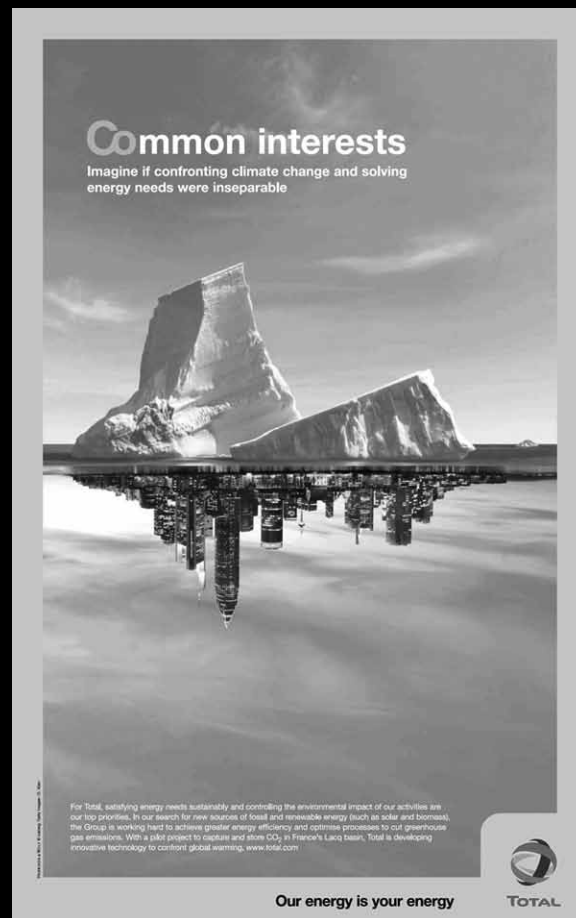


AG

E

N

CY



1

In 2008, the oil and gas company Total conducted a corporate advertising campaign to articulate its position on the future of energy vis-à-vis the rising specter of climate change. The recommendations of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change a few months earlier had put energy providers under growing pressure to reduce carbon emissions while simultaneously satisfying growing energy demands—an inherently challenging task.¹ Under the motto “Communauté d’Intérêts” [*Common Interests*], the campaign proposed to

WHERE ARE THE MISSING SPACES? THE GEOGRAPHY OF SOME UNCOMMON INTERESTS

RANIA GHOSN

reconcile the objectives of economic growth and environmental challenges. The slogan rhetorically articulated: “What if meeting energy demand and combating global warming are inseparable?”

Visually, the Campaign built on its 2007 “The Kid” publicity split-screen strategy, which depicted a day in the life of a child on one side and that of Total employees on the job on the other. Adopting a perfectly mirrored binary structure, *Common Interests* highlighted the spatial presence of energy by depicting sites of production on one side and those of consumption on the other. One frame, for example, features a polar prospection landform that reflects into an iconic all-lights Manhattan skyline.^(Fig. 1) The far-reaching powers of the transnational oil corporations are presented as something that traverses the gap between “here and there,” between a production hinterland and a consuming metropolis. The frame that divides the world into the old dichotomy of nature-culture also unites the separated landscapes through the perfect symmetry of mirrored silhouettes.

The erasure of geography is twice political. The first act of violence compresses geographies of energy systems into a thin line. The infrastructure that makes possible connections between the two landscapes, including a myriad of tankers, terminal ports, and policy documents, is abstracted so that externalities—environmental or social—are excluded from representation. For if geography does not exist or matter, then energy corporations can not be held accountable for the social and environmental transformations brought about by their operations. The *Common Interests* campaign violently conceals such irreconcilable contradictions behind a perfectly consensual appearance of how to organize the world and its resources, in which the “designed” misrepresentation of energy as a condition of spatial compression serves to externalize costs and build social consensus on energy “needs.”

EXTERNALITIES OF OIL

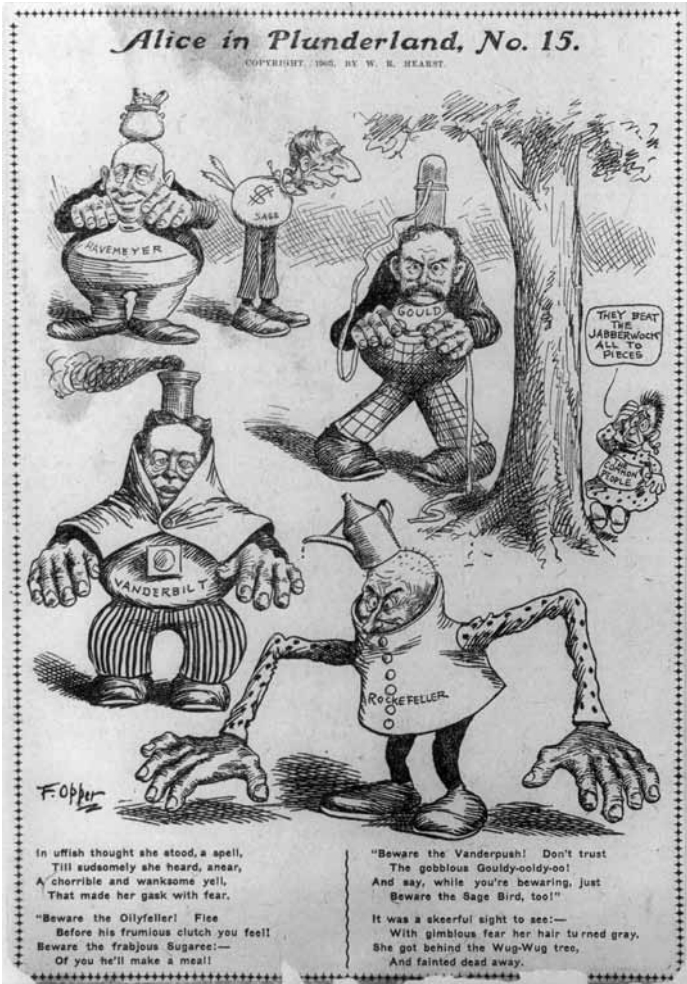
In his 1950 book *The Social Costs of Private Enterprise*, the economist William Kapp abstracted a general law for capitalism. “Capitalism must be regarded as an economy of unpaid costs, ‘unpaid’ in so far as a substantial portion of the actual costs of production remains unaccounted for in entrepreneurial outlays; instead they are shifted to, and ultimately borne by, third persons or by the community as a whole.”² Economists recognize that the allocation or use of the factors of production to benefit some individuals can often incur unintended costs to other individuals. This recognition is built into economics by the identification of two types of costs: private cost, which assesses costs incurred from the perspective of private individuals; and social cost, which assesses costs incurred from the perspective of the whole society. Economists commonly describe these discrepancies with the term “externalities,” which are the social side effects external to the largely private process of

allocating resources. The geographic distribution of such a cost produces an “externality field.” Discrepancies between private costs and social costs are recognized as producing ill effects—notably, pollution, the degradation of common-property resources like forests and oceans, and the neglect of the future consequences of present actions.

The externalization and socialization of costs has been virtually the explicit mandate of corporations, not least that of the vertically-integrated oil industry.^(Fig. 2) The production of energy in the distant and the underground, coupled with an analysis of urbanism at a city-scale, contributed to keeping infrastructures of urbanization out of sight and severing the continuity between crude geographies and the refined world. Indeed, while modern urbanization extends across the earth to fuel cities and heat homes, the geographies of high-energy civilization remain largely unaddressed. Such “designed” abstraction of space has allowed the industry to appropriate the revenues of energy conversion while divesting itself of associated environmental and social costs by sliding them to the periphery—to the offshore and the desert.

Throughout the twentieth century, the geologic distribution of reserves brought the industry to expand across the world in search of resources. To contain competition and maximize benefits, major energy companies adopted a vertically-integrated style of management control, which united the oil supply chain through a common owner. Oil companies thus deployed a set of spatial and legal technologies to integrate extraction, transport, and distribution services. In terms of power-geometries, multinational corporations owned not only extraction concessions and distribution services, but also transport channels. As crude is not worth much at the wellhead, control over distance, and hence over the transport conduit, was central to the monopoly of the oil corporation. Specialized technologies, such as tankers and crude pipelines, were developed to move larger volumes of oil over longer distances and in a more efficient manner.

It is worth noting that Rockefeller’s Standard Oil, which came to dominate the U.S. oil industry in the nineteenth century, began as a pipeline company and gradually gained control of the oilfields upstream and the refineries downstream. Standard Oil Company, which carried the nickname “The Octopus” in a reference to its powerful tentacles, was said to “hold the entire old industry of the country by the throat,” barring smaller owners and independent refiners from the market by controlling and owning most long-distance transport facilities, first the rail and then the crude oil trunk lines.³ A 1904 illustration shows a “Standard Oil” storage tank as an octopus with many tentacles wrapped around the steel, copper, and shipping industries, as well as a state house, the U.S. Capitol, and one tentacle reaching for the White House.^(Fig. 3) Standard’s large production allowed it to transport its oil at a cheaper price. The oil company would force the railroad, which carried both



2



3

Fig.1 (on page 109) Total's "Common Interests" ad campaign, 2008. Photograph by Thierry Cron. Image courtesy of Thierry Cron.
 Fig.2 Caricatures of Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Gould, Sage and Havemeyer in "Alice in Plunderland, No. 15," Frederick Opper, 1903. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.
 Fig.3 "Next!," Udo Keppler, 1904. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

the competitor's and Standard's crude, to transport Standard's oil for ten cents per barrel while charging the competitor thirty-five cents, with the extra twenty-five cents then paid to Standard. The mechanism by which Standard forced such rebate was a threat to build a pipeline parallel to the railroad. Progressively, Standard owned most of the transport facilities, especially the crude oil trunk lines, forcing independent oil producers and refiners to use its lines. Smaller independent refineries could thus either ship their oil in the Standard pipeline (if permitted) or use much more costly overland transportation.

ABSTRACTION OF TRANSPORT; THE STRIKE OF THREE WORLDVIEWS

Although the infrastructure of transport was key to oil monopolies, its significance, as well as the broader spatial structure of the oil system, was shifted out of sight. To say that geographies of oil were abstracted does not imply that spaces of oil circulation were dropped out of representation all together. Ironically, the strategic significance of oil has rendered its space of circulation a mantelpiece of a few modern discourses, and notably those of technology, globalization, and geopolitics. However, rather than highlighting the geographic attributes of the oil system, these three worldviews have collectively contributed to the abstraction of its material attributes and spatial dimensions.

First, the euphoric tone of energy technology is noteworthy for a nearly unbroken attitude of wonderment, extending from the advent of steam power through the spread of fossil fuels. Engineering archives highlight the celebratory tone in their images of construction and inauguration. Subsequently, the infrastructure disappears from representations of energy technology: its operational life, as well as its eventual obsolescence, is rarely present in public archives or imaginaries. The technical landscape is largely inert, to the degree that energy conversion processes may be congealed into physical artifacts such as power stations and electricity grids. Not very dissimilar to John Gast's 1872 "American Progress," technological infrastructures, such as telegraph lines, railroads, and steamships, collectively embody visions of progress.

In the post-World War II period, capital, technology, and progress were coupled into landscapes of development, which promised to extend the American dream of peace and abundance to all the people of the planet.⁴ Developmentalism praised oil as a mode of energy that could advance economy and democracy for producing and consuming nations alike. The equation of a nation's prosperity with the rate of energy use per capita in social indicators, such as the United Nations Development Indicators, contributed to the prodigious expansion of fossil fuel systems and their bestowment with positive images. The infrastructure of oil was represented as a developmental operation that changed the lives and economies of the lands it crossed,

through employment and the construction of service roads and company towns. By equating the "development of oil" with "social development," the discourse of the technological artifact aspired to construct "a community of interest," eclipsing contested political relations around oil and legitimizing a consensual order over its exploitation. (Fig. 4)

With respect to the globalization discourse, the growth of oil into the largest single item in international trade has brought it into the representational regime of the "space of flows." Seeking to capture the extraordinary fluidity of the global political economy of the last few decades, Manuel Castells coined the term, which rightly acknowledges the intensified flows of people, goods, money, information, images, and technology.⁵ However, some scholars have joined their observations of global flows with an end to "power over space," and to geography altogether. A good illustrative example is Thomas Friedman's best-selling book *The World is Flat*, in which he argues that the world is being tied into a single global marketplace where spatial barriers are being overcome.⁶ Such focus on unhindered steady circulation within global conduits eclipses distances between production and consumption regions, as well as frictions encountered in the movement of oil. It abstracts the large-technological system of oil transport and leaves unaddressed the process of making things flow. (Fig. 5)

The extensive literature on the geopolitics of energy provides insights into the operational logistics of oil in its potential to integrate or polarize regional geographies. In *The World is Not Enough* (1999), James Bond passionately engages such pipe-wars and pipe-dreams, as the 007 agent is sent to the Caspian Sea region to assist in the construction of an 800-mile pipeline from Azerbaijan to the Mediterranean. Once in the vicinity of the capital city Baku, Bond is shown a map revealing how the proposed pipeline would provide the West an opportunity to access oil from the region independently of the existing Russian pipelines. Such accounts of pipelines present telling accounts of moments of conflict, as well as (or maybe because of that) tap into a Saint-Simonian utopian integrative potential of infrastructure. As such, geopolitical accounts are concerned with the diplomatic planning for a "zone of operations" and the resolution of disruptions in moments of crisis. The geopolitical discourse overlooks the materialist and spatial attributes of the infrastructure, often abstracting it into a bold abstract line on a regional map.

THE GEOGRAPHIC

In a critique of the deterministic, narrowly political, and aspatial representations outlined above, I propose a geographic perspective on energy to foreground some of the system's materialist and territorial attributes. If the erasure of geography has served to conceal the ecological imperative of such systems, could the reassertion of the Geographic be an antidote to corporate externalities, all while



Fig.4 Photograph by T.F. Walters. Image Courtesy of Saudi Aramco World.

deconstructing the solidness of energy as an abstract social category? A geographic perspective on energy opens up and materializes the compressed space between the resource-hinterland and the metropolis, and by doing that, addresses the political significance of such missing spaces. Once no longer defined by erasure, the space of corporate imaginaries continuously unfolds into a complex re-representation of energy's spatial condition.

A conversation between Bruno Latour and Michel Serres evocatively captures such geographic disruption to our sense of distance, through the analogy of the crumpled surfaces of a handkerchief once folded and stuffed into our pocket.⁷ The purpose of the analogy, presumably, is to convey the fact that in a topological world, distance is not a good indicator of either separation or proximity; distance between two points becomes less significant than the landscapes that hold them together. In such mediated exchanges, landscapes are not flattened by what circulates across them, but are re-composed by the relationships involved across scales.

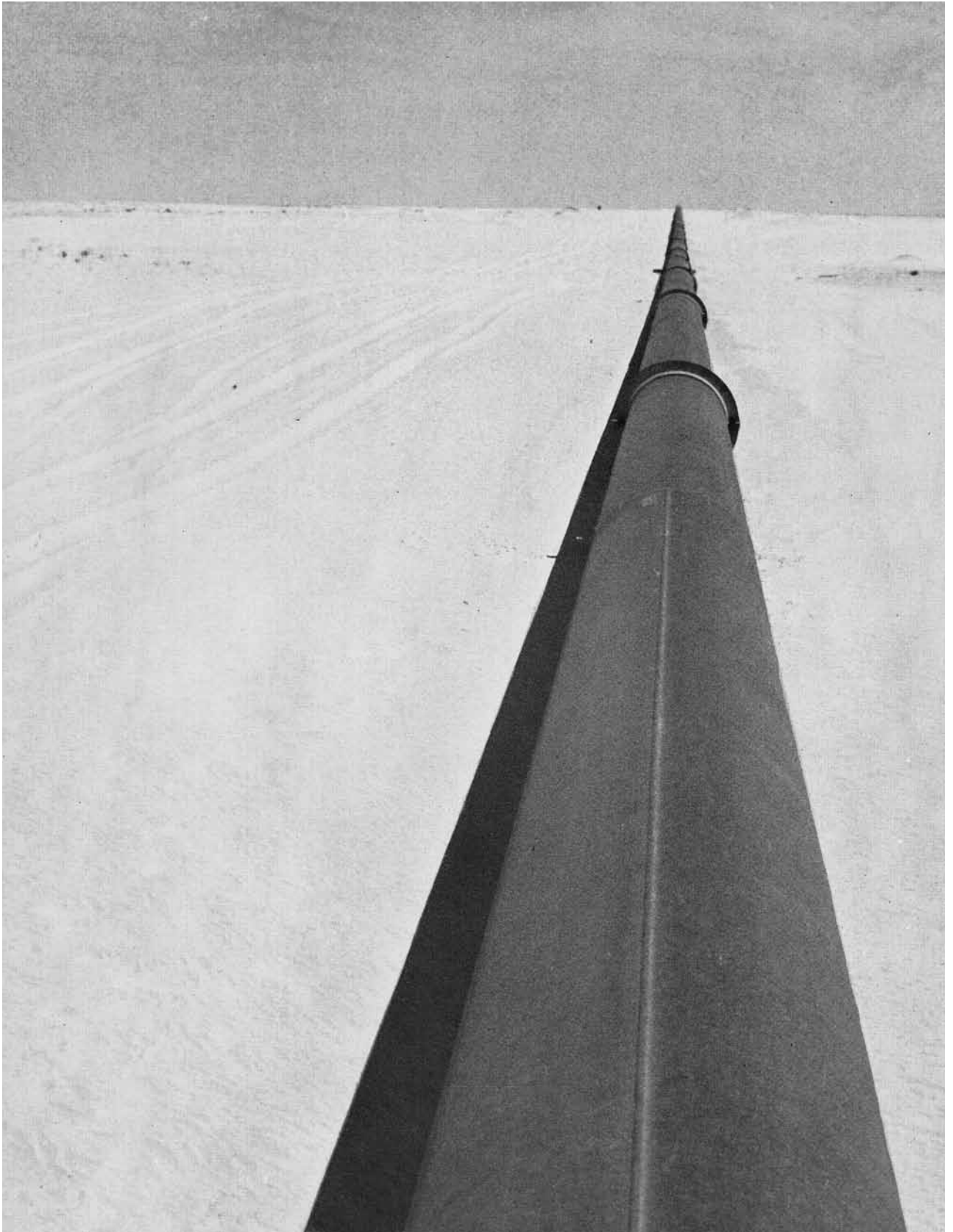
Similarly, the geographic foregrounds the systemic attributes of energy. To circumvent the limits of Kantian idealist geometric abstraction of matter, Latour endorses a “thick things” descriptive style, or an “assembly of entities,” which allows to “*extend* the number of parts necessary for the gathering of the thing and then *multiply* the number of assembling principles that gather them together in a functioning whole.” For example, power generation and consumption could be considered as a vast network of technological devices, information, politics, biogeochemical processes, people and so on. Such worldview seeks to incorporate organizational, economic, political, and material factors into a technological system. In the case of fossil fuels, and as Timothy Mitchell suggests, “closely following the oil” means “tracing the connections that were made between pipelines and pumping stations, refineries and shipping routes, road systems and automobile cultures, dollar flows and economic knowledge, weapons experts and militarism”—all of which, as Mitchell says, do not respect the boundaries between the material and the ideal, the political and the cultural, the natural and the social.⁹ Geographically channelled and legally embedded, oil rests on a circulatory process that fixates itself in space and, in the process, organizes territories into particular political-economic order. From this perspective, the flow of oil does not operate in a *tabula rasa*, but rather is achieved through territorialities. It displaces previous modes of circulation to construct its own geographies of access and control. Redrawing flows, the oil order harnesses social processes in a new geography of places and relations. The deployment of its infrastructure materializes a territory through which different actors subsequently negotiate their stakes and interests.

Beyond a methodology, the Geographic is a political position against the isolationism of production-nature and

consumption-culture into two distinct spheres. It is a critique of an urbanism focused on the metropolis and of an ecologism concerned with nature. To address half the frame, Manhattan or the arctic glaciers, leaves unaddressed the politics of the division—and hence perpetuates the isolationism of the urban-ecological question. Ecologism, as Latour elaborates in the conclusion of *The Politics of Nature*, cannot be simply the introduction of nature into politics, since “nature is not a particular sphere of reality but the result of such a political division.”¹⁰ The Geographic moves away from a narrowly defined agency of architecture that seeks to re-envision each frame separately while respecting the totality by substituting, for example, a nature of fossil fuels with one of solar or wind power. The Geographic offers a way of thinking about the dividing line itself as an ethical site. It aspires to reconfigure the aesthetic assumptions and political relations upon which the totality of high-energy urbanism rests.

Finally, the Geographic is a powerful tool to deconstruct the solidness of some social concepts—such as Energy. Over the last century, the erasure of Geography as well as the reinforcement of Energy as a “community of interests,” has channeled a common-sense imperative, which allowed corporations to expand their total capacity without questioning associated needs and costs. The power to maintain the existing distribution of externalities rests on the power to depoliticize or defer consideration of an issue—making it a non-issue. If campaigns such as *Common Interests* aspire to reassert a consensual common position on Energy, the Geographic, by unfolding the “thick space” of the system, inquires into how our social relations are organized and reproduced. In his seminal essay “The Social Construction of Energy,” Ivan Illich articulates that Energy belongs to a class of words that share the characteristics of being strong in connotation and weak in denotation. Originating in nineteenth-century physics, the concept of Energy has been appropriated by economics and distinguished from labor as the ability “to make nature do work.” Energy is nature's capital, a nature that has been interpreted as “a domain governed by the assumption of scarcity.”¹¹ Energy thus needs space to produce its economic value; and to that end, its infrastructural system organizes political relations at different scales. To underscore the geographic of energy is to thus reassert the centrality of space in the production of value in energy regimes, rather than merely attach a “geographical” attribute to an inherently thermodynamic concept.

A Geographic sensibility prompts us to think further about the design of such things as scale and territory, in a less abstract and more material manner. But above all, the *geographien*, literally the writing of the surface of the earth, elicits us to intervene within power and its representations, in ways that make a difference. A Geographic sensibility prompts us to think further about the design of such things as scale and territory, networks and connection, in a less abstract manner, but above all about power and its



5

Fig.5 Photograph from "Bechtel in Arab Lands," Richard Finnie, 1958. Image courtesy of Bechtel.

representations, in ways that make a difference. The challenge of a Geographic ethics is thus not simply to represent these systems, but to intervene in them so as to render visible the inequality between a distribution of spaces and time and a distribution of capacities and power.¹² It is an aspiration to shift Energy from the consensus of “matters of fact” towards the aesthetics of “matters of concern,” a shift that reclaims matter and materiality and renders them into objects of design through and through.¹³

- 1 I would like to thank Marrikka Trotter for her feedback and advice on an earlier version of this essay. IPCC 2007.
- 2 K. William Kapp, *The Social Costs of Private Enterprise* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 231.
- 3 Leslie Cookenboo, *Crude Oil Pipe Lines and Competition in the Oil Industry* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1955), 1.
- 4 Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 4.
- 5 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. I. (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 412.
- 6 Tomas Friedman, *The World is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).
- 7 *Thinking Space*
- 8 Bruno Latour, “Can we get our materialism back, please?” *Isis* (2007): 138-142, 140.
- 9 Timothy Mitchell, “Carbon Democracy,” *Economy and Society* 38.3 (2009): 399-432, 422.
- 10 Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 231-232.
- 11 Ivan Illich, “The Social Construction of Energy,” in *New Geographies #2: Landscapes of Energy*, Rania Ghosn ed. (Cambridge: Harvard GSD, 2010), 11—19; 13.
- 12 Jacques Ranciere, “The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics,” in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 109—132.
- 13 Bruno Latour, A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk), Keynote lecture for the Networks of Design meeting of the Design History Society Falmouth, Cornwall, 3rd September 2008, p.2.