
Ecology and Spectacle in *Oil Wells of Baku: Close View*

The First Eco-Disaster Film?

Blazing oil gushers make marvelous cinematographic material . . . only cinema can capture the thick oil stream bursting forth like a fiery monster. Only cinema can display such an awesome inferno in its terrifying beauty and majesty.

—Rahman Badalov, “Oil, Revolution, and Cinema,” 1997



WHEN BERTRAND TAVERNIER asserts that an 1896 Lumière Brothers' film, *Oil Wells of Baku: Close View*, “may be the first ecological film ever made” (*The Lumière Brothers' First Films*), he is, to a certain extent, reading the footage of burning oil wells from an eco-critical perspective. The film invites such a reading, one that centers on environmental concerns, because of what looks like devastating effects of drilling for oil. This thirty-six second “view,” shot by Kamill Serf with a stationary camera, shows huge flames and black smoke streaming from burning oil wells in Baku, Azerbaijan, seemingly sure signs of environmental disaster. But disaster looks more like spectacle in this closely shot scene, and both Serf and the film's viewers serve as attentive spectators.

Although the camera never moves during the film, the vibrant image it captures also captures its viewers.

The film appears to be strategically framed. The oil wells in the frame look like miniatures until the immensity of the oil derricks is emphasized by a human figure moving in the front of the center well. This figure looks minuscule as it walks away from the center derrick and out of the frame of the shot. The two tall derricks in the view behind the tiny striding male figure show us that the view was shot from a distance. This extreme long shot accentuates the power of both the tall derricks and the rising flames and smoke, smoke that darkens into the distance from the right side of the frame. We see enormous flames shoot up and clouds of heavy black smoke plume from the fire, but more smoke comes from similar oil well fires offscreen. To the right of the center derrick, as far away as the horizon line, two blazes flame up from what look like vertical pipes. Gray and black smoke flows out of the fires in a plume that covers the sky.

The enormity of these flaming plumes mesmerizes because their powerful blaze shocks us. But the raging flames also bring forth images of phoenixes rising from the flames and hearths stoked by Hestia, broaching the question, "Is this beautiful?" Within the context of our Western culture, such a scene looks fabulous because it is based in a mythology in which fire and its power are associated with beautiful rebirth.

The center derrick serves as the focus of the shot. This derrick is placed inside an enormous pit, as if to capture any excess oil flow. A platform connects the derrick to its outside enclosure and what looks like a pipeline to transport oil from these interconnected wells. A roofed building serves as the derrick's foundation. In front of the derrick are what look like the frames of new derricks under construction. Vertical pipes that resemble bare trees pop up in every corner of the shot, usually in rows of four or five. A set of wooden stairs leads up to a scaffold on the left side of the center derrick. The second completed derrick sits on flat ground, with no scaffold—and only an enclosed building at its bottom. The center derrick, though, sets off the tall derrick to the left and the gray and black smoke to the right. The left derrick hides the source of the fire that bursts out from behind it. This fire is just one of three fires in the view: one to the left of center, the other two to the right and offscreen. Smoke from the fires fills the background in the view.

All this smoke and uncontrolled fire supports Tavernier's assertion of this as an eco-disaster film. Such a disaster, from a current point of view, begs for an ecological reading. Today we have become committed to considering the consequences of uncontrolled oil well fires and gushers, and the fire and smoke look destructive to humans and their

environment. More than just spectacle, these burning oil fields, these obfuscating clouds of smoke, this general conflagration of the natural world, signify humans' rape of the landscape for personal gain—oil at any price to the natural world.

But the figure walking in front of the derricks suggests another reading altogether. He moves without the urgency an ecological reading might spur. In fact, he walks in front of the derricks and the burning oil fields with quite a normal gait, as if he's unconcerned about anything. We'll see this again in two films shot one hundred years later: David Douglas's *Fires of Kuwait* and Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (both 1992). But as the Lumières' brief film offers no explanation for its fires, nor does its title: *Oil Wells of Baku: Close View*, it leaves today's viewers wondering, is this a picture of business as usual or an account of eco-disaster?

It is possible, then, to be caught in a conundrum with a film like this, forced to struggle in uncertainty as to whether the extremity of the screen depiction is meant to say something about our environment and our way of living in it, or merely show with a certain casualness the world as received.

What the Lumière view "means" may be different now than it was in the late 1890s, but spectacular events continue to overpower environmental statements on film. So, what does the view tell us about what we would now call our "concerns about nature"? And what did the view tell its original viewers? This is an issue, to be sure, that has itself changed in meaning since the beginning of the twentieth century and that has come to have a principal focus for scholars, citizens, and viewers of entertainment today. Also, what sets this view—comprising one of the first films produced—apart from other images of fires in Baku found in photographs, on postcards, and in narrative descriptions found in texts? When (if ever) does the destruction "wrought" by gushing oil wells—"monsters," according to explorer and historian Abraham V. W. Jackson (40)—become seen as something other than a "spectacle" "surpassed only by the awful grandeur when fire adds terror to the scene" (40)?

When, in other words, does a burning oil well gain the status of ecological disaster? When does it come to be perceived that the costs of such flames include not only money and human lives but also nature? This brief view can certainly be read as stating a message, and this more powerfully than did photographs, postcards, and textbooks that came before it, but if we are to presume there is a message here, that message at first is subsumed by its context. That is, the spectacular event serves as the context of a possible environmental message—oil well fires and gushers not only waste resources; they also destroy the surrounding ecology. Yet, this view, like that in later films highlighting

oil-driven eco-disasters, begs a question: How does disaster come to be turned into a spectacular image that leaves spectators struck more with awe than with concern?

Baku

Oil production in the region around Baku goes back to Hammurabi and the Babylonian Dynasty—and so, it appears, do perspectives that see oil well gushers and fires as spectacle. According to Sarah Searight, “Baku, on the sandy south-west shore of the Caspian Sea, has been renowned for its oil for some 3,000 years” (46). Evidence from Herodotus and Vitruvius demonstrates that crude oil (bitumen) from around Baku was being used as “mortar in the walls of Babylon” and “as a binding agent, mixed with clay” (Searight 46). In 700–600 BC, “oil was being extracted for use in everyday life, both for medicinal purposes and for heating and lighting in homes. ‘Fuel oil’ was known for being transported from Absheron Peninsula (where Baku is located) to Iran, Iraq, and India” (46). Plutarch, as well, talks about oil in northern Iraq. But “the oil and gas of the Absheron peninsula, on the southern side of which lies Baku, was sufficiently well known for a Zoroastrian fire temple [a temple built to worship spectacular oil fires] to be built at least 2,500 years ago over a gas seepage at Surakhany” (Searight 46). The fire temple remained in Baku as late as 1911, when Jackson published his *The Oil Fields and The Fire Temple of Baku*, a reminder of the oil fields that prompted the temple, where an eternal flame shone, fueled by the oil below it until, according to Jackson, the oil boom drained the reserves below the temple (40). The praise worshippers brought to this flame parallels Jackson’s awe at the sight of such a magnificent spectacle as a burning oil well.

Oil from the Absheron Peninsula provided resources for everyday life in the region, but it also became a source of revenue—indeed, of prosperity—especially in the late nineteenth century when the Nobel family of Sweden invested in the region. Under their auspices beginning in 1874, the oil fields at Baku flourished. According to an 1882 statement by Ludwig Nobel, “Russia could light all the world, lubricate all the world, and paint all the world” (quoted in Searight 47). Hazards like heavy smoke from kerosene refineries and gushing oil wells did not decrease economic gains for the Nobel family and smaller oil producers like Viktor Ragozin, and, again, were seen more as spectacle than disaster. Instead, Baku’s smaller oil producers formed the Baku Petroleum Association and sought “continued development of the industry” (McKay 613), so that, as Searight argues, “pollution seemed a small price to pay” (47).

In fact, hazards in the oil field translated into environmental damage that looks horrific by today's standards. According to Searight, "when drills reached the deeper strata, violent eruptions of gas, oil and sand were sometimes sent sky high," creating a gusher (47). Searight explains, "In 1886 a particularly ferocious gusher in Bibi-Eilat, Baku's richest field, is said to have produced more oil in one day than all the rest of the world's wells put together" (47). Gushers spewing out tons of oil were common in late nineteenth-century Baku. And in 1896, the year *Oil Wells at Baku: Close View* was shot, "Another well produced close to 12 million poods (60 million gallons), and engineers could not get it under control for 15 days. Most of the oil flowed into the Caspian Sea because there were no adequate means to contain it" ("The Development of the Oil and Gas Industry of Azerbaijan"). Such spillage would have destroyed aquatic ecosystems and inhibited aviary reproduction along the coast. Yet soon after the gusher, oil production, transporting, and refining increased by thousands of poods with little concern for the environmental consequences of either oil gushers or fires. The spewing turned the area around oil wells and refineries into "Black Town," a town still black as late as the 1980s when oil spillage and overuse of oil resources still caused "sand storms and flies" (Searight 48).

This disregard for environmental consequences continued into the twentieth century. When explorer and historian Abraham V. W. Jackson visited the oil fields near Baku around 1910, his primary concern regarding oil as pollutant seemed to be sartorial. Jackson explains, "On all occasions when visiting the petroleum fields it is advisable to wear old clothes." When wells gush, he goes on, they "fill [. . .] the air with a deluging rain from whose greasy downpour there was no escape." In spite of Jackson's warning, he describes each well as "a source of revenue that is a fortune" and uses adjectives like "thrilling" to describe gushing wells. For Jackson, the main challenge with gushers related to loss of revenue: "Sometimes the boring [drills] strike 'fountains,' and then a tremendous 'spouter' is the result, belching up its concealed contents with the force of a geyser, and perhaps bringing ruin instead of fortune to its owner unless the giant can be speedily throttled and gagged" (Jackson 40).

Jackson compares gushers to monsters and geysers, but the description he provides emphasizes their sublime rather than their destructive force. The wells, whether burning or gushing, may seem "awful," but they are mostly seen as a magnificent "spectacle." Although unavailable for viewing, the photographs and film footage from A. H. Mishon, a French photographer and cinematographer who lived in Baku for twenty-five years, included footage of some of these oil fields (footage that still exists

was shown in France in 1995, according to Aydin Kazimzada, director of Azerbaijan's Cinema Museum). Kazimzada states that "from 1879 to 1905 [Mishon] documented landscapes, episodes from oil extraction, the refining process, as well as the oil gushers' eruptions and terrifying fires that broke out in the oil fields." Writing in 1997 about Mishon's footage of fires in 1898, Kazimzada called the oil field fires "terrifying," raising us to an alertness entirely absent from the person in *Oil Wells of Baku: Close View*, who appears blithely unconcerned with them.

A decade after both the Lumières' oil fire film (with Kamill Serf as cinematographer) and Mishon's, environmental damage caused by gushing or burning oil wells was still being ignored. Jackson's book notes attempts made to protect Baku oil derricks (and what he calls their "precious liquid") from fire, but those preservation attempts are based on economic rather than environmental concerns. These pyramidal wooden structures were "covered with gypsolite or iron plating as a protection against fire," to save the oil reserves, "one of the richest articles of commerce," according to Jackson (39). Yet, as Searight asserts, despite these precautions, in late nineteenth-century Baku, "The dense forest of tall, wooden oil-soaked derricks resulted in frequent fires, especially since everyone smoked heavily." In the 1880s, British journalist Charles Marvin explained that over Baku "hung a dense cloud of smoke and long before you reach it you perceive the all-pervading smell of oil, which you will breathe everywhere and taste in everything so long as you remain in Baku" (quoted in Searight 47). According to Searight, "Pollution seemed a small price to pay" to have such a bounty from oil production (49). In 1890, George Curzon described Baku as "a town of crude and undigested wealth" (quoted in Searight 49). The only contemporary negative consequence of fires and gushers that Searight (writing in 2000) notes, however, is their impact on revenue: "too many gushers depressed the price of oil, thereby adding to the economic and political fragility of Baku" (47).

The Baku of the 1890s has been compared to an American frontier town, with oil instead of gold inviting outsiders to compete for economic gain. Depressed prices exacerbated racial and political discord brought on by this influx of foreigners.

Jackson's first description of Baku after entering its "handsome station" also at first suggests that around 1911 pollution was viewed in a negative light. According to Jackson,

Oil is in the air one breathes, in one's nostrils, in one's eyes, in the water of the morning bath . . . , in one's starched linen—everywhere. . . . The very dust of the streets is impregnated by the petroleum with which they are sprinkled; the soil of the

home garden is charged with oil; and if flowers are really to thrive, it is said that earth must be imported from Lankuran farther down on the Caspian. (25–26)

But Jackson's impulse is to defend the town's drinking water and connect oil to prosperity in the region rather than to destruction of the environment. Immediately after what amounts to a criticism of the town, he continues, "The busy wheels of commerce that roll out of Baku are lubricated with the native product; the engines and steamers are propelled by it; the coffers of the great petroleum companies are filled with it; and the bourse of the city's exchequer is governed by its rise and fall." Jackson "look[s] back with pleasure to each visit" to Baku and says he "shall gladly welcome the chance to see this busy metropolis again if another opportunity takes me to the Caspian" (25, 26, 27). Although journalists such as Marvin and historians such as Jackson do take note of the pollution produced by the oil wells, Jackson, especially, interprets smoke, dirt, and grease as necessary annoyances that are outweighed by the economic boom that oil has provided Baku and the Azerbaijan region.

Spectacular Destruction

Oil Wells of Baku captures on film the exact sort of fire noted by Jackson, as well as smoke from burning oil wells described by both Jackson and Marvin, with the addition of "sensuous elaboration" that, as Susan Sontag argues, filmic representations provide (212). The view also reflects the same purely fiduciary perspective on oil production and its consequences—that because oil catalyzes an economic boom in the region, pollution and debris are a small price to pay. The nonchalant figure in the Lumière view acts as if the fire and smoke caught on film are quotidian, the same reaction Jackson has when re-entering Baku's oil-covered streets and breathing its smoke-filled air a decade later. At least as late as 1911, most Westerners saw burning oil derricks and gushing wells as signs of progress, not ecological disaster.

Most essentially, however, *Oil Wells of Baku* is a film, a construction that works by capturing a spectacle for a viewing public. The 1896 Lumière *View* may have been the first film of Baku's oil well fires, but many others followed: *Fire at the Oil Gusher in Bibi-Heybat* (1898), *White City/Black City* (1908), *In the Realm of Oil and Millions* (1916), and *Symphony of Oil* (1933) to name a few, all of which caught oil fires, like flaming monsters, as centerpieces in one way or another (see Kazimzada and Badalov). All filmic displays of burning oil highlight their spectacular—if terrifying—effects, even if these fires are shot for purposes other

than entertainment. Yet the rhetoric of entertainment provides a license for especially extravagant displays, as, for instance, in *Cimarron* (1931), *Spoilers of the Plains* (1951), *Comes a Horseman* (1978), and *Jarhead* (2005). As museum curator Rahman Badalov explains, “Blazing oil gushers make marvelous cinematographic material . . . only cinema can capture the thick oil stream bursting forth like a fiery monster. Only cinema can display such an awesome inferno in its terrifying beauty and majesty.”

Later filmic representations of oil gushers and fires sometimes achieve a spectacular quality without invoking the glory of wealth. Documentary and newsreel footage of oil fires during World War II, for example, foregrounds loss of fuel and supplies more than profit. The film series *WWII Road to Victory* (1941–1945) highlights battles won by both the Allies and their enemies. Some of these films show us the frequency of oil fires during the World War II, from those on allied ships and oil tankers devastated by the Germans in *Commerce Raiders* (1940) and *U Boat War* (1940–1941) to the German/Rumanian oil fields destroyed by allied bombers in *Bombing of Ploesti* (1943). Even on newsreel film, oil fires erupt with the same hot flames and black smoke as in *Oil Wells of Baku*, but now they are in color, presaging the kind of electrifying aesthetic vision presented in such contemporary films as *Jarhead*. None of these films mentions loss of oil profits, because for World War II combatants, oil meant fuel for military vehicles, not money. Yet the images remain spectacular. Flames flaring up from oil tankers and bombed oil fields provide us with violent and mesmerizing views, especially since film footage of oil fires tends to be shot from above. Looking down on erupting fires distances us from them and enhances their monstrous, yet spectacular, power. In *Jarhead*, the angle is reversed, since the oil has become rain that is blackly misting soldiers as they slog through the Kuwaiti desert.

Although both the oil well fire films from Baku and the documentary footage of exploding oil tankers and fields from World War II are unconstructed, perhaps only to seize and record actual events, they still play on what Nick Browne calls the “rhetoric of the spectacular.” Browne asserts that “formally, the rhetorical parameters of the spectacular work by modulation of cinematic scale, repetition, and perspective.” Here, filmed oil well fires take on spectacular qualities when they assume the large-scale dimensions that such fires produce, when they are shot repeatedly or for a long duration, and when they are shot from an angle that emphasizes the fires’ force. Considerable documentary footage we viewed does all of these things without any creative special effects. According to Browne, the goal of spectacular effects in action films like the *Die Hard* and *Batman* series (1988–2007; 1989–2008) is to “recreate [an event] experientially,

namely in a mode that displays the force, that is the physics of the event, but not its meaning.” But *Oil Wells of Baku*, too, hardly an action film, displays the force and physics of an event—not its meaning.

Spectacle conflicts with the historically based environmental messages in these films, and what Nick Browne calls the “big bang” overpowers any possible ecological leanings in *Oil Wells of Baku* and masks and deludes environmental concerns raised in later oil well fire films. Browne suggests that an “analysis of the spectacular explosion as an event and the movies which feature it pose a larger sociological question about entertainment’s simulation of the war-like foundations of modern economies.” Browne argues that when we watch such spectacular events, “we are meant to be aware of the expense and take pleasure in the simulation of destruction,” a paradox evident in *Fires of Kuwait*. We are aware, generally, that there is expense to the environment when watching burning oil wells and black-clouded skies on the screen; but we also take pleasure in the spectacular events on display and do not pause to calculate the effects.

Resolving such a contradiction may require a negotiation. Geoff King argues that the spectacular features of a film do not necessarily erase “the kinds of underlying thematic oppositions and reconciliations associated with a broadly ‘structuralist’ analysis of narrative” (25). He suggests that spectacular events presented on film and the narratives that drive them can work together to illustrate and reinforce “the opposition between the ‘frontier’—or its contemporary analogues—and a version of technological modernity” (25). King’s reading reinforces the eco-critical reading on display here. King’s argument suggests that by making the workings of spectacle transparent, the underlying environmental issues on display in *Oil Wells of Baku*, as well as the later oil fire films, can gain more force. Yet the conflict between the spectacular and the environmental degradation on display is not resolved, even from King’s perspective; it is merely revealed. Knowing the conflict exists makes possible a double reading of the event both as spectacular and sublime splendor and eco-disaster.

In fact, the filmic production of the spectacular event becomes part of this technological modernity on display. Nick Browne even suggests that when it is turned to spectacle, at least in cinema, destruction can be evidence of a certain active social spirit. “Spectacular destruction,” he writes,

is one of the opaque signs of life and types of pleasures evident under late, some would say, post-modern capitalism’s commodification and marketing of the mass visual event, one whose investment sustains cinema as providing an experience of a certain

scale and intensity in its struggle with television's miniaturization and sentimentalization of the contemporary world.

We cannot deny these spectacular events put on display precisely because they are so eye-catching, so undeniable; such spectacles are made more transparent, their causation more evident, through the structural and ahistorical lens cinematic drama provides. When placed within their cultural context, such events demonstrate the paradox that a highly industrial medium (film) provides a framework for unearthing possible environmental ideology. But can these environmental leanings, further revealed by historicized readings, also be explored when these seemingly contradictory approaches are applied together? Eco-criticism, inherently interdisciplinary in nature, may work in tune with such readings to reveal the environmental ideology concealed by the spectacular. Here Browne's and King's arguments contradict one another. Browne argues that spectacle itself can provide the social action an eco-critical reading of the event behind the spectacle should reveal. King suggests that spectacular events cannot erase or veil environmental issues behind them. Instead, we suggest that spectacular events and the issues behind them are always already in conflict, so an eco-critical reading can only reveal the conflict itself, neither erasing nor valorizing either the spectacular event or the message behind it.

Fighting Hell

Feature films with oil well fires at their center go even further to show the force of fire while minimizing displays of environmental costs. Stuart Heisler's *Tulsa* (1949), a post-World War II film about the Oklahoma oil boom of the 1920s, seems at first to bypass spectacle and foreground the prosperity that oil revenues can bring to a region. But after an opening that shows us an aerial view of the bustling prosperous city of Tulsa in 1949, the film backtracks to the 1920s conflict between ranchers and oil producers in Oklahoma, a conflict that climaxes in a tremendous oil fire spectacle. The first 1920s scene highlights the pollution that exploitation of oil reserves causes: a stream polluted with oil kills cattle on a ranch owned by the protagonist Cherokee's father, Lansing (Lloyd Gough), who throws a match in the stream and ignites the oil floating on its top. And when Lansing "trespasses" on his rival Tanner's (Robert Preston) land to protest his oil production, he is killed running from a spectacular oil gusher that blows up in a tornado of wood and metal. Both the stream fire and the exploding oil well are shot first in close-up and then from a distance to heighten their force. Yet although *Tulsa's* opening spectacle



Figure 1.1. *Tulsa* (1949): Oil field fire.

foregrounds pollution for a current audience, the film's main conflict is between cattle ranchers and oil producers, not between environmentalists and land exploiters. Lansing originally attacks Tanner not because he polluted the stream, but because the pollution has killed his cattle, a sign that Lansing cares more about the impact of oil on his cattle ranching than on the water and landscape itself.

The film's ending outdoes the beginning with an even more spectacular oil fire that, according to Hal Erickson, "must have cost as much as all the other Eagle-Lion releases of 1949 combined" (*Tulsa Review* *All Movie Guide*) Framing the burning stream opening, the film's Native American lead, Jim Redbird (Pedro Armendariz), his cattle lying dead from drinking the poisoned water, lights an oil-laden stream on fire and waves it into flame with his jacket. The ensuing oil field fire blasts up in red flames and black smoke that fills nearly half the frame. As in the opening sequence, erupting flames are shot first in close-up, for spectacularizing magnification, and then from a long shot that distances the viewer and adds force to the fire. Repeated shots of the heightening flames intensify the oil fire's force.

Although the film resolves its conflicts in favor of both Native Americans and conservation, it is the massive fire scene that sells the film.

Even though the film's narrative foregrounds Lansing's daughter Cherokee (Susan Hayward) and her rise to power as an oil queen, it also enacts a battle between white oil moguls and Native Americans, and between greed and conservation. But it is the film's spectacular ending that resolves both conflicts. Jim Redbird chooses to destroy oil fields that supplant cattle ranches—a choice that, ironically, results in environmental destruction more massive than that caused by drilling oil wells too close together to accommodate cattle. Redbird's action reinforces the film's emphasis on spectacle rather than on environmental devastation. Although events point toward a conservation message, spectacular effects obscure or even erase the meaning of that message. What stays with us, in other words, is the intensity of the magnificent fire itself, and not the message about the conflicting demands that oil drilling and cattle ranching place upon the ecology and society.

A filmed oil well fire can serve as spectacle for an audience even when the principal object of a film or scene is extinction of the flames. A veteran of World War II, Paul N. "Red" Adair served as a firefighter controlling oil well fires and blowouts from 1945, when he left the army, until his death in 2004. His expertise contributed to two oil fire films, Andrew McLaglen's *Hellfighters* (1968) and *Fires of Kuwait* (1992). Adair served as a consultant for *Hellfighters*, which highlighted a hero like him—Chance Buckman (John Wayne). According to film critic Dan Pavlides, Adair and his assistants "provided excellent and credible information for the film and the pyrotechnic team headed by legendary special-effects expert Fred Knoth" ("*Tulsa Review*" *All Movie Guide*). In his role as consultant, Adair ensured that authentic techniques were used to extinguish oil fires in the film, from Texas to Sumatra and Venezuela. But he also helped authenticate the spectacular visual effect that flaming oil wells provide.

According to the *Hellfighters* production notes, in the film, John Wayne "had his most formidable battle—taking on giant, billowing towers of searing flame." Based on the experiences of Red Adair and his assistants, the film put fire at its center, so that "John Wayne had to take a back seat to explosive pyrotechnic effects." As special effects engineer, Knoth created a pyrotechnic mixture that "provide[d] a maximum of spectacle." As in other oil well fires, spectacular flaming plumes inspire awe, but here the fires, while enormous, are simulated and deftly controlled by the filmmaker and his crew.

Looking for authenticity, Knoth and his team produced oil well fires using oil and propane, thereby reproducing some of the same environmental consequences flowing from actual oil fires. The opening scene shows them a drilling operation that is "coming in wild." Shot from the



Figure 1.2. *Hellfighters* (1968): John Wayne fights fires.

point of view of a worker (who is ironically smoking a cigarette), the scene looks like documentary footage of a gushing well in extreme long shot. Oil workers struggle to contain the gusher, but the whole derrick operation explodes into flames, throwing off gray and black smoke. Fire and smoke fill the frame, as burning oil field workers run away from the disaster.

As with the *Oil Wells of Baku* view, erupting red flames fill the sky with a heavy black smoke. And like the Lumière view, this opening scene is an extreme long shot, providing the viewer a safe distance from which to take pleasure. While it is filmed in Technicolor, this scene from *Hellfighters*, because it is shot at night, looks as dark as *Oil Wells of Baku*. Other scenes show flaming oil stifled by courageous firefighters. As McLaglen explains, the special effects also have consequences similar to actual oil well fires. Smoke fills much of the frame. To produce such powerful effects, special effects engineers burned 350,000 gallons of diesel oil and 60,000 gallons of raw propane. For example, in the final scenes of five oil wells in Venezuela rigged for fire by special effects men, fires and explosions produced “tremendous” heat: “I had to bite my tongue every time I sent Duke Wayne into the scene because I knew the heat was almost unbearable. . . . As soon as he went near the fire he started steaming, like a boiled egg” (*Hellfighters* Production Notes). With “geyser[s] of flame 125 feet high” and temperatures so extreme they melt the plastic on the director’s chair, special effects replicate the awesome power of an actual oil well fire (*Hellfighters* Production Notes).

Gushing and flaming oil creates a spectacle especially powerful when caught on film. In *Hellfighters*, the five oil well fires McLaglen discusses provide visions of fire and smoke that are exacerbated by rebel attacks from Colombian Communist insurgents combating the Venezuelan dictatorship. While the hellfighters attempt to ignite and extinguish the

fires, two rebel snipers attack, shooting one of the workers (Jim Hutton) in the process. The Venezuelan military intervenes in a battle scene that contributes to the spectacle produced by the fires and smoke shooting up through the rainforest. The fires and dangerous atmosphere also serve as the catalyst for Wayne's character's return to firefighting—and give us monstrous images of heroic “hellfighters” extinguishing flames and skirting bullets. *Hellfighters* thus combines spectacular eco- (and economic) disasters with heroic (and successful) firefighting strategies onscreen in a series of stimulating visual effects. The ecological work of the firefighters is all but lost in the spectacular hell where they battle.

In 1992, almost a century after the *Oil Wells of Baku: Close View* was produced, the IMAX documentary *Fires of Kuwait* foregrounds that same spectacle—this time in a documentary produced for a fifty-foot screen. Although it follows a traditional narrative that moves from a problem to a solution and foregrounds firefighters' heroism, *Fires of Kuwait* heightens the effect of monstrous spectacle, not only because of the immensity of the Kuwaiti fires but also because, as it was designed to do, the IMAX format displays the colossal, the sublime, and the spectacular. Film technology, then, heightens the impact of the spectacular, even as it documents environmental destruction.

Fires of Kuwait opens out of blackness broken only by red flames. Red light flickers as the camera tilts down to show the burning flame. It tilts up again and reveals a series of four flaming oil well fires in perspective receding into the distance. Then the film cuts to a second shot of a river of molten burning oil on the ground. A third shot shows oil well fires pushed by wind to reveal the sun—which looks like a red moon since the sky is so black. The last shot before the film's title parallels the Lumière's *Close View*: an extreme long shot of a row of burning oil wells that stretches into the distance. The dark smoke nearly fills the screen; the sky goes black.

The film cuts to a map of the Persian Gulf region, and the origin of these hellacious fires is revealed. The rest of the film exposes the devastation caused by these hundreds of fires and valorizes the miraculous cleanup efforts of firefighters from all over the world. *Fires of Kuwait* takes a stand against damaging nature that is primarily based on values other than economic. For David Douglas, the director and cinematographer, and for the firefighters who contain the blaze, burning oil well fires should be extinguished not only because the fires waste money but also because they destroy the natural environment and pollute the air and soil. However, Douglas filmed his documentary in the IMAX format, which, when projected, provides viewers with breathtaking views of the projected images, from all angles and with a 3-D effect. Douglas was

struck by the fires' enormity, when sent to Kuwait to get footage for another film, and filmed the post-Gulf War destruction instead. Desson Howe suggests that "On a normal screen, 'Kuwait,' directed by David Douglas, would rate only as a passably engaging 'Frontline'-type documentary. But in the IMAX format (ten times larger than 35mm film), it becomes a titanic, archetypal man-versus-nature clash" (4 December 1992, *Washington Post*).

The first 25 minutes of the 34-minute DVD version of *Fires of Kuwait* provide such spectacle—glimpses of fire, black smoke, and firefighting teams stemming the flames. Fantastic fires and battles to curb them are the highlight. Awesome views of towering flames with enormous plumes of smoke are strengthened by aerial views through the darkness invoked by black smoke. From a distance even the sand is black from spilled oil. Only after Red Adair's team detonates an oil gusher and snubs the well 25 minutes into the film does the narrator turn to environmental consequences of the fires and oil spills, explaining that costs to the environment may be "devastating" and "global" so firefighters are helping "wildlife," too. The film shows oil-covered desert sands, and the voice-over explains that the "ecosystem is damaged." A black oasis appears on the film, and the narrator tells us "oases are under lakes of oil." Trees are "encrust[ed]" with oil mixed with poisoned chemicals. "Migrating birds" are lost in "poisoned air." The water is polluted, and the beaches are still strewn with mines.

The devastation is "an environmental assault." But the film ends on a hopeful note: Gushers are under control and a blue sky is visible. People work in teams, highlighting the need for cooperation, as they extinguish the last of the fires, stop oil gushers, and find and destroy all land mines. To demonstrate the re-growth of the land—and of nature—the last shots show signs of life: green leaves grow out of the oil-covered ground in oases. *Fires of Kuwait* successfully demonstrates a nation's recovery from a vengeful and tyrannical act of eco-terrorism. But the film relies on a rhetoric of spectacle intensified by the use of the IMAX format, which provides viewers with breathtaking views of the projected images, from all angles and with three-dimensional effect, all but erasing the environmental message blatantly proclaimed by the film's narrator.

The effective use of documentary footage to create spectacular sequences in *Fires of Kuwait* becomes even more evident when lined up against the cinematography and narrative of Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness*. Herzog's film uses images from the same Gulf War and the fires that erupted after it to create a multi-genre 54-minute film that is part documentary and part science fiction, a meditation on the nature of the spectacle that the filmmaker encountered as an "outsider," a "visitor"



Figure 1.3. *Lessons of Darkness* (1992): Beautiful fires in Kuwait.

sensitive to the environmental destruction. Herzog also takes the time to explore intimate details of Kuwaiti citizens who have been brutalized by the Iraqi invasion. But both films depend on the nature of the fires that only images can fully describe.

As a way to clarify the power of the image of an oil fire, it is important to reiterate that *Fires of Kuwait* was originally shown on enormous screens using either the IMAX or OMNIMAX format that hyperbolizes the physical impact of the visual. Herzog's meditative, more metaphysical art piece, however, adds weight to spectacle without IMAX effects. In both films, because these fires are deliberately ignited to create an environmental disaster of unimaginable proportions, they have no rival as visual presentations. Whether presented in narrative or poetic form, they become all the more spectacular, both because their scope can only be illustrated through sweeping overhead shots from a helicopter and because they are projected onto large screens.

Despite their narrative difference, *Fires of Kuwait* and *Lessons of Darkness* both give us the scale of the distance between the oil wells that are burning. They both emphasize the utter darkness caused by smoke from the fires, a smoke so thick the sun is blacked out. The epigraph from Blaise Pascal that opens Herzog's film helps illustrate how devastating fires might take on the role of spectacle: "The collapse of the stellar universe will occur like creation—in grandiose splendor," the same splendor on display in *Oil Wells of Baku*.

Conclusion

This brings us back to our initial questions about the 1896 view—and about perspectives on oil fires then and now. There is no definitive answer to the first question: Is the fire depicted in *Oil Wells of Baku: Close View* business as usual or an eco-disaster? Although it looks like an eco-disaster to its retrospective commentator, Bertrand Tavernier, and, perhaps, to other twenty-first-century viewers, to historical observers such as Jackson, the fires recorded in the Lumière view and elsewhere in the late 1890s seem typical, if not “natural,” and unthreatening. The only disastrous result mentioned by historians of the period relates to financial loss, not environmental consequence.

The second set of questions, however, requires a more complex set of answers. The most complex of these questions becomes, when do burning oil wells gain the status of ecological disaster? When do the costs begin to include not only money and human lives but nonhuman nature? The answer turns on another question: When, how, and why does disaster become a spectacular image? In this context, the notion of spectacle obscures or even erases ecological readings. In Baku itself, meanwhile, neither the rhetoric nor the real pollution have changed dramatically in the century since *Oil Wells of Baku*. Postcards and photographs heightened the effect of the Lumière Brothers’ view, providing viewers around the world with a monstrous spectacle that inspired awe. The Baku that Jackson describes in 1911 looks and feels pretty much the same seventy or eighty years later. As Searight describes it, “when arriving by train in the 1980s, one was struck by the grimy desolation of the Bibi-Eilat field on the approach to the city, with its ancient ‘nodding donkeys’ wearily bringing oil to the surface, and the pipelines leaking over the sandy soil. Black Town was still black; sandstorms and flies were still a blight” (48).

Whether oil fires flare up by accident, as they did in the late 1800s (and still do today) or are set deliberately, as they were during the Gulf War (and still are today—in Colombia and Iraq, for example), their erupting plumes of fire and smoke and gushing rivers of oil still spark the same awestruck response. Photographs of burning oil wells and pipelines in 1896 and shots of Iraqi pipeline sabotage in 2006 provide the same universal force. *Hellfighters*, *Lessons of Darkness*, *Fires of Kuwait*, and *Jarhead* attest to the continued popularity of this particular form of spectacle, of the sublime. Spectacular flaming explosions inspire awe.

Oil Wells of Baku: Close View highlights what looks like a horrific eco-disaster, but the view of oil fires spurting up in 1896 sparks immediate visual attention and blunts attention to the ecological impact of the

fires. *Oil Wells of Baku* stands out as an ecological film, an environmental film, and a view highlighting a history of wealth garnered from resources around the world. It also foregrounds a history of spectacle, and the history of one of the most contentious modern currencies. Images of gushing oil in later films like *Giant* (1956) and *Oklahoma Crude* (1973) and in television series such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–1971) demonstrate the pervasive power of oil. And contemporary images of oil well and pipeline fires on the covers of newspapers and magazines attest to our continuing appetite for the spectacle that burning oil may produce. Reading these images through an eco-critical lens, however, can make the workings of the spectacular events transparent.