

Noah Hutton, *Deep Time*, New York: Cinema Guild, 2015.

<http://www.deeptimefilm.com>

Noah Hutton's *Deep Time* is an acutely unsettling film. Hutton takes us back to Stanley, an emblematic North Dakota oil boomtown that he first visited for his 2009 film *Crude Independence*, updating local representations of community and landscape change in the wake of the "shale revolution". He takes us to the neighbouring Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, where disputes about resource rents, band politics, and overly cozy business relationships swirl around the "sovereignty by the barrel-drop by drop" approach of leadership. We meet geologists unearthing global climate histories and environmental scientists modelling global climate futures. We meet state politicians mindlessly plumbing nostrums about oil "entrepreneurship" and the "opportunities" that it creates, and others warning of the effects of a Koch Brothers-fueled dismantling of political "compromise" around resource development. We meet Stanley locals carping about the pace of change and the price of housing, crowing about how dust from oil field trucks improves crop yields, worrying about increasing crime, and trying to retain reliable labour to drive and maintain the local school bus fleet. We meet itinerant roughnecks who drunkenly assert their right to "fight, fuck, and trip pipe", and others who appeal to the virtue having "two families", at home and on the rig, with material, life-and-death responsibilities to both. As these tangential examples show, Hutton's film exhibits the profound ambivalence of oil economies as they are traced over time: the ephemeral benefits of a short-term economic boom against the longer-term repercussions of social dislocation, intensifying economic inequality, public health concerns, and deleterious environmental effects.

These ambiguities are fundamental to the construction of the *Deep Time* narrative, playing up the radical disassociation required to live comfortably inside a hyperactive

hydrocarbon economy. Yet the overwhelming sense of disquiet comes to the fore through Hutton's exploration of the unmoored relationship between time and story. This film is both artistically and analytically important because it challenges us to reconcile the often-competing interests of narrative and time. More properly Hutton's oil story confronts the role of both the past and the future in shaping the present. In Hutton's telling, the story of Stanley, of its oil economies and resources cultures, cannot be understood without tracking forward and back in time. In this way, Stanley is both historicized within broader (geological, economic, extractive, etc) contexts and also productive of different possible futures, both aspirational and apocalyptic. Energy economies in Stanley are at once intimately local and profoundly global. Many of the compelling contradictions can be traced to Hutton's reading of Timothy Morton's (2013) *Hyperobjects*—the articulation of concepts, things, events or encounters that are too big to comprehend within the traditional metrics of analysis. Within this frame, mammoth femur fossils, the Enchanted Highway sculptures of massive birds and grasshoppers welded from discarded oilfield materials, and a Halliburton billboard (“in this job, every challenge is an opportunity to go further, go faster”) can exist as part of the same narrative chronology. Oil in Stanley is a hyperobject—too big, too historical, too socially divisive for people to fully understand.

Geographers have begun to focus attention on similar questions of narrative disarticulation from a different optic. Emilie Cameron (2009, 2015) and others have shown us how stories shape understandings of the past, how their telling can manipulate conflict, how power can manifest both in the subtleties of emphasis and the inequalities of social relations. Stanley residents are dealing with many of the same questions. John Warburg, considering a kind a history of the North Dakota oil present, reveals in footage originally shot in 2008 that:

I don't know how I'd answer the question, do I like it better than before? Cause the before is still here, and the after we don't know what that is. I still feel for the most part that I'm living and working in the before.

Yet Hutton cannot find Warburg in the Stanley area when he returns in 2014, and none of his neighbours know where he is. Hutton eventually finds him in a new log house in Bottineau County, near the Canadian border, where he moved because there were “parts of that town that I wouldn't recognize”. After the oil boom, the before and the after came to mean something different for John Warburg. Rents from drilling on his grandfather's “old farmstead” meant he could retire from the farm and then leave the patch. For Warburg, the before that was still there in 2008 was gone by 2014.

Deep Time employs many different kinds of narratives of the past. We face the punitive legacies of colonial relations as we follow Marty Youngbear in his advocacy of responsible resource development for his Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation. We hear echoes of a neocolonial agenda as Hutton traces interactions between MHA Nation band personnel and major industrial players on the oil patch. We hear Gary Dunn, the welder of the Enchanted Highway sculptures, claim extraction and the oil economy as a geological birthright: “This was just a swampland of fig trees and dinosaurs and underneath there was oil...you knew what was going to be underneath there if you knew the history of the state.” We hear local bar owner Chase Lindberg claim that he'll raise his family in Stanley “probably forever, right now”. And, as the politics of the Anthropocene come into view, we are faced with the managerialism of the past, as Marlene Gunderson explains the dramatic increase in requests for local geological information and mineral ownership from the local courthouse as she complains about “the greed of some people” disturbing the quaint Americana of the Stanley of old.

Hutton's film is indebted to varying articulations of history, but there's a disturbing contemporary adjunct to the historical stories told in *Deep Time* befitting Trump's America. A particularly striking scene in the film juxtaposes an attempt by an energy firm to build a "man-camp" for workers on Fort Berthold Reservation land with the colonial aftershocks of the Garrison Dam, built in the 1950s by the US Army Corps of Engineers, transforming a long section of the Missouri River into Lake Sakakawea. The reservoir required the flooding of several Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara towns and adjacent agricultural land. The story is captured in harrowing detail in Marc Riesner's (1986) *Cadillac Desert*, but the effects of the dam are front and centre in Marty Youngbear's steadfast opposition to the incursion of extractive economies on tribal lands. The story of the Garrison Dam parallels another, more recent, dark chapter in America's long and tangled history of colonial and resource exploitation. Fort Berthold is a few hours north of the territory of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, where the Water Protectors and a global network of allies defeated an attempt by the US Army Corps of Engineers and Energy Transfer Partners to build the Dakota Access Pipeline on land close to spiritually and ecologically important locations in late 2016. Yet at the time of writing, the US Army Corps of Engineers had granted an easement, allowing construction to continue and calling an end to the formal process of environmental impact assessment. This followed Trump's request to expedite the process. As Hutton's *Deep Time* attests, energy economies have long histories and produce ambivalent legacies; this lesson is invaluable to residents of Stanley, to the Standing Rock Sioux, and to those seeking to counter unfettered extraction all over the world.

References

- Cameron E (2009) Summer stories: (Re)ordering the Canadian Arctic. *Antipode* 41(1):216-219
- Cameron E (2015) *Far Off Metal River: Inuit Lands, Settler Stories, and the Making of the Contemporary Arctic*. Vancouver: UBC Press
- Morton T (2013) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Riesner M (1986) *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. New York: Penguin

Jonathan Peyton
Department of Environment and Geography
University of Manitoba
jonathan.peyton@umanitoba.ca

February 2017