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# A Journey Through Oil's Space

## Reflections on Oil, Architecture, and Text

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Niger Delta  
crude oil  
Petrolio  
abyss  
architecture  
infrastructure  
greek letter delta  
oil space

*In quest'opera il punto di vista è sempre al vertice. Le cose sono colte in un loro momento di attualità così estrema da presentarsi come cristallizzate o pietrificate. [...]. Tuttavia questo punto di vista culminante non disdegna di prendere in considerazione di tanto in tanto (anzi, per la verità piuttosto spesso) le profondità dei baratri; non solo, ma addirittura di osservare come le cose, formando laggiù nei baratri, salgano lentamente di quota, fino a emergere e a cristallizzarsi nei vertici: a coglierle addirittura, in somma, nel loro moto, nella loro evoluzione, nella loro storia. Ma—tra vertici e baratri—c'è una terza alternativa: ossia la 'mezza-costa'. [...]. Se il grafico dell'opera è costituito da una serie di 'salti' tra vertici e baratri è costituito anche—e con una certa continuità—da una linea regolare, che è appunto quella della mezzacosta.*

*In this work the point of view is always at the peak. Things are caught at a moment of actuality so extreme that they appear crystallized or petrified [...]. Yet this heightened point of view does not disdain to consider from time to time (quite often, in fact) the depths of the abyss; not only that but, indeed, to observe how things formed down in the abyss slowly rise up until they emerge and are crystallized into peaks; in sum, to capture them exactly in their movement, in their evolution, in their history. But—between the peak and the abyss—there is still a third alternative; that is, the “middle road” [...]. If a diagram of the work consists of a series of “leaps” between peaks and abysses, it also—and with some continuity—consists of a regular line, which is precisely that of the middle road.*

Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio*.

Note 43. Flashes of light on *Linkskommunismus*

A massive mountain-shaped white house appears in George Osodi's photo. It has pseudo-classical columns and corner solutions with approximate ashlar decorating the building, its high walls punctuated by other white columns.



George Osodi  
Ogu, 2013

All the white-cream colors of the building and its elements easily liquefy in the black oily water that occupies the bottom of the photo. This white mountain that emerges from the dark water full of oil of the Niger Delta is the realization of the dream of illegal refinery owners who, once they become wealthy enough, can finally build a house that's "a bit neo-classical, a bit modernist, a bit enriched West's periphery." At this scale, we can observe the contradictions and complexities of oil and its reflections on space. White architecture emerges from the abysses of the black water and from the earth where crude oil "slowly rises up"<sup>1</sup> to be transformed. We can consider this photo as a diagram that allows us to see how oil shapes our planet.

Oil is space and oil is language. It is the language and the space of our contemporary world, of capitalistic society. It is our blood with which we write our history and give shape to our cultural artefacts.



Despite its ubiquity—“everything is mapped (above all, because of Oil)”<sup>2</sup>—it is “doomed to blindness,” according to Bertolucci in his film *La via del petrolio*.<sup>3</sup> Oil pumps life in our existence by acting on the sharp border between visibility and invisibility, in both space and language: it is a physical infrastructure that connects, finds, but also separates and, quoting Reza Negarestani, it is the “undercurrent of all narrations.”<sup>4</sup> In this blurred border, we read and hear about it through the news, in the political, economic, ecological, and social discourse, but we easily forget about its constant presence in our daily life, our everyday “encounters” with it, as Jordan B. Kinder writes in his essay. We don’t easily see its travels through the Earth, but we recognize its “bad” consequences as its spills and leaks—the black liquid surface in ecological disasters.

As space and language, Pasolini wrote *Petrolio*, his last unfinished novel he started writing in 1972 and that was abruptly interrupted by his homicide on the night between November 1 and 2, 1975, at Ostia’s seaplane base. The book is an architecture made of text—an attempt to unveil the backstage of our world by letting the readers move through the spaces of the novel and, in this way, experience oil and its structure. The constructive element of *Petrolio*’s architecture is the note (*appunto*). The notes (*appunti*) also determine the work’s rhythm, unity, and fragmentation. They build a space that develops both vertically and horizontally, as the quote that introduces this text explains.

Oil is the *topos* of power, we can read our society through its structure. And the same is true of the architecture of Pasolini’s book: something is hidden, and something emerges in “crystalized forms” from the deep abysses. Vertical and horizontal means putting the network and the hierarchy together and this is exactly how power and oil work: “networks are generally nested in hierarchies, nomads stick to riding camels and raiding, and the war machines run on coal and petrol.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the language power uses is, apparently, multiple and diversified, and in fact, according to the original project, *Petrolio* was to have been made not just of notes, but also of letters, newspaper articles, interviews, songs, and illustrations.<sup>6</sup>

Many languages are necessary in order to grasp the complexity of oil; similar to Pasolini’s project, in this group’s contributions, the ambiguous condition of visibility and invisibility of oil is expressed through the point of view of different disciplines and practices, and so, by using several forms of texts and contents. Various languages and contents build a space where the reader can travel from the abysses of oil to its peaks, but they might also find the “middle road,” where the texts connect like pipelines in the desert or the steppe. As in the work of Pasolini, where “the fragmentary character of the whole book ensures that, for example, certain ‘narrative pieces’ are in themselves complete,”<sup>7</sup> the contributions build a space by themselves but, at the same time, they are linked together creating a movement that makes it pulse like magma. It is a structure that allows this section of the book to keep together a plurality of individual contributions, their *differences*—because oil “makes all the difference” as Simone Gingrich writes—but also the connections between them, or the “middle road.” The symbol that connects and at the same time differentiates all contributions is  $\Delta$ , the delta. It means, indeed, difference and change. Moreover, delta is a triangle, geographically identified in the Niger Delta—effectively illustrated by George Osodi’s photos—and it is symbolically related to vertical and horizontal movements, a “constant change,” that is physical, chemical, biological, and geographical like the one David Misch narrates.

# The delta, $\Delta$ , is an architectural diagram that also represents the “peaks” and the “abysses,” the building that emerges from the oil depths.

The journey through the architecture of this section goes inside the Earth, in the abysses where oil reservoirs are, and it arrives at its summits, where oil comes out and is transformed, thanks to the extracting technologies.

It finds its built forms in the various scales of the refineries, because “the fullest possible understanding of the refinery would include the fullest possible understanding of the planet,” as Benjamin Steininger writes in his text. Oil runs around the world within its transportation, follows its transformation, and becomes the fuel that builds the spaces we live in. Oil expresses our world in all scales, for this reason, the micro-scale of oil movements inside rocks, its compositions and behaviors, helps us to understand our society and environment as from the refinery to the planet, from oil micro-flows inside rocks to big rivers. As Pit Arnold explains: “The flow in porous media is contingent on its topology and can only be accurately modelled with three-dimensional information. As in a river, there are faster and slower flow paths, introducing intricacies to the transport dynamics.”

Oil runs through all the scales of our existence, from the air we breathe to cities and space projects. To capture it in a single image is impossible; many voices and viewpoints are needed to understand it, voices that are both equal and contradictory, like oil itself.

Pit Arnold writes that “each variant of crude oil has a unique composition and physical properties, making it a fascinating and complex substance,” and so are the contributions in this section: Reflections on Oil. Each contribution produces its own reflections, the journey through them is like a walk through the rooms of a building, each one with its own peculiarities and all together building the space of the palace.

- 1 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1992).
- 2 Pasolini, *Petrolio*.
- 3 *La via del petrolio* [The Path of Oil], directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, 1967.
- 4 Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: complicity with anonymous materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008).

- 5 Paul Hirst, *Space and Power: Politics, War and Architecture* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2005).
- 6 Pasolini, *Petrolio*.
- 7 Pasolini, *Petrolio*.