virginia inter-
-state. téa leoni as the career-minded news anchor gives up her place in the helicopter

to go down to the ocean, reconcile with the problematic father. a CG tidal wave
smashes a humble oil rig. the sound technicians approximate the demolition
of new york by water, or, they do their best. i reheat curry that's spent
several months in the freezer, pulling a constant stream of energy

I wrote “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine” over several months at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, a period in which I watched (or subjected myself to, if we're being dramatic) numerous disaster movies such as *Deep Impact* (Leder, 1998), *2012* (Emmerich, 2009), *Dante's Peak* (Donaldson, 1997), *On the Beach* (Kramer, 1959) and *Geostorm* (Devlin, 2017). Although not following formal criteria for selecting which films would be included, I mainly (with some exceptions) focused my attention on what Montano and Carr (2022) categorise as “Global Catastrophe” films, or films in which human life on Earth faces an existential threat – a subset of the disaster genre which, despite seemingly not existing in the 1970s, have now become “so commonplace recently that we're now expected to take the most horrific scenarios for granted” (Barber, 2014). I also largely sourced films that were of Hollywood in origin, in part because, following Buell, I was particularly interested in US-centric representations of risk and catastrophe in particular, even as these fictional catastrophe's were often meant to be global in nature.

In form and methodology, PCM is composed as a parataxic long poem where sequences of sentence-long fragments on one coherent topic can be intercut by fragments that may seem, on the face of it, un- or questionably related. These fragments contain, variously, descriptions of filmic elements from disaster movies, recorded (or misrecorded) lines of dialogue, bits of trivia about the film's production and the lives of actors, notes about actual historical disasters, atmospheric carbon dioxide readings from different years, mundane (ostensibly) autobiographical events, and reported messages from friends and family. These fragments are interlinked in a technique I have described elsewhere (Weightman, 2020) as propelling long poems by Timothy Donnelly and Andrea Brady, using what Zapruder (2017) has also called “associative movement” to link seemingly disparate ideas through proximity, sound, image and chronology. Formally speaking, the poem is undivided into stanzas or sections. Rather, for much of the poem, line lengths gradually rise and fall in repeating cycles of 30 to 40 lines (as shown partially in the excerpt above).

Fictive disaster

I initially began watching disaster movies because, while I was neck-deep in research about the kinds of disasters we are leading ourselves to, I was drawn to existing popular representations of apocalyptic scenarios. Numerous authors have commented on the strange relief such movies provide – that “there is, after all, something comforting in the thought of imminent destruction. All bets are off, all duties executed, all responsibilities abandoned” (Dixon, 2003, p. 2). What often gets lost is a more specific kind of relief: collectively, these show a tendency to enact fantasies in which expenditure of oil is necessary (and spectacularly so!) in the averting of – or escaping from – disaster; that oil saves the world, community, family, lovers or heroes from an obvious and urgent threat. In these fantasies, oil-combusting technologies are seen to propel the heroes away from the danger even as the infrastructures of petromodernity (roads and

suburbs, airports and skyscrapers) are ceremoniously destroyed behind them by whichever disaster-in-progress. Often the starring disaster or cataclysm is “natural,” random or external – it happens due to causes outside human agency. Examples of such disasters include volcano (*Dante’s Peak* [Donaldson, 1997]), solar flares (*Knowing* [Proyas, 2009]), meteor strike (*Armageddon* [Bay, 1998]), and alien invasion (*Independence Day* [Emmerich, 1996]). Sometimes the disaster is human-caused, for example nuclear war (e.g., *On the Beach* [Kramer, 1959]) or technology-induced cataclysm (*Geostorm* [Devlin, 2017]). With few exceptions, though, human-caused environmental crises have not usually been figured as the catalyst for disaster in Hollywood cinema. For example, a survey of disaster films from 1956–2016 found that just ten from fifty-nine (17%) of box-office entry disaster films were environmentally driven (Kareiva & Carranza, 2018). Even more rarely are fossil fuels figured as the root cause of the problem – in a different survey of 173 disaster films made between 2000 and 2020, Montano and Carr note that “There was also no scientifically accurate depiction of climate change as a primary hazard in any of the films included in this sample” (2022, p. 559).

Collectively then, disaster films tend to reproduce and reinforce a characteristic already well embedded in oil’s impasse – namely, that although everyone “knows” on some level that our fossil fuel use is a problem that must be dealt with, it is seemingly never the worst or most immediate problem (Hughes, 2017); and can often actually be marketed as a solution to whatever said problem du jour is. As Aradau writes:

The normality of catastrophe in the processes of capitalist reproduction is effaced by the looming presence of catastrophic disruptions in the future, stripped of conditions of possibility, politics, and history. The injunction to imagine possible catastrophes-to-come is ultimately an injunction to ignore what we know today about already unfolding catastrophes. (2017, p. 70)

Additionally, we might view the imagined catastrophes of the Hollywood disaster film as an attempt to resolve the philosophical and aesthetic contradictions of hegemonic petromodernity: that oil is both safe/boring and dangerous/exciting. Within the film’s spectacle-filled narrative, oil consumption has been relieved of its status as a threat, because a bigger, imminent threat looms large: why does global warming mitigation matter if a meteor is going to hit Earth tomorrow? At the same time, oil (technology) is frequently implicit as the conduit in the spectacle of action sequences: car chases, shuttle launches, plane squadrons and helicopter evacuations, not to mention all the requisite explosions (of vehicular fuel tanks) that accompany these sequences. For a brief window, oil is suddenly redeemed as both safe (saviour) and exciting – where exciting means demonstrating its capacity for danger for the sake of entertainment. The paradox is resolved; the lived tension for the viewer is (temporarily, for the course of the film’s run-time) relieved.

Indeed, oil-powered vehicles and infrastructures being imagined as crucial to escape from disaster was likely a foundational narrative of the US interstate system in the years following World War 2. As Daniel Yergin records in *The Prize*:

Eisenhower himself advocated the interstate highway program on several grounds: safety, congestion, the many billions of dollars wasted because of inefficient road transport, and, evoking the darkest fears of the Cold War, the requirements of civil defence. ‘In case of atomic attack on our cities,’ he said, ‘the road net must permit quick evacuation of target areas’. (1991, p. 553)

The interstate system itself, in tandem with other circumstances, catalysed suburbanisation as a desirable way of life, forever tying US- (and elsewhere) dwelling individuals to car reliant modes of living (in turn with ever increasing demands for fuel). Seventy years on, nuclear war hasn’t yet arrived, but through cinema, viewers have been able to indulge the fantasy of using oil-powered cars, motorbikes, planes and boats to try and outrun or avert every imaginable disaster and cataclysm.

Throughout, “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine” draws the reader’s attention to the way oil operates in cinematic disaster narratives by selectively noticing and parsing oil’s (implicit or actual) role in certain scenes while omitting others. As a result, it generates a petrocentric reading of the films, even as it skips over plot points, drawing attention to the way disaster fantasies exaggerate how “mobility is part of the construction of a petrocapitalist economy in which the car and other petroleum-powered machines and petroleum-derived consumer products become inextricable from the modern imaginary” (Wilson, Szeman & Carlson, 2017, p. 10). For example, in rendering its fragmented synopsis of *2012*, “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine” observes over several lines: “john cusack’s battery won’t start,” “the entire anonymous freeway is swallowed by the earth. still, there’s a love triangle / to consider; will the original family unit ever be reunited?”, “they escape to the himalayas while / the visual effects house caresses a destroyer on top of the president,” “in a giant russian plane full of luxury vehicles,” “only the cruise shipping industry / survives,” and “everybody / learns to share”. The poem seems piecemeal about which details it records, missing characters and entire sequences of plot. Instead, it leaves behind fragments which elevate our notice of the role of oil-powered vehicles in the film’s sequences, both as the conduit for the characters to escape (and therefore for the plot to advance), and in the creation of spectacle that such sequences accompany.

Consequently, the poem critiques the way oil’s “disastrous” effects are fetishised even as narratives conventionally hinge on oil’s banality. “Narrative requires power to become powerful,” writes Macdonald (2013, p. 4), noting that all narratives have an unspoken reliance on energy to generate agency and change. In disaster movies the expulsion of energy is both a flavouring device to create spectacle, and also something that happens “in the background”. Observing how oil consumption fuels a sense of realism in narratives alongside its use for spectacle forces us to consider how “banal” backgrounded oil and exuberant oil are part of the same continuum.

At the same time, the production and distribution of blockbuster films is also a notoriously fuel-intensive process, requiring, as a base, the long-distance movement of people, goods and equipment, before we even consider the further costs that may be incurred by what happens in

the film itself. As LeMenager observes, “Film stock, like the ink used in modern print media, is essentially petroleum” (2012, p. 81). Hitchcock notes that, in fact, from the advent of cinema, “oil money often funded early Hollywood cinema and its real estate ventures (the Bell of Bel-Air fame combined all three attributes)” (2010, p. 94). Scattered throughout its observations of the films themselves, PCM makes mention of some of the ways petrol’s materiality directly informs the production choices of the film at hand. Subsequently, filmic portrayals of disaster are subverted by (or perhaps blended with) the film’s own direct contribution to planetary disaster. For example, in its retelling of *Deep Impact* (1998), the poem notes that a highway calamity scene required “2100 extras / driving 1800 cars and trucks over two days of filming on an unfinished bit of virginia inter- / state”. Not only does *Deep Impact* explicitly advocate the expenditure of oil as a way of thwarting the global calamity through its shuttle sub-plot and associated commentary, it burns through a large amount of actual oil in the creation of its fictive spectacle. Such instances link the material basis of petrocultural production with both the way catastrophe and exuberance are used in the film and implicitly the real disasters that oil continues to cause.

Actual disaster

As intimated earlier, oil’s more deleterious effects are often represented either through highly visible disasters, or not at all. What may be more difficult to *know* experientially is that oil is always disastrous, and that it is disastrous in multiple ways “consumers” are usually not aware of – recalling Nixon’s discussion of responses to slow violence, “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” (2011, p. 10). Knowing oil as flamboyantly disastrous then has the potential to distract from the ways oil is slowly disastrous. Representations of oil’s ontology are then tasked with breaching the gap between invisibility and spectacle, but also in balancing the attention given to different kinds of calamity.

Considering oil spills and how much their representation may add, or not, to our understanding of the full spectrum of oil’s consequences, can illustrate this issue in microcosm. On the one hand, spills are undeniably a part of any far-reaching representation of oil’s ontology. Both spills and “clean-up” processes have the potential to be locally devastating events, ecologically destructive over generations, with compounding consequences for local human ecologies, livelihoods and industries (Sandifer et al., 2021). Spills seem “exceptional” in the sense that they create one of the few moments when oil’s destructive potential becomes viscerally realised in the visual/sensorial realm – when the substance itself comes into view (rather than just the effects of fuel, expended), absurdly and catastrophically. While other consequences of oil require a lot of dot-joining, spills have consequences that are immediate, knowable and localised, as LeMenager argues:

Unlike anthropogenic climate change, which resists narrative because of its global scale and its as-yet limited visibility, the Deepwater Horizon rig localized a plethora of visible data. Only later would marine scientists recognize the multitude of invisible victims of the blowout, the marine life destroyed by chemical dispersants used to “attack” the spill. (2014, p. 104)

This makes spills (and other spectacle-disasters) attractive to the writer looking to represent the oil world system's various malignancies, because together they provide easy (and dramatic) signs and cues for the repeated negligence and risks undertaken by oil companies in the course of profit-seeking, and the costs to the earth that these incur. On the other hand, spills can potentially already be lightning rod events, what people think of first when asked to name oil's downsides. The problem is that overly focussing on these (shock/spill/spectacle) events draws our view from the more mundane and difficult-to-really-grasp tragedies of oil, which are all the consequences of the system working "correctly," which is to say: dramatic wealth and power inequality (Silverstein, 2015), the mass displacement of people (Macdonald, 2017a), the chronic pollution events – particularly in the Global South – which remain un- (or under) reported on, the poisoning of people and ecosystems living around refineries and extraction sites (Huber, 2014), the many emerging and future effects of global warming, and all other kinds of slow violence. As Macdonald notes:

"Disastrous" moments when oil copiously spills into public visibility percolate through the history of petroculture. But equally if not more crucial for eco-critical interpretation is the ongoing "success" of oil-based modernity is the less spectacular, contained movement of oil that flows 'safely' in huge volumes around the world every day. (2017b, p. 42)

In other words, disasters provide an opening to representation, but this representational possibility may distract from more accretive, consistent, banal forms of damage. And yet, as intimated by the "invisible victims" that LeMenager mentions, there is a sense in which the oil disaster (singular or plural) is still not really "known," either in isolation or collectively. It is also true that spills happen more often, and at larger volumes, than many would be aware of, and that the shock and attention – the visual spectacle – given over to major oil disasters may lead many to erroneously assume that these are rare and unlikely events. Even when it has some shock/spectacle characteristics or level of global recognition, the spill event is invariably also full of its own slow violence, as the consequences of the event continue to accumulate long after the initial moment of spectacle. In this sense, spills are "a happening resistant to a coherent plot" (LeMenager, 2017, p. 324). Each event becomes a site of contested knowledge, wherein different parties are invested in limiting, obfuscating, investigating, or spreading different kinds of information, both from the raw numbers (volume) of the spill, to its causes and consequences. Treated in isolation, as they invariably always are by the people responsible, the spill event is explained away by individualised circumstances, blamed on some routine oversight, unforeseen human error, or unique mismanagement. Yet both Juhasz (2017) and LeMenager (2017) note that the word "spill," in its contemporary formulation, seems to denote a one-off event without agency, whereas approaching spills collectively allows a vantage point to see how the overarching conditions that lead to spills are an inextricable and frequent part of extractivist cultures and economies.

All this is to say that in PCM I make reference to actual historical and ongoing oil disasters, as a way of conveying disaster as a continuum of the conditions created to produce fictional disasters. Such references are linked fragmentarily around movie discussions. So for instance

a mention of *North Sea Hijack* (McLaglen, 1980) observes that it was released “eight years and no prime ministers before / the piper alpha explosion killed 167”. Buried here is the association of type – *North Sea Hijack* depicts the blowing up of a North Sea offshore oil platform as the carrying out of a hijack threat, while the tragically real blowing up of a North Sea oil platform at Piper Alpha in 1988 happened as the result of corporate neglect (Shah, 2005). Similarly, the poem explicitly makes mention that some elements of *City on Fire* (Rakoff, 1979) “apparently / do reflect what happened in the texas city / explosion of 1947”. However, I feel like there is a limitation to understanding oil disasters in this way, in part because these associations are more likely to fulfill the spectacle criteria simply by being what links them to certain films.

I have therefore also tried to present “disaster” as something that happens on different levels and at different speeds. I have chronologically linked movies with atmospheric CO² readings taken at the time of their release, so as the poem works its way through movies from the past sixty years, the reader is reminded of the way carbon levels have greatly accelerated. I hope this also then allows “disaster” to be interpreted in the oil industry notes that are scattered throughout the poem even where the disaster element is not explicitly stated, for instance “the / year offshore oil was first pulled / from the forties field, some 170 kilometres / east of aberdeen”, or “the then-planned bp-led / baku to Ceyhan pipeline, through which / 700 000 barrels of oil have moved / most days since 2005”. These fragments are presented without embellishment or opinion, but context complicates both the mention of specific oil infrastructure and the viewing of fictions which inspire their mention. Simultaneously, context works to reimagine other real disasters as symptoms of the oil age’s catastrophe and exuberance, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Covid-19 pandemic, events relating to the latter which are noted as contemporaneous to the poem’s composition.

Admittedly, there are various risks in writing poems about real disasters. In *The Hatred of Poetry*, Ben Lerner describes William Topaz McGonagall’s poem “The Tay Bridge Disaster” as “considered one of the most thoroughly horrible poems ever composed” (2016, p. 25), in part, Lerner argues, because its attempt to memorialise the actual loss of life from a disaster comes off as comically trite and incompetent. Still, it is possible to write long poems about oil disasters – “Jese” by Ogaga Ifowodo and “Dynamic Positioning” by Julianna Spahr are both, I would suggest, very successful long poems about oil disasters. Both go beyond the process of memorial to examine the systematic failures and conflicts that led to the disaster occurring. While PCM doesn’t treat individual (real) disasters with the same kind of forensic attention, I hope that the broader contextualisation of disaster as a habitual consequence of oil extraction has a similar effect. Perhaps more pertinently, David Baker makes the case that spectacular, outrage-inducing disasters often make a poor subject for poetry, because inevitably they incite responses from poets who have no genuine personal connection to the subject matter. Baker warns that “Outrage and shame are one thing, real but often vague. The lived and learned capability to witness and speak wisely is another” (2014, pp. 38-9). Rather, Baker asserts, “We write best, we write most truly, about the place we inhabit most deeply” (p. 39). This is sound and practical advice, but it also echoes the logic of oil capitalism. Although there are indeed innumerable environmental battles to be fought in all places, as a general rule, oil’s (il)logic allows Global North residents to (physically and imaginatively) inhabit one place and time

while simultaneously damaging others. Recalling Val Plumwood (2008), some places are made “nice” because oil capitalism temporally and spatially offshores extraction’s shadow. In other words, the local here and now is not always a reliable way to fathom oil’s dispersed meanings and consequences. By implicitly limiting the ecopoet’s set of valid concerns to the specific place and time they “inhabit,” we perpetuate the paradigmatic constraints that limit poets’ abilities to write about it. On the contrary, to inhabit *anywhere* at the present time is to be entangled with oil’s consequences, which are largely removed from sight and dispersed across time and space.

Banal disaster

Earlier, I noted the necessity of, to paraphrase Macdonald, trying to close the gap between oil disasters (both spectacular and unspectacular) and the normalised and banal acts of consumption. In PCM, a third thread takes up this role, namely the lyrical I or poetic persona for whom watching disaster movies takes place around a life where other events, feelings and habits continue percolating in the background.

Each film’s synopsis is intercut with other fragmentary observations and information, blending the fictional portrayal of oil consumption with “the real” oil consumption noticed and observed in and around the process of viewing. Around *2012*, for example, several threads entwine: the poetic persona thinks about energy and oil consumption in their dinner and ice cream, someone uploads their travel photos to social media, there are personal messages reported (one directly about oil, one not), and it is noted that the Brent crude index spot price has had “another brutal day of trading”. These interjections of “the real” are paratactically placed to flow out of the filmic fragments that proceed them – for example, the image of “the plastic lid / cracked” and the author-character pondering “whether / larger than usual chunks of polymer are just now entering my digestive tract” are echoed in *2012*’s disaster sequence of “the entire anonymous freeway is swallowed by the earth” – swallowing (of oil) begets more swallowing (of oil). Later in the sequence, “lauren messages / to say did you hear? bp / kwinana is shutting” is wedged between two filmic observations about death and survival (“only the cruise shipping industry / survives” and “watch enough of these / things and you get a strong / sense of who is going to die”), which lends the (actual) refinery’s closure a sense of cliché or predictability from *2012*’s narrative tropes.

The autobiographical thread of PCM facilitates the binding together of the others into a coherent “real” in which filmic fictions are placed precariously alongside the recollection of historical events. Essentially, it elevates the lyrical I’s reality as one in which these different disasters are perceived as existing together, being built of the same material and interacting across boundaries. This is attempted by relating autobiographical fragments to situate the author with geographical and personal contexts to the production processes of the films, which (as noted) is a reminder that films themselves have real-world oil costs. At the same time, the lyrical I is shown to be taking part in the petrol-intensive economy through seemingly routine actions (for example, “mum wants to know if i’ll fly / back for the holidays”), which, contextualised by observational fragments noting the role of driving and flight in the disaster

films at hand, draws unavoidable parallels with quotidian oil consumption and the spectre of real world oil disaster.

Here, the third thread reveals the limitations of a viewpoint which necessarily filters its understanding of crises through a removed, detached, safe and privileged perspective. Death is a cheap and frequent occurrence in disaster films, yet in resolution, these largely privilege a narrative of survival. Even as we watch some characters (and innumerable bystanders) perish, our protagonists – and therefore humanity as a whole – almost always make it out the other side. In any case, as pointed out by Dixon, the audience, too, survive, so “each filmic depiction of the apocalypse inherently projects the existence of surviving witnesses, for whom the film has been made” (2003, p. 3). The viewer is led to an uncanny bit of tunnel vision, tricked into caring largely about the survivor/s – or a single contingent reality of survival – to be satisfied with the conclusion. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot warns, “Do not count on death – on your own or on universal death – to found anything whatsoever, even the reality of this death. For it is so uncertain and so unreal that it always fades away ahead of time, and with it whatever declares it” (1995, p. 90). For the petropoem, depicting the different kinds of death caused by oil’s slow and spectacular violences similarly might not be counted on to “found anything whatsoever”. Configuring the (privileged) individual’s viewpoint within the expanded realm of “real” unfolding crises necessarily runs up against experiential limits – there is no way of making the disaster happen to the author or the reader. Rather, there is a kind of jarring discontinuity between the poem’s autobiographical fragments and the (combination of) real and fictive explosions, crashes, deaths and calamities that the poem erstwhile reports.

Zoom out, and the accumulative reframing of oily disaster films within a broader lens of an oil-saturated perception evokes in “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine” a sense of the postmodern sublime – what Joseph Tabbi defines as a “simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology, a complex pleasure derived from the pain of representational insufficiency” (1995, p. 1). Jameson has alternatively called this the “hysterical” sublime, an experience where the “world thereby momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density” (1984, pp. 76-7). For Jameson this formulation of the sublime offers “representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp—namely the whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself” (p. 79). In “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine”, the iterative entwining of fiction and fact, history and experience, technology and biology, is evocative of a vast thing – the singular “machine” of the title – propelling forth the poem’s disasters. The poem is suggestive of an indirect, glimpsed representation of petromodernity as a hyperobject, invoking fear and awe, but tinged with unknowability and pleasure. In discussing maximalist novels, Ercolino writes, “Everything is linked: this is the unshakeable conviction of the paranoid, a conviction that finds its structural equivalent in the direct or indirect interconnection of all the stories, of all the characters, and of all the events that proliferate” (2014, p. 111). Ostensibly but inevitably, we summon the same thing in a scale depiction of petroculture, as the poem presents a sea of connections to be made across cinema and history: everything is linked, by oil and to oil. The postmodern sublime is useful because of the way it arises from its interaction with operational aesthetic – the way

the text encourages readers to look for clues, rather than presenting them with an easy resolution. Coale writes:

Most conspiracy theorists thrive on their desire to locate the missing piece, the elusive detail, but were they to do so the quest would be complete and the case closed. Better to persist in an ongoing investigation – it keeps conspiracy theories and theorists alive – than to find it concluded and finished. (2005, p. 142)

By that token, the implicit conspiracy in “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine” is an essential component of the way the poem discursively frames the problem of oil, an intentional move to make the problem attractive to engage with. The difference with most fictional conspiracies is twofold: one, the conspiracy arises out of the positioning of “real” information and events, and two, the “conspiracy” suggested is not reducible to the actions of a closed but unknowable external group of people, but rather the interaction of numerous enormous systems.

Problematising the disaster

Still, the remaining problem is the same of all sublime encounters with systems of the Anthropocene – in its affirmation of oil as very large and very connected to everything in contemporary life, the poem risks accidentally suggesting that transition is impossible via granting oil, and our relations with it, seemingly immovable power and agency. We risk the reader turning away, “since we cannot possibly act on something that exceeds our comprehension” (Szeman, 2012, p. 437), even as the paranoid imagination concomitantly demands the deferral of closure, the continued search for clues. There is also a sense that what is theoretically pleasurable about the poem’s effects indulges in oil’s entropic excesses in much the same way that all action movies do. As Macdonald observes, “fiction relies on momentum and transference,” which is to say that for things to happen energy needs to be moved around. This is true, obviously, for the protagonists of disaster movies, using oil-powered vehicles to escape the cataclysm – but it is equally the case in all genres of fiction, even if less obviously so. As Macdonald points out, “Consider the sprawling fiction of twentieth century suburbia – relating psyches, bodies and worlds saturated in oil-based products – suddenly shorn of plastics, deprived of automobility or domestic electric power, bereft of pharmaceuticals, denied the cheap food supplies of prime-moved fertilizer!” (2013, p. 5). Poetry, broadly speaking, so often dwelling in the quiet, extended moment, may not have quite the same debt to energy – without plot to satisfy, there is not always a need to move things around. Yet PCM undoubtedly does have an energy debt. Through its bricolage of disaster movie scenes, the poem critiques the filmic energy unconscious but, in the process, also uses exuberant fragments to sustain its own churning mode. By this I mean that the entwining fragments of movie disaster, real disaster, personal/anecdote and so on, invoke the spectre of energy in their own accumulative propulsion system – the explosions and accidents which dot the fragments still recall images of extreme, sudden and uncontrolled energy transference, however ironically, using these images like firing pistons in a motor to generate momentum through the long poem. There is a sense, then, that “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine” does not completely get away from using the disaster-as-spectacle in its critique of the same, making it potentially flawed as activist literature in the same way that Clark suggests compromises climate disaster-oriented speculative fictions,

where “Extreme environmental scenarios unfold with a kind of remorseless logic whose effect of protest is undone by their aesthetic logic of increasing suspense, in which horror merges with a kind of gripping excitement” (2015, p. 182). Similarly, Buell observes that much of the rhetoric of oil’s catastrophe and exuberance “have now become key reference points for U.S. culture’s construction of normality” (2012, p. 82). The question then becomes whether representing oil’s ontology is still effective or worthwhile if, in the process, the critique ends up replicating or fetishising the petro-aesthetic’s appeal.

The poem’s title is intended to hold multiple possible interpretations simultaneously. “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine” refers on one level to the poem’s critical view of Hollywood as a “machine” able to produce fictional cataclysmic spectacles, seemingly in perpetuity. On another, the whole neoliberal system of extraction (in which Hollywood is, from its historical outset, both materially and culturally entwined) is the machine perpetually producing disasters, both cinematic and “real”. Formally speaking, “perpetual” may also refer to the poem’s shape, with lines gradually expanding and contracting in length, which may give the impression of a self-sustaining flow of energy. The title is also a nod to the way the end loops back to the start, with the missing final word – “saved” – transplanted to the first line of the poem, doubly connecting the two 1998 “asteroid twin and rival[s]” of *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* from their opposite ends of the text, suggesting that the poem itself is “perpetual,” a prospect that ironises the soteriological propositions of each film. Taken in isolation, a disaster movie narrative assures its audience of closure, finality, resolution of enormous problems. Taken collectively or as part of a continuum of disaster narratives, salvation is forever deferred; the disaster is always in progress. As Blanchot writes:

The disaster is its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive of it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster, the disaster has always already withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment. (1995, pp. 1-2)

But there is also a sense that this poem could be added to indefinitely. There are both many more fictional disaster films that could be included and many more historical disasters, not to mention all the loose fragments and connections that could all be researched further and expanded outwards. The poem is presently bound by a loose timespan of composition, during which a personal narrative unfolds in the background, but it doesn’t particularly have to end where it does. “Perpetual” in this sense also refers to the investigative mode of the poem’s composition. In drawing from a wide array of subjects, its encyclopaedic impulse suggests to the reader that it “responds to the desire to capture the world in one fell swoop” (Ercolino, 2014, p. 32) – that talking about disaster movies really means talking about everything.

Of course, just as all claims to perpetual motion machines are a lie, the poem’s “perpetuity” has its own critical flaws. Just as many aeons’ worth of accumulated solar energy leaving the geosphere at once cannot be quickly replaced or easily substituted, the notion of Hollywood as a perpetual (filmic) cataclysm machine is a conceit with a narrow claim to validity: eventually the energy will run out. “Perpetual Cataclysm Machine” likewise subverts its own construction

of implied perpetuity throughout, skewering the comforting notion that the cataclysm plot is both endlessly renewable and deferrable. The pattern of rising and falling line lengths begins to stagger and loosen, giving the impression of tiring, wheels spinning in place, or literally running out of energy – even though images of energy transference are still in abundance. Throughout, the alignment of atmospheric carbon dioxide readings to the periods of film productions, as the poem skips around anachronistically, provide a continual reminder of time’s arrow, dismantling the poem’s own looping ruse of renewability.

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