Sophie Jerram

Oil on Troubled Water

28 March – 3 April 2007

Culture and Sustainability: Oil and Water

By Amy Howden-Chapmen

Sophie Jerram's short film *Refined Life*, considers a range of narratives, from environmental to romantic, cinematic to documentary, that have been used to chronicle the history and culture of consumption of our times' two most vital resources, oil and water. The film appeared along with an installation titled Oil on Troubled Water, a title that, while overtly referring to the ability that oil has to calm turbulent waters, also asks whether we will add mistakes with water to those we have made with oil.

Jerram's film mixes sampled scenes from iconic North American dramas, for example the film *Giant* and the television series *Dallas*, with video footage that she has shot herself. Epic dramas like *Giant* chronicle the glamour and excess of the oil industry as it began to overtake the cattle industry in the USA. Jerram has included scenes such as those that depict the raw might of oil, in its unrefined state, gushing out of the ground and raining down on the bronzed James Dean, in effect coating him in wealth. Although *Dallas* chronicles a latter period in the oil industry – think fictionalised Bush family – what the two narratives share is how they depict the effect of wealth accumulated from oil, on romantic, family and community relationships. There is an ominous glamour in some of these sample images: disenchanted women with overblown shoulder pads and chiseled features are overlooked by their oil-baron husbands as they pat their secretaries on the ass.

The footage shot by Jerram shows streets in Los Angeles and Wellington, as well as rustling grass in a deserted patch of New Zealand landscape. In contrast to the tales of glamour, grandeur and demise of the Hollywood narratives, Jerram's own scenes are of everyday acts in mostly unremarkable settings. We see a string of people getting off a bus in LA, intercut with a passing plastic bag twirling between the traffic in Newtown, Wellington, finally coming to settle on the pavement outside McDonald's. We see the reality of these urban environments and their intersecting cultures of consumption. Jerram jogs our awareness that we are considering not only images but also the fate of resources. We consider the bag both as an article produced from petroleum, and one that has become a piece of waste, something that should be caught and recycled, or more importantly, something that should never have been produced at all.

Jerram's own footage is distinguished from that which she has sampled, both in terms of technical quality (hand-held vs. big budget sweeps from the sky), but also in the way she subtitles the dialogue from *Giant*. In a conversation between characters played by Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean, both speak with strong American accents, and although this conversation is mostly audible, subtitles allow us to pay extra attention to the body language and setting. The subtitles also draw our attention to the fact the language and culture that is being shown is a foreign one, despite the way in which American cultural and historical myths often seem indistinguishable from our own. Through the dominance of America in the sphere of entertainment, the American accent has almost become naturalised, which begs the question of what other cultural values we have absorbed.

The excess of luxury and over-the-top glamour seen in *Giant* and *Dallas* at first seems to have few parallels with New Zealand culture. Both films feature luxury that derives from the wealth of natural resources on a scale not seen here.. In present-day New Zealand (despite the odd oil well) the most conspicuous wealth seems to be associated with real estate speculation – that is, the height of luxury in our time often derives from the exploitation of land in some form. During colonisation, vast masses of timber were extracted from the land – logged or burnt off – converting the land into farming territory. In New Zealand today, land is arguably most valuable, most profitable, when it can be packaged and sold as 'pristine' and isolated. New Zealand's unique resource – unsullied, scenic land – fulfills the desires of New Zealanders and the likes of Shania Twain to inhabit such surroundings, while simultaneously allowing industries such as tourism, dairying and even bottled water to prosper. Of course, we have to overlook the contradictions between these trends, such as the impact of pollution from dairying on the quality of New Zealand's waterways.

Jerram's hand-held shots of a golden grassy plain stretching into the distance are reminiscent of another packaged resource being depicted in a highly cinematic way: that of a recent Meridian Energy television ad campaign. As a marker of current times, the resource that is being advertised is not brutishly black oil, but rather clean and invisible – wind. The gushing has been replaced with the floating. In the Meridian advertisement, the camera waltzes through the landscape, following a dandelion (as innocent, round and wholesome as James Dean's oil pumps are erect) over various contours of the New Zealand landscape, across mountain ranges and overflowing brooks. Wind keeps us pristine. Energy resources of today, such as

wind power, are still being packaged in cinematic ways like oil was throughout last century by Hollywood, and they are designed to conjure up similar images of happy frivolity in emotive landscapes.

Jerram's film was projected onto the back wall of Enjoy Public Art Gallery, the windows of which had been blacked out, so that the only other light source in the gallery was a small fridge that sat off to the right of the screen. The fridge was filled with suspect looking bottled water: grimy, stained versions of what we expect to be crystal clear. The romantic tinge of the soundtrack added an element of descending gloom, and when the audio dissipated between loops, the banal hum of the fridge could be heard.

Jerram's film is concerned with the power relations that underlie resource use. While the domain of art is to provoke thought and changes in the production and consumption of culture, environmental activism aims to more directly bring about changes in the sphere of so-called real or concrete materials and resources. While the film is centred on historical narratives about resources, the presence of the fridge filled with bottled water draws us into the present. Bottled water is a concrete object symbolic of how, in our everyday lives, we blithely overlook the way we are using finite materials.

The market for bottled water is emblematic of how desires are manipulated to create a consumer market for the most basic resources. Plastic bottled water, similar to those seen in Jerram's installation, are often branded as being natural, bottled at source, allowing us consumers to feel more connection to a spring

thousands of kilometres away than we do to the kitchen tap. Concerns about the distance that the water has travelled are eclipsed by the vista of the sun setting behind mountain peaks on the label.

We think of water as something we will always have, in the same way that the characters in *Giant* and *Dallas* rely on oil flowing out of the ground in perpetuity. The parallel that Jerram draws between these two resources asks us if the manner in which we are consuming water is any better than the way in which we have consumed oil, a commodity whose production in the USA peaked in the 1970s. Is water cleaner than oil? By showing cinematic samples of dated views of the USA, alongside newly shot scenes of New Zealand, we are asked to consider if we are engaging in a similar type of over-consumption in our country.

The extravagant consumption of oil in *Giant* is obscene, but in the footage Jerram has taken of contemporary LA and Wellington streets, we are reminded that there is not a vast difference between the way the USA and New Zealand consume oil. Although the USA has a higher rate of oil consumption, and thereby CO_2 emissions, New Zealand is by no means entirely clean and green. We, too, drive SUVs, endure inadequate public transport, sit in traffic jams and perpetuate urban sprawl.

Bottled water and the recycling of water bottles is a hot area for debate around consumer versus corporate responsibility. Jon Mooallem recently asked should "those who sell a product, not to mention those who use it … be accountable for its mess?"[1] Jerram uses bottled water to symbolise the folly and waste with which we treat larger bodies of the same substance. The plastic bottle is impermanent, as are all desires. Once we have been hydrated, we have no use for the container. Desire is not steady, it comes, it can be quenched, or it may remain unfulfilled, in which case it will morph into despair. Desire is unsustainable.

Like peak oil, the consumption of water is an issue that is going to become more and more pressing. In 2007, Americans will drink more than nine billion gallons of bottled water, nearly all of it from polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic bottles. They throw away 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour.[2] Ironically the production of PET, through its contribution to global warming, compromises the purity and grandeur of the water's source – a secluded spring, a glacial brook – so often invoked by images on the bottle labels.

A desire is not a necessity, and bottled water, especially in sipper-tops, is becoming more part of a desirable lifestyle than a product for quenching thirst. Michelle Barry, a market researcher, notes, "Bottled water has become less about the physical act of hydration and more about being a companion to people … They like to walk around with it and hold it. Increasingly the typical consumer sips out of a bottle of water "to mark time".[3]

In her 1972 essay, *Holy Water*, Joan Didion begins by bemoaning the fact that she rarely meets other people who find discussing where their water comes from even half as interesting as she does. Just as Jerram tracks cinematically the resource of oil, the products into which it is converted and the environment and communities along the way, Didion tracks the politics, infrastructure and spheres of influence that underlie the management of water in Los Angeles. Didion ties this flowing mass into other aspects of culture and place:

> "Some of us who live in arid parts of the world think about water with a reverence others might find excessive. The water I will draw from my tap in Malibu is today crossing the Mojave Desert from the Colorado River, and I like to think about exactly where that water is. The water I drink tonight in Hollywood is by now well down the Los Angeles Aqueduct."[4]

Like other fashions, celebrities, and presidents that Didion critiques in her essays, by revealing the structures that support them, the water she examines is equally precarious. Water could cease flowing as easily as a star ceases to shine once the cameras have stopped flashing.

As Jerram's *Oil on Troubled Water* illustrates, it is not enough to set up an argument between the wise and wasteful uses of resources. One must mediate the idea and highlight the feelings present in the debate. Jerram is concerned with how romanticism is constructed around certain industries, the cultural capital that magnifies and justifies the raw capital. *Oil on Troubled Water* hints at the complexity of the way we see and use resources, how they tap into our desire for different lives by providing a sense of luxury or power or romance. By highlighting for us some of the narratives that package the resources we consume, Jerram invites us to begin producing culture that can promote more sustainable desires.

Oil on Troubled Water reveals the way in which the luxury of resource use is tied in with the other desires of life; the romance of the individual and the romance of a nation. Jerram considers the folly of hitting the road and not turning back, the way in which narratives and images present certain types of desired lives. By considering the time and place in which iconic cinematic images were produced, we can see the status quo they support. By contrasting these with her own contemporary footage we can ask whether anything has really changed. Has it become possible to imagine alternative cinematic narratives that would show how we might live? Or what alternative narratives we need to be producing in order to make a sustainable life seem desirable?

1 Jon Mooallem. (2007) "The Unintended Consequences of Hyperhydration" Container Recycling Institute http://www.container-recycling.org/mediafold/newsarticles/bottlebills/2007/5-27-UnintendedConsequences.htm
2 Clean Air Council: "Waste Facts and Figures", Clean Air Council, http://www.cleanair.org/Waste/wasteFacts.html
3 Jon Mooallem, ibid.
4 Joan Didion, "Holy Water" in *The White Album*. (USA: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 59.

Installation photos and video stills courtesy the artist.
Edited by Helena Nimmo and Paula Booker, proofread by Gabrielle Amodeo, designed by Alice Baxter