

Crude Representations: BP & the Cultural Imagination of Oil (online, 24 Jan 25)

online, Jan 24, 2025

Deadline: Sep 23, 2024

Malcolm Cook

Online Symposium with Keynote Speaker: Mona Damluji, Assistant Professor of Film & Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Symposium Organisers: Peter Adkins (University of Edinburgh) and Malcolm Cook (University of Southampton)

Oil is a cultural as well as material product. It is now pervasive in every aspect of modern life: transport, energy, communications and media, pharmaceuticals, farming, food ingredients and packaging, homes. As many scholars in the energy and environmental humanities have demonstrated, to understand our current dependence on oil and enact decarbonisation we need to contend with its cultural dimensions.

Within the history of oil production, BP holds an important position as one of the largest and longest running oil companies. Crude Representations is a one-day symposium that looks to engage with the cultural history of the company, bringing to light the multifaceted ways in which artists, film-makers, authors, curators, performers, and other cultural figures have responded to, critically interrogated, and represented BP. The symposium aims to examine the rich, surprising, and troubling history of cultural representations of BP and its activities in extracting, refining, and selling oil and its derivatives. It will explore how cultural figures from the early twentieth century to the present have devised new and innovative modes of representation to alternately facilitate, question, and resist BP's history and operations across the globe. The event will also examine and reassess BP's role as a patron and sponsor of the arts, and as a company producing its own cultural works in the form of communications using myriad media for the purposes of science, engineering, education and training, advertising and PR, investor relations, and political influence. In so doing, we hope to deepen the understanding of the cultural history of petroleum and the ongoing legacies shaping the present moment of energy transition.

BP (including its antecedents (Anglo-Persian Oil Company (1909-1935); Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (until 1954), British Petroleum (until 2001), as well as subsidiaries) is one of the longest running oil "supermajors". Established in 1909 to exploit an oil concession in Iran, in 1914 the British government took a controlling stake in the company and the British navy became its largest customer, initiating a long entanglement with the British Empire and states politics. The nationalisation of the oil industry in Iran in 1951, and subsequent US/UK backed coup in 1953, provoked a diversification and restructuring of its activities. During this period, BP expanded its fields of oper-

ation to Africa and North America, while also establishing itself as a major contender within North Sea oil extraction. Its privatisation after 1979, and involvement in numerous mergers and acquisitions, saw it transform into the present day diverse multinational company, with annual profits of \$13.8bn (£11bn) in 2023. At the same time that it accrued massive profits, the company was involved in a number of environmental catastrophes, including the Torrey Canyon spill in 1967 and the Deepwater Horizon spill in 2010, while also facing criticism over employment and working conditions, human rights violations, political influence, and market manipulation.

This symposium is multi-disciplinary, inviting contributions from across all academic disciplines as well as other arts and cultural institutions. It seeks to examine cultural and artistic forms including: film, television, drama and other performance forms, poetry, novels and other prose forms, photography, painting and other fine arts, sculpture and installation art, architecture, music, graphic design and other visual arts, sports, video games, digital art, and new media.

This symposium will also seek to be critical and self-reflective about the topic and our approach to it. What are the benefits and challenges of making a single oil company the primary organising principle of research, rather than other disciplinary, media, or theoretical norms? How can we ensure our work does not replicate the unjust and inequitable basis of extractivism, and instead provides a diverse and inclusive space for new ways of thinking about oil? How can our historical inquiry inform and contribute to present day imperatives for sustainability and energy transition?

We invite proposals on the topic of the multi-dimensional relationship between the arts and BP.

Potential topics could include (but are not limited to):

- Historical changes in the representation and cultural outputs of BP
- Indigenous, local, national, and cross-cultural artistic responses to BP's operations
- Artistic and cultural movements in countries and regions with dominant BP involvement
- Literary works and other narrative forms that directly or indirectly engage with BP, its activities and sites of extraction and production
- Adaptation and translation of works stimulated and facilitated by BP's multinational presence
- BP sponsorship of arts, and divestment and boycott campaigns related to it
- Biographical or professional links between BP and cultural figures
- Greenwashing, artwashing, and BP's negotiation of its social license to operate
- The cultural impact of the changing political and economic context of BP, from the British Empire to global multinational public limited company
- Corporate artworks and architecture, investment art and collections
- BP advertising and public relations
- Internal BP operational and industrial media productions (scientific, educational, investor relations)
- BP as award winner and awards patron (BP film *Giuseppina* (1959) was winner of the Academy Award for Best Documentary (Short Subject); the BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery 1990-2020)
- Specific events in BP's corporate history and their representation in or impact on arts and culture (the nationalisation of oil production in Iran, Torrey Canyon tanker spill, the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the discovery of North Sea oil, privatisation, Kirki tanker spill, Deepwater Horizon platform spill)
- Historiography and prior research of BP's involvements in arts and culture

- The art and performance of oil activism and protest
- The representation and imagination of energy transition
- The aesthetics of the changing BP logo and branding
- BP petrol/gas stations and product placement in popular entertainment (James Bond (From Russia with Love (1963), Goldfinger (1964), On Her Majesty's Secret Service (1969) and A View to a Kill (1985)), The Firm (1993), I'm Alan Partridge (1997), The Bourne Identity (2002), Hung (2009), Hillbilly Elegy (2020), Slow Horses (2022))
- Celebrity endorsement and spokespeople (Bob Hoskins, Steven Spielberg, Ron Ananian, Terry Thomas, Jimmy Nail, Fenella Fielding, Jack Kelly)
- Comparative studies of BP's cultural impact (with other oil companies; across different media; historically)
- BP in education and schools outreach
- The BP Archive (University of Warwick) and BP Video Library, their potentials and restrictions for arts research, and alternative archives for BP media

Submission:

To propose a contribution please submit an abstract (max 300 words) and a short bio (max 100 words) via this form: <https://forms.office.com/e/N7Lbsdg0XV> by Monday, September 23, 2024.

As well as conventional 15-minute academic conference papers, we welcome proposals for other formats appropriate to the topic and online venue, such as practice-based outputs or collaborative presentations and performances.

Submissions are welcome from any part of the world and timings of this online event will be arranged to be broadly inclusive.

Notification of acceptance will be sent by Monday December 2, 2024.

If you have any queries regarding this event please contact us via email: m.cook@soton.ac.uk and peter.adkins@ed.ac.uk

Reference:

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