



Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens

Vol. (2023)

ISSN 2183-7198 (electrónico/online)

Homepage: <https://revistas.fcsh.unl.pt/index.php/rcl>

Bearing witness to ecological excommunication: reflections on oil in Salgado and Herzog through Cyclonopedia

Francisco Nunes 

Como Citar | How to cite:

Nunes, F. (2023). *Testemunhando a excomunhão ecológica: reflexões sobre o petróleo na obra de Salgado e Herzog a partir de Cyclonopedia*. *Revista De Comunicação E Linguagens*, (59), 53-73. <https://doi.org/10.34619/zyhe-ecpx>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34619/zyhe-ecpx>

Editor | Publisher:

ICNOVA - Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA

Direitos de Autor | Copyright:

This journal provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.



Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens

Vol. (2023)

ISSN 2183-7198 (electrónico/online)

Homepage: <https://revistas.fcsh.unl.pt/index.php/rcl>

Bearing witness to ecological excommunication: reflections on oil in Salgado and Herzog through Cyclonopedia

Francisco Nunes 

Como Citar | How to cite:

Nunes, F. (2023). *Testemunhando a excomunhão ecológica: reflexões sobre o petróleo na obra de Salgado e Herzog a partir de Cyclonopedia*. *Revista De Comunicação E Linguagens*, (59), 53-73. <https://doi.org/10.34619/zyhe-ecpx>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34619/zyhe-ecpx>

Editor | Publisher:

ICNOVA - Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA

Direitos de Autor | Copyright:

This journal provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.



Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens

Vol. (2023)

ISSN 2183-7198 (electrónico/online)

Homepage: <https://revistas.fcsh.unl.pt/index.php/rcl>

Bearing witness to ecological excommunication: reflections on oil in Salgado and Herzog through Cyclonopedia

Francisco Nunes 

Como Citar | How to cite:

Nunes, F. (2023). *Testemunhando a excomunhão ecológica: reflexões sobre o petróleo na obra de Salgado e Herzog a partir de Cyclonopedia*. *Revista De Comunicação E Linguagens*, (59), 53-73. Obtido de <https://revistas.fcsh.unl.pt/rcl/article/view/1296>

Editor | Publisher:

ICNOVA - Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA

Direitos de Autor | Copyright:

This journal provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

Bearing witness to ecological excommunication: reflections on oil in Salgado and Herzog through *Cyclonopedia*

***Testemunhando a excomunhão ecológica:
reflexões sobre o petróleo na obra de Salgado
e Herzog a partir de Cyclonopedia***

FRANCISCO NUNES

Nova University of Lisbon, Portugal

francisco.fortuna.nunes@gmail.com

Abstract

How do the inhuman forces of ecology relate to human subjectivities in contemporary materialist philosophy? This article attempts to tackle this question from the perspective of a particular instantiation of one of these forces: oil as it appears in Werner Herzog's documentary-film *Lessons of Darkness* and Sebastião Salgado's photographic series *Kuwait: A Desert on Fire*. It does so through the lens of Reza Negarestani's theory-fiction *Cyclonopedia*, which offers a number of conceptual avenues to rethink more-than-human entanglements. Arguing for the possibility of considering both of these visual works as paradoxical mediations of a principle of ecological *excommunication*, this article then interrogates the political potentialities of an ecology predicated on incommensurability, anonymity, and complicity between human and inhuman forces, attempting to bridge recent debates on materialist ecology and revolutionary politics.

Keywords

ecology | materialism | cyclonopedia | herzog | salgado

Resumo

De que forma as forças inumanas da ecologia se relacionam com as subjetividades humanas no pensamento materialista contemporâneo? Este artigo é uma tentativa de abordar esta questão através de um exemplo específico de uma destas forças: o petróleo no filme-documentário *Lessons of Darkness*, de Werner Herzog, e na série fotográfica *Kuwait: A Desert on Fire*, de Sebastião Salgado, fazendo-o a partir da teoria-ficção de Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, que oferece várias avenidas conceptuais para repensar intersecções mais-que-humanas. Defendendo a possibilidade de considerar estas obras visuais como mediações paradoxais de um princípio de *excomunhão* ecológica, este artigo interroga ainda as potencialidades políticas de uma ecologia assente na incomensurabilidade, no anonimato, e na cumplicidade entre forças humanas e inumanas, numa tentativa de aproximar debates recentes nos domínios da ecologia materialista e da filosofia política revolucionária.

ecologia | materialismo | cyclonopedia | herzog | salgado

Palavras-chave***On the surface***

In the first weeks of 1991, with the victory of the United States-led coalition forces in the First Gulf War looming on the horizon, the Iraqi military, before definitively retreating from Kuwait, unleashed a series of attacks to more than 700 oil wells, setting them ablaze for months on end. The landscape was effectively Dantean, as the uncontrollable fires produced densely dark smoke day and night, and crude oil gushed uncontrollably, eventually creating massive oil lakes. The environmental disaster of gargantuan proportions that ensued — with severe consequences to the human and animal populations in the territory — is, still to this day, virtually impossible to appropriately measure, as are the total costs of the fire extinction operation that took place in the following months, as well as the long-term costs associated with the lingering effects of this environmental catastrophe.



Figure 1
Werner Herzog, *Lessons of Darkness* (1992)

Oil is narratively *slick*. “The Oil Encounter” in the mid-nineteenth century — our “discovery” of a dark substance that we knew existed, but whose full potential as a general source of energy was hitherto unknown — produced, strangely, very little literary depictions in the following decades. Amitav Ghosh’s (2006, *ebook*) now canonical article first published in *The New Republic* in 1992 explores the reasons behind the narrativization problems surrounding oil, pointing to the substance’s literal and metaphorical “bad smell”:

“(...) it reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises; of thousands of dead civilians and children and all the troublesome questions that lie buried in their graves. Bad enough at street level, the smell of oil gets a lot worse by the time it seeps into those rooms where serious fiction is written and read.”

The intricate mesh that composes what Ghosh calls the “territory of oil” is an inherently slippery patchwork in which global petro-capitalist structures, millenary geological formations, human and animal populations, geopolitical warfare, complex pieces of engineering, form an “hyperobject” (Morton 2013) that resists the modernist conventions of the novel, “[tripping] fiction into incoherence” (Ghosh 2006, *ebook*). What if this narrational friction, this intrinsic resistance to comply with conventional ways of narrative development — with particular features intrinsic to the novel but extensive to other media and modes of expression — points to a larger representational problem, one stemming from an ontological gap that resists communication?

This article uses oil as a site to reimagine the range of possibilities of relating to the *anonymous materials* that surround human existence. What if the human-nonhuman continuum is made of objects that are not only hybrid (Latour 2007), enmeshed (Haraway 2016), or composed, but can also be weird, horrific, or alien? I tackle this issue *obliquely*, dwelling on two visual instantiations that attempt to capture its singular presence in a particular moment, one in which the assemblage put in place to control and direct its energy suddenly crashes. Relying largely on Reza Negarestani's influential theory-fiction *Cyclonopedia* to engage Werner Herzog's film *Lessons of Darkness* and Sebastião Salgado's photographic series *Kuwait: A Desert on Fire*, this essay reflects on the latent incommensurability that traverses mediations between human subjectivities and inhuman materials, arguing for the philosophical and political potentialities of that incommensurability.

Deep inside

To grasp war as a machine, or in other words, to inquire into the Abrahamic war machine in its relation to the technocapitalist war machine, we must first realize which components allow Technocapitalism and Abrahamic monotheism to reciprocate at all, even on a synergistically hostile level. The answer is oil: War on Terror cannot be radically and technically grasped as a machine without consideration of the oil that greases its parts and recomposes its flows; such consideration must begin with the twilight of hydrocarbon and the very dawn of the Earth. (Negarestani 2008, 16-17)

All reconfigurings, including atomic blasts, violent ruptures, and tears in the fabric of being — of spacetime-mattering — are *sedimented* into the world in its iterative becoming and *must be taken into account in an objective (that is, responsible and accountable) analysis*. (Barad 2020, 73)

Cyclonopedia eludes straightforward classification, being situated in a strange limbo, meshing theory and fiction. Largely influenced by H. P. Lovecraft's eerie strand of horror, the book intertwines fictional narrative with a series of other textual sources, such as fictive academic articles and scientific papers, in which the human characters of the novel appear and disappear as the convoluted script evolves. Being simultaneously a playful exercise of literary experimentation and an important addition to the (then) blooming field of speculative realist philosophy, Negarestani's work offers the reader the possibility to speculate on the consequences of the subject of history to be situated beyond the human — to be absolutely material but anthropologically unreachable, categorically *anonymous*.

Making use, chiefly, of Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual apparatus — from bodies-without-organs to war machines — *Cyclonopedia* radicalizes an infernal, hyper-paranoid death drive inscribed on the earth (Bordeleau 2016). The text's *leitmotif*, one that



Figure 2
Sebastião Salgado,
Kuwait: A Desert on Fire.
| 1991 Sebastião Salgado /
2016 TASCHEN GmbH

This is a recite of insurgency, of “the black corpse of the sun,” — a substance “oozing black flame” (Negarestani 2008, 12) — remerging as the principal insurrectional agent of a monstrous earth, *fueling* (quite literally) “the possibility of a tellurian insurgency against the sun” (Woodard 2013, 85) and the solar economy it feeds. Earthly geopolitical events, the *oily* entanglements between the Middle East and the Western powers are thus reframed and rewritten from the vantage of oil, the underground, demon-like entity *vomited* by the earth in its anti-Oedipal struggle against the “great solar mother” (Woodard 2013, 87). The earth is posited not as the site onto which a certain narration is inscribed — much less a décor, or mere background for events —, but a demoniac ensemble of forces whose internal unfolding is outside the human grasp, reframing us as accidental participants in an alien narrative, imposing a radical subversion of ‘politics’ and ‘political action’ under these circumstances.

In *Cyclonopedia*, the traditional scientific instruments of geology or chemistry are hardly sufficient to make sense of the earth’s processual activity. Instead, *Cyclonopedia* opens a radical line of flight away from what Jussi Parikka (2015, 138) calls the trope of “the readability of the earth,” where the latter is “constantly read as if it were a script needing to be interpreted, a trace of hermeneutic persistent in the age of advanced technology.” The script, here, is an alien one, evolving parallel to human endeavors to

decipher it; at its center, oil, the “Tellurian Lubricant,” is “the viscous matter into which all narratives, all world views, all ideologies collapse and move forward together,” as Mason (2020, 112) stresses in his reading of *Cyclonopedia*.

—
Figure 3
Werner Herzog,
Lessons of Darkness
(1992)



In medias res

Gulf Wars I and II were oil wars twice over: battles fought both with and for fuel resources. But because the weaponry and ideology of war are inextricably linked to the means and ends of cinematic vision, what emerged from Gulf War II was a conflation between the categories of ‘resource’ and ‘image.’ (Bozak 2011, 54)

Drawing inspiration from Negarestani’s speculative account of oil, I now turn to two specific visual instantiations of an encounter with this viscous substance. Sebastião Salgado’s *Kuwait: A Desert on Fire* shows a series of photographs that were initially taken for *The New York Times Magazine*, as the Brazilian photographer flew to Kuwait to document the aftermath of the Iraqi bombings in April 1991. Salgado was at that moment working on a visual archeology of manual labor, and a number of photographs taken in Kuwait were included in his *Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age*.

Indeed, a significant number of photographs in *Kuwait* depict the exhausting toil of those — mostly American workers — who had been hired to put out the fires and cap the wells. In line with the photographer’s crude *verité* approach, at the intersection between photojournalism and more artistically-codified photographic practices, most of this series’ shots, even compositionally, focus on the labor needed to put the fires out and remedy the environmental catastrophe that ensued. It is beyond the scope of this

article to further explore the way in which Salgado “negotiates the choppy waters between naïve social realism...and the aestheticization or discursive institutionalization of poverty,” (Watts and Boal 1995, 105) a recurrent debate not only *vis-à-vis* Salgado in particular, but a whole strand of social realism in photography. What seems clear is that the Brazilian photographer espouses a vision that emphasizes rather simplistic anthropological and ecological binaries such as the opposition between a pristine nature and the mechanical imaginary of late industrialism, a kind of preservationist outlook both on “nature” and “human society” that tends to idealize both the “natural sublime” and the “human heroism” of mundane or prosaic laboring gestures¹. Steeped in an “enduring belief that people from very different social locations can empathize with and assist one another,” (Gold 2011, 422) the humanist universalism that pervades the entirety of his body of work, Salgado’s praxis has often been praised for its social or political relevance; however, it very rarely “escapes the orbit of United Nations ‘family of men’ internationalism,” in the fitting words of Watts and Boal (1995, 112).

By contrast, Werner Herzog’s work is significantly different. The German filmmaker has been engaging with the relation between “nature” and the human in a more intricate fashion. For the purpose of the argument developed here, it is particularly important to address Herzog’s exploration of the limits of representation and narration. Some authors, such as Matthew Gandy (1996), have noted that Herzog’s cinematic sublime, a combination of nineteenth-century romanticism and twentieth-century existentialism, is often used, aesthetically, to emphasize the gulf between human endeavors and the frightening vastness of the wilderness.



Figure 4
Werner Herzog,
Lessons of Darkness
(1992)

¹ The description, in the editor’s website, of another of his works, *Genesis*, presents the latter as “a love letter to the planet, a monumental portfolio of nature, animals, and indigenous peoples that reveal the earth in all the precious splendor of its pristine state.” See <https://www.taschen.com/en/limited-editions/photography/02613/sebastiao-salgado-genesis/>.

While this fascination for the “natural Absolute” is somewhat shared with Salgado, Herzog’s vision of the human-nonhuman encounter is significantly darker, giving rise to a tragic fate in which human transience is sublimated in the face of an unforgiving earth. In *Lessons of Darkness*, the desolate landscapes underline the idea of an unsurpassable impossibility to fully convey the meaning — from a social, political, or intellectual point of view — of such an event, other than by means of an attempt to approach a sort of tragic sublime. This is particularly salient in a passage from a speech given by the German filmmaker after a screening of the film in which he says that “as the oil fields burned in Kuwait, the media — and here I mean television in particular — was in no position to show what was, beyond being a war crime, an event of cosmic dimensions, a crime against creation itself” (Herzog 2010, 2). To make a last contrast between Salgado and Herzog: while the former affirms that he “has no pretensions to be artistic,” and “never pose[s] anyone for pictures” (quoted in Watts and Boal 1995, 105–7) in an attempt to preserve the seemingly veristic aura of his work, the latter intentionally avoids “the factual, upon which the so-called *cinéma vérité* fixates,” arguing that “it can never give us the kind of illumination, the ecstatic flash, from which Truth emerges” (Herzog 2010, 7).

—
Figure 5
Sebastião Salgado, *Kuwait: A Desert on Fire.* | 1991
Sebastião Salgado / 2016
TASCHEN GmbH



We are, thus, in neither of these cases — in the capital-T, mysterious and only poetically approachable Truth, or in the social realist, mundane and prosaic truth — in the realm of Negarestani’s weird, speculative materialism. In *Cyclonopedia*, we don’t seem to get closer to any aesthetically-inflected transcendental sublime, but the Iranian philosopher’s approach also does not afford any naïvely realist concessions. Instead,

we are faced with a series of quasi-sentient entities whose internal narration absolutely escapes our grasp, refashioning what we perceive as “nature,” or “natural phenomena,” or so-called “natural substances,” such as oil.

What would it mean to take these two cultural objects — Salgado’s photographs and Herzog’s film — and drastically queer the ways in which they portray their *main character*, oil? In both of these instances, we see the destruction caused by the uncontrollable force of oil gushing from the wells, a substance that has ceased to perform its role in the extractive capitalist regime, as the Iraqi bombs unleash a different potential, and a new assemblage is formed. Indeed, a vast, world-wide infrastructure is put in place to contain this inner force (or perhaps to redirect its telluric destiny, if read from the lens of *Cyclonopedia*), but, in this particular moment in time, oil emerges here from the darkness and into the light, with unforeseen consequences.

The whole process put in place from the nineteenth-century onwards, one that involves extraction, transportation, refinement, and finally, use, is concealed from our gaze; when we see it, as in oil spillages, for instance, something has gone wrong. The oil fires are an extreme example of this infrastructural malfunctioning; in several of Salgado’s shots we see a juxtaposition of industrial materials used in the oil wells before the bombings, and a series of military equipment, such as army tanks and trucks, now partially sunken by the oil-infested sand/mud. This is also present, if in a somewhat more eerie setting, in Herzog’s long shots filmed from above, slowly cruising through a desolate landscape in which the Gulf War gives way to a “futuristic environmental war, a war waged against the no-man’s-landscape” (Bozak 2011, 77).

Figure 6
Werner Herzog, *Lessons
of Darkness* (1992)



Beyond Negarestani's specific demonic recite of oil and its role in the geopolitical situation of the Middle East, *Cyclonopedia*'s underlying ontological claims push against a certain strand in contemporary materialist approaches that assert inherent desires for connection in the nonhuman world, in an attempt to *enliven* their “poetic and productive self-organization,” (Weber 2019, 3) often framing their vitalist metaphysics in term of “desire” and “affinity”². Partially indebted to a certain New Age discourse — and its scientifically-inflected conceptualizations, such as the Gaia hypothesis — these accounts find themselves at odds with Negarastani's attempt to grapple with a noncommunicative exteriority, one that seems only to communicate through *violent insurgency*, which becomes particularly visible when the structures erected to redirect the energy it possesses — whose function in our social and political order is to provide fuel for the world economy — is shattered. In this regard, *Cyclonopedia* goes one step further than suggestions such as Bryant's “black ecology,” which challenges an inherently homeostatic nature destabilized by human positive feedback loops. We are thus not only “adrift in a wilderness, in a universe, that is indifferent to us and to life” (Bryant 2014, 302), but rather faced with the possibility that some of the earth's geological forces — here instantiated by oil — are operating absolutely outside of our grasp.

The visible, sensible effects of this potential incommensurability, the ones Salgado and Herzog try to address, but can only touch upon, are perhaps better grasped through the lens of *excommunication*. I take oil, as it appears in these depictions, to be the embodiment of a principle of excommunication, “a double movement in which the communicational imperative is expressed, and expressed as the impossibility of communication” (Thacker 2013, 80).

Thus, what I am proposing here is that, in line with this insight, we look at these cultural objects as the eerie effects of this impossible communication, an extraneous mediation brought about by the collapse of one — albeit a vital one — piece of a gigantic assemblage (one that includes everything from petro-extraction structures to geopolitical borders) put in place to technically mediate our relation to an *oily* narrative that absolutely escapes us. This approach is fundamentally at odds with accounts of life as a general *poietic* principle, beyond cellular life; while this type of framework emphasizes the inherent possibility of communication between human and more-than-human subjectivities — in fact, these works often premise the political emancipatory principle of their approaches in the ability to work through this dense semiotic environment — a *Cyclonopedia*-inspired reading of the relation between the human and the nonhuman addresses this exteriority only by means of testimony. The media used to depict this catastrophe, the filmic or photographic camera, can only bear witness to the effects of this telluric force once the assemblage put into place to contain it collapses. Indeed, as

² This is also somewhat visible in Haraway's approach to human-nature entanglements. See (Haraway 2016).



—
Figure 7
Werner Herzog, *Lessons
of Darkness* (1992)

3 “*Cyclonopedia* is not a novel. It can of course be read as one, but only at the expense of making the category of novel meaningless. *Cyclonopedia* is heretical theology. (...) As in theology, its characters are inhuman.” In (Wark 2012, 41).

This is our hypothesis: a multiplicity is defined not by the elements that compose it in extension, not by the characteristics that compose it in comprehension, but by the lines and dimensions it encompasses in ‘intension’. If you change dimensions, if you add or subtract one, you change multiplicity. Thus there is a borderline for each multiplicity; it is in no way a center but rather the enveloping line or farthest dimension, as a function of which it is possible to count the others, all those lines or dimensions constitute the pack at a given moment (beyond the borderline, the multiplicity changes nature). (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 245)

The flight of exodus is not so much a question of mobility through space, not so much a question of running and hiding. Rather, exodus indicates a withdrawal from modes of identification and representation. In this sense exodus is more a question of ontology than space or movement. Desertion and exodus mean a withdrawal from actualization, and hence a migration into superposition. Under the flight of exodus, things are put into a state of virtuality. But such virtuality is merely a synonym for the generic. For when an entity withdraws into the generic it ceases to delimit itself by way of actual identification. Rather, the entity metastasizes into a virtual space: the shifting desert, the swarm of bees, or the darkness at the edge of town. (Galloway 2014, 198)

Two workers lie exhausted next to a well gushing out oil uncontrollably; they are completely soaked in oil, and shining from the effect of the camera’s light. Their poses are reminiscent of wounded soldiers (in this case, they are face to face with the “enemy” — the viscous, unrelentless substance expelled from the interior of the Kuwaiti desert). As much as the composition of Salgado’s photographs attempts to emphasize the humanistic aspect of the catastrophe, something *leaks*. It is the all-encompassing, pervasive element of the series, a black and eerily shiny viscous element. The speed in which it erupts from the underground, as it forces its way past the now-faulty infrastructure once put in place to contain it, creates a black cloud, giving a “dusty” feeling to the airborne substance, rendering useless the crumbling barbed wire fence that once protected the well against other threats. This is much more than Salgado could have imagined when he stated that “oil was both the beginning and the end of the story of the Iraqi invasion” (Salgado 2016, 9). Something also leaks, escapes, from Herzog’s shots. Oil-drenched plants, unstoppable fire, lakes of oil; this is no longer the usual setting of the Gulf War, nor is it a war against the “forces of nature,” but rather a testimony of something alien to our grasp, an extraneous narrative that challenges both the romantic “natural sublime,” and the fantasy of a perfectly interconnected, homeostatic, and essentially harmless earth.



Figure 8
Sebastião Salgado,
Kuwait: A Desert on Fire. |
1991 Sebastião Salgado /
2016 TASCHEN GmbH

Cyclonopedia's narrative of oil — here seen through the lens of Salgado and Herzog, who accidentally stumble upon a broken network, a *leaky assemblage* — can be read as gesturing towards the heretical character of this nonhuman entity that pushes against reconciliation. In Thacker's (2012, 179) apt summary: "The unhuman does not exist for us (the humanism of the unhuman), and neither is it against us (the misanthropy of the unhuman)." Rather, it is the "enigmatic thought of the immanence of indifference." *Contra* a sort of facile tendency in ecological thinking that places us at the center of a perfectly communicative world of vital energies and circulating fluxes, sharing with capitalism a kind of ethos of absolute commensurability, *Cyclonopedia* forces an opening towards the coming into being of anonymous forces (Bordeleau 2014, 172). As with capitalism, what this pacified ecology masks is not just unequal exchange, but "a non-exchange, a *noncommunication*" (Wark 2013, 201).

To work through — and around — these shadowy spaces is tantamount to (at least partially) abandoning traditional notions of agency and self-sufficiency in a world of surreptitious materials and evasive presences. In this regard, *complicity*, which is in the subtitle of Negarestani's book, captures this process in a better way than some of its fashionable alternatives in ecological materialist discourse such as *affinity*, or *resonance*. Here, it is “oil that discovers humans” — as in Thacker's (2012, 173) formulation — and what ensues is a process in which the human is *drawn*, in a way, to be complicit with the inhuman forces of oil — with their phantasmagorical presence — where the possibilities of exchange, of communication, cease to be anthropocentrically available, but also which undergird a number of “happy-go-lucky” approaches to ecology (Woodard 2014, 265). This radical opening to the forces of the outside, as Negarestani (2008, 200) points out, is completely at odds with liberal “so-called emancipatory human openness” and is closer with a sort of processual becoming. Bordeleau (2014, 171) is right in connecting the “laceration from the forces of the outside” with an ethical and political stance of radically tearing open the field of possibilities for the coming into being of new intensities — ones that cannot be anticipated, but only *actualized*, to use the Deleuzian grammar — as they make contact with our current social realities.

While fully escaping the aforementioned naïve connectivist ecological approach, it does not foreclose another way of relating to the anonymous materials that surround us. This is especially visible in the two works in appreciation here, where the *production* of oil is a sort of “polity of the inhuman.”⁴ Its *violent insurgency* need not be seen as a revolutionary gesture of liberation (this would be a facile reading, and one that misses the crucial point of Negarestani's work), but the signal that our proximity, the comingling of human and inhuman, the more-than-human mesh that keeps resurfacing in recent ecological discussions, has dark, inaccessible sides, ontological holes composed by spaces of nonexchange.



Figure 9
Werner Herzog, *Lessons of Darkness* (1992)

⁴ As Bratton (2012, 45) asks, apropos of *Cyclonopedia*, “After the end of the world, what is the polity of the inhuman?”

Thus, and to go back to Salgado and Herzog, what is leaking is not the “natural Absolute” rising against the human, but an incomprehensible, inaccessible “polytics” — to use Negarestani’s (2008, 172) own term. This “polytics” is the indelible mark of the inhuman at the heart of the *anthropos*. As Dolphijn (2012, 211) rightly argues, what Negarestani’s “polytics” stresses is the process of *being opened (by)* the inhuman, as an alternative to the conventional *being open (to)* the Other, which reeks of anthropocentrism and is never quite able to conceive of alterity beyond the Kantian subject. If the connectivist impetus present in ecological discourse shares an ethos with the network-thinking that reconstructs *affects* so that they apply to everything from global capitalism to cybernetics — which is, in a way, the unfortunate destiny of the rhizome — then the noncommunicative illegibility of the inhuman can offer avenues to further articulate a subtractive politics of imperceptibility (Culp 2022). The “polity of the inhuman,” to go back to Bratton, can be thought of as another hole in the “unified synoptic view” (Culp 2022, 6) that is enabled by the connectivist approach.

Andrew Culp’s discussion on the aesthetics of imperceptibility illustrates this point: “Imperceptibility as a mode produces events without an image, those types of events in which the sudden invasion of something unrecognizable forces a rupture. In brief, the imperceptible is arrival of the alien” (Culp 2022, 7). From the vantage of this article’s argument, it is not the case that oil is revolutionary, or that the inhuman is necessarily recalcitrant to human institutions as they exist today, but rather that the ontological gap that opens up with a *Cyclonopedia*-inspired approach — predicated on a sort of excommunication, as already mentioned — allows for a deeper cut in the politics of subtraction that Culp puts forth.

Fundamentally, what *Cyclonopedia* inspires is the possibility of rearticulating the Harawayian suggestion that particular forms of ethical engagement might emerge from encounters with more-than-human entities in ways that are radically non-anthropocentric (Haraway 2016). This could be a way to infuse Karen Barad’s (2006; 2020) agential materialism with revolutionary possibilities, insofar as the intra-actions⁵ that cut through matter are never pre-given, or defined in advance: they leave space — and this is the crucial space whose eerie visibility is torn asunder at particular instances, such as the one encountered by Salgado and Herzog — for uneasy, even paradoxical proximities, noncommunicative yet present. What erupts in this process, glimpses of a mysterious and phantasmagoric *outside*, does not lend itself to reductionist positivistic inquiry, it is not defined by the sum of its (unknown, *unknowable*) physical features, but is also

⁵ For Barad (2006, 33), “[t]he neologism ‘intra-action’ signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual ‘interaction’, which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the ‘distinct’ agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements.*”

not metaphysically transcendental. Rather it is *mattered through and through* (Barad 2020), but in unforeseen ways, and it is precisely its diffractive incommensurability, its fundamental anonymity, that affords our complicity with its sudden subtraction from old assemblages. In this regard, it offers a possible way out — a productive escape — from conceptual straitjackets such as Nick Land's (2011, 493–505) "geotraumatics," the attempt to articulate a theory of trauma beyond the human, positing a scaled-up, all-encompassing repressive principle driving towards catastrophe. Departing from Freud, and inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis, Land suggests that there is a primal cosmic trauma that is effectively inscribed in all matter; this absolutely pervasive, materially-embedded pessimism leads to the dire conclusion that Mackay and Brassier (2011, 41) appropriately identify: "Nothing short of the complete liquidation of biological order and the dissolution of physical structure can suffice to discharge the aboriginal trauma that mars terrestrial existence." More interestingly, Negarestani's take on "geotraumatics," in *Cyclonopedia* and elsewhere, stresses the possibility of working through the great chain of geotraumatic events in ways that might help mobilize its revolutionary possibilities (Negarestani 2011, 43).

This is precisely what *complicity*, and not only *affinity* can mobilize. It is the politics of *excommunication*, signaling the possibility of bearing witness to the reconfiguration of a particular *traumatic mattering*. To posit the possibility of engaging with anonymous materials such as oil, at the intersection of materialist ecology and revolutionary politics, and avoiding simultaneously anthropomorphization and reification, requires finding a specific kind of value in excommunication, imperceptibility, and inarticulability, as both predicaments of unnatural complicities and strategies gesturing towards novel ontological reconfigurations, open-ended and unforeseeable.

There is obviously no equivalence between the human psyche and other material arrangements — this is partly what is being stressed in excommunication and incommensurability — but there need not be. If traumatic mattering cuts through everywhere, if it can be posited as an ontological condition — one of paradoxical proximity — ethics and politics, understood ecologically, begin with cosmic violence but do not stop there. Ecological thinking need not be caught in the dark, self-effacing circuitry of Landian philosophy⁶, *en route* to the final dissolution; stepping away from a soothed ecology of forces, a giant cybernetic Gaia traversed by homeostatic flows can also mean *participating*, being an *accomplice* to differently arranged assemblages as they come to light. Far from signaling a retreat from agential politics — and to a position of mere contemplation of the accumulated sediments of telluric trauma, where one could shy away from dealing with the human participation in the present configuration of the assemblages that concur to the furthering of catastrophe (ecological, political, or social) — this position

⁶ For an overview of Nick Land's philosophy, see (Mackay and Brassier 2011).

involves a direct engagement with the ethical conundrums involved in the process.

If, for Bennett (2010, 38), “an understanding of agency as distributive and confederate... reinvokes the need to detach ethics from moralism,” from the vantage of ex-communication and anonymity, ethics is not only detached from moralism, but is also illegible when separated from the material arrangements from which “the subject” is extracted. This is what Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 239-42) point to, when writing on the disruption of the self as leading to a sort “unnatural participation” outside the domain of communication. Addressing specifically this passage of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Matts and Tynam (2012, 164) aptly note that the philosophers’ main lesson is that the problems of politics and subjectivity can only be adequately tackled in non-human terms; or rather, that the philosophical investigation into those issues necessarily takes us to the more-than-human domain. Excommunication, then, is a possibility to relate not to an unbridgeable gulf — the human/non-human, or the life/non-life ontological gap — but to the *excess* that comes with the “terrifying overproximity” (Woodard 2014, 265) of these categories. The dualities that seem to pervade both Salgado and Herzog, the natural sublime/human frailty dyad, or the brute force of ecological powers/the fallibility of political institutions, if seen from the vantage of a sort of shared exposure to the violent “reconfigurings” (Barad 2020, 73) that cut through matter, begin to give way to a more intricate articulation of the question of violence beyond the recourse to facile anthropomorphizing. Ethics is thus reframed as the enjoined responsibility “to participate in, to be possessed by, that which is neither human nor animal in the organic sense” (Matts and Tynam 2012, 165).

It is in this sense that it is possible to appropriate Agamben’s reflections on bearing witness and testimony and *explode* them ecologically. The violent “matterings” (Barad, 2020) of the cosmos expose the inhuman in the human not through the foundational biopolitical gesture of sovereignty, but through the anonymous forces that operate *at the end of(our) world*. The paradox of the testimony, which Agamben (2002, 120) considers in a wholly different manner, in which “something subjectified speaks without truly having anything to say of its own,” — the “zone of indistinction between the human and the inhuman” brought about by the impossible identification of the subject — can here be reappropriated ecologically not only to further complicate the concept of subjectivity but also to interrogate ethics at the threshold of subjectification. If, as Deranty (2008, 175) argues, the Agambenian project aims at “[finding] redemption in a new use of language, which will be the testimony to the impossibility of being a subject,” to reconstruct this argument through the lens of radical ecological materialism means finding a space for this impossibility non-anthropocentrically (and thus non-linguistically too).

Hence, before the political violence of biopolitics, there is the *ur-violence* of being made a subject out of inhuman, anonymous matter. Indeed, as Negarestani (2011, 44) argues, “the subject is but the traumatic focalization of the universal continuum.” Understood thus, *redemption*, as an ethical category, can best be sought not through the

testimony of the Agambenian witness, whose existence resists the biopolitical separation of the human and the inhuman (Chare 2006, 48); rather, the ethical subject, so to speak, is closer to an ecologically expanded reading of Deleuze. Addressing specifically some of the problems with materialist thinking already identified throughout this article, Culp (2016, *ebook*) stresses — *contra* “those who have worked to square Deleuze with identity” — that “subjects are only interesting when they cast a line to the outside,” suggesting that the Deleuzian “[b]ecoming is really a process of un-becoming.” Ultimately, Culp acknowledges that the question then becomes the specific orientation of such a project, the contours of an alternative to subjectivity. From the perspective developed in this article this does not exactly mean abandoning “assemblage-thinking”⁷ but the underlying connectivist approach that seamlessly weaves together all the forces that compose these assemblages. We can find in Negarestani a useful counter-position to this merry-go-round world of forever-circling fluxes, which often “[sanctify] a bloodless world by cataloguing the networks that make up its many attributes” (Culp 2016, *ebook*).

If the Deleuzian project is explicitly nonhuman, prepersonal, and asubjective, as Culp maintains, aren’t the successive *reconfigurings of matter* — those which operate to bring about the subject as well as those running parallel to the human — renewed possibilities of piercing through presently existing social and political configurations? Seen from the prism of the argument developed here, when the bombs fell on the Kuwaiti desert, what came violently gushing out was an inhuman line of flight pointing to a different unfolding; the irruption of oil outside of the circuit of capitalistic valorization and geopolitical warfare would, therefore, signal the heretical eruption of a monster, a new anonymous force. To put it in Marx’s (1977, 279) terms, we find ourselves finally in the “hidden abode of production” of the earth, only this time, it is an *inhuman production*. When Salgado and Herzog encounter this “*inappropriate element*” (Matts and Tynam, 166), which stands outside of aesthetic contemplation or transcendental sublimity, what we finally see are the unrepresentable traces that haunt its visual instantiations but exceed the communicative realm, offering complicities rather than affinities — casting imperceptible lines to the outside.

⁷ In this regard, see the section titled “The Subject: Un-becoming, Not Assemblages” in (Culp 2016).

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 2002. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books.

Barad, Karen. 2006. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.

—. 2020. “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable.” In *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Matthias Fritsch, Philippe Lynes, and David Wood, 206–48. New York: Fordham University Press.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bordeleau, Erik. 2014. *Comment sauver le commun du communisme ?* Montreal, Quebec: Le Quartanier.

—. 2016. “Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials de Reza Negarestani.” *Spirale : arts · lettres · sciences humaines* (255): 41–44. <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/81117ac>.

Bozak, Nadia. 2011. *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Bratton, Benjamin. 2012. “Root the Earth: On Peak Oil Apophenia.” In *Leper Creativity: Cyclonopedia Symposium*, edited by Reza Negarestani, Eugene Thacker, Ed Keller, Benjamin H. Bratton, Robin Mackay, McKenzie Wark, Alisa Andrasek, Zach Blas, Melanie Doherty, and Anthony Sciscione, 45–57. New York: punctum books.

Bryant, Levi R. 2014. “Black.” In *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 290–310. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chare, Nicholas. 2006. “The Gap in Context: Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Remnants of Auschwitz.’” *Cultural Critique* (64): 40–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489257>.

Culp, Andrew. 2016. *Dark Deleuze*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

—. 2022. *A Guerrilla Guide to Refusal*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deranty, Jean-Philippe. 2008. “Witnessing the Inhuman: Agamben or Merleau-Ponty.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107(1): 165–86. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2007-061>.

Dolphijn, Rick. 2012. “Undercurrents and the Desert(ed): Negarestani, Tournier and Deleuze Map the Polytics of a ‘New Earth.’” In *Postcolonial Literatures and Deleuze: Colonial Pasts, Differential Futures*, edited by Lorna Burns and Birgit M. Kaiser, 199–216. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Galloway, Alexander R. 2014. *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gandy, Matthew. 1996. “Visions of Darkness: The Representation of Nature in the Films of Werner Herzog.” *Ecumene* 3 (1): 1–21. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44251810>.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2006. *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Gold, Steven J. 2011. “Sebastião Salgado and Visual Sociology.” *Sociological Forum* 26 (2): 418–23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23027326>.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Experimental Futures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Land, Nick. 2011. *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*. Edited by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier. Falmouth: Urbanomic.

Latour, Bruno. 2007. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mackay, Robin, and Ray Brassier. 2011. “Editor’s Introduction.” In *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, edited by Nick Land, 1–54. Falmouth: Urbanomic.

Marx, Karl. 1977. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1. Translated by Ben Fowkes. New York: Vintage.

Mason, Freddie. 2020. *The Viscous: Slime, Stickiness, Fondling, Mixtures*. New York: punctum books.

Matts, Tim, and Aidan Tynan. 2012. "Geotrauma and the Eco-Clinic: Nature, Violence, and Ideology." *Symploke* 20 (1-2): 153-171. <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.20.1-2.0153>.

Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Negarestani, Reza. 2008. *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. Melbourne: re.press.

—. 2011. "Globe of Revolution. An Afterthought on Geophilosophical Realism." *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture* 8 (2): 25-54. <https://doi.org/10.51151/identities.v8i2.263>.

Parikka, Jussi. 2015. *A Geology of Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Pinkus, Karen. 2016. *Fuel: A Speculative Dictionary*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Salgado, Sebastião. 2016. *Kuwait: A Desert on Fire / Eine Wuste in Flammen / Un Desert En Feu*. Edited by Lélia Wanick Salgado. Cologne: Taschen.

Shannon, Laurie, Vin Nardizzi, Ken Hiltner, Saree Makdisi, Michael Ziser, Imre Szeman, and Patricia Yaeger. 2011. "Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources." *PMLA* 126 (2): 305-326. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41414106>.

Thacker, Eugene. 2012. "Black Infinity; or, Oil Discovers Humans." In *Leper Creativity: Cyclonopedia Symposium*, edited by Reza Negarestani, Eugene Thacker, Ed Keller, Benjamin H. Bratton, Robin Mackay, McKenzie Wark, Alisa Andrasek, Zach Blas, Melanie Doherty, and Anthony Sciscione, 173-80. New York: punctum books.

—. 2013. "Dark Media." In *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, edited by Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, 77-149. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wark, McKenzie. 2012. "An Inhuman Fiction of Forces." In *Leper Creativity: Cyclonopedia Symposium*, edited by Reza Negarestani, Eugene Thacker, Ed Keller, Benjamin H. Bratton, Robin Mackay, McKenzie Wark, Alisa Andrasek, Zach Blas, Melanie Doherty, and Anthony Sciscione, 39-43. New York: punctum books.

—. 2013. "Furious Media: A Queer History of Heresy." In *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, edited by Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, 151-210. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Watts, Michael, and Iain Boal. 1995. "Working-Class Heroes: E. P. Thompson and Sebastião Salgado." *Transition* (68): 90-115. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935294>.

Weber, Andreas. 2019. *Enlivenment: Toward a Poetics for the Anthropocene*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Werner Herzog. 2010. "On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth." Translated by Moira Weigel. *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 17 (3): 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1353/arn.2010.0054>.

Woodard, Ben. 2013. *On an Ungrounded Earth: Towards a New Geophilosophy*. New York: punctum books.

—. 2014. "Ultraviolet." In *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 252-69. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Filmography

Lektionen in Finsternis (Lessons of Darkness). Dir. Werner Herzog. Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, Germany, France, United States, 1992. 52 min.

Biographical note

Francisco Nunes is a PhD student in Communication Sciences (specialized in Theory of Culture and New Technologies) at the Nova University of Lisbon radical futurities and existential risk.

ORCID

[0000-0003-3302-5848](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3302-5848)

CV

[3D14-8228-71D3](https://orcid.org/3D14-8228-71D3)

Institutional address

Avenida de Berna, 26-C / 1069-061 Lisboa, Portugal.

To cite this article

Nunes, Francisco. 2023. "Bearing witness to ecological excommunication: reflections on oil in Salgado and Herzog through Cyclonopedia." *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens*, (59): 53-73.
<https://doi.org/10.34619/zyhe-ecpx>.

Received Recebido: 2023-09-22

Accepted Aceite: 2023-11-27

DOI <https://doi.org/10.34619/zyhe-ecpx>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>