

PETROCINEMA



SPONSORED FILM AND THE OIL INDUSTRY

EDITED BY

MARINA DAHLQUIST & PATRICK VONDERAU

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Introduction

Marina Dahlquist and Patrick Vonderau

It is doubtful whether any single industrial development has brought so many sweeping changes to the world as has petroleum. No industry has wrought a revolution in manners, customs, mode of living, relation of the individual to society in so short a period as has the petroleum industry, along with its allied and dependent industries.¹

AMERICAN PETROLEUM INSTITUTE, 1930

In his *Book of Lantern: Being a Practical Guide to the Working of the Optical (or Magical Lantern)* (1888), Thomas Cradock Hepworth credits the “introduction as illuminants of the hydrocarbons, under the name of petroleum,” in having had a significant share in a by-then massively spreading use of this media technology, “for now a few pounds will purchase a better instrument than was procurable at any price twenty years ago.”² While the magic lantern itself has been known since at least 1659, it is only after 1820 that this apparatus for the projection of glass slides turned into the world’s first domestic media machine. Several innovations helped to make this possible, such as the incorporation of photography into otherwise painted series of slides, visual effects such as dissolves, and, most importantly, new and powerful illuminants such as those based on oil.³ Although petroleum lamps soon came to be replaced by electric illumination as still images began moving and screens began to grow, the use of oil only kept increasing in all kinds of technical media. In 1889, Eastman Kodak introduced a flexible, transparent roll film made from a substance called celluloid, a petroleum by-product. A few years later, film projections started to offer new experiences everywhere, in the “form of captured, organized, and released light-heat-energy-movements.”⁴ All media, in the sense of technical means of mass communication, rely on matter and

energy, but cinematic projections made their material base—the flickering images of easily burned film strip—certainly felt in specific ways. Oil became a frequent topic among motion picture engineers, as “oil on film,” dirt, torn sprocket holes, and other damage done to reels required technical fixing;⁵ more importantly, oil also quickly turned into a topic of films themselves, such as the *The Story of Petroleum* (1926), for instance, coproduced by the US Bureau of Mines in cooperation with the American Petroleum Institute to showcase “the latest engineering and technical developments of the petroleum industry.”⁶ Screened in cinemas as much as in schools and other nontheatrical venues, various forms and formats of film subsequently came to shape people’s values, beliefs, and feelings, practices, and habits over the course of the twentieth century in unprecedented ways.⁷ It thus certainly owes a lot to cinema when, as the American Petroleum Institute noted in 1930 as cited before, “the petroleum industry, along with its allied and dependent industries,” had “wrought a revolution in manners, customs, mode of living, relation of the individual to society in so short a period” like no other.

This book studies the historical relation between cinema and petroculture in order to underline the role of moving images in the way an energy regime was established in the twentieth century. “Cinema” here is approached as an “open system,”⁸ one whose institutional borders were both clearly defined and often contested. This includes long features that were screened theatrically alongside nontheatrical film circulating within companies, schools, or associations and later on television. Cinema contributed to the century’s dominant energy regime not so much in a direct, political, or propagandistic sense, but through forms of sponsorship and “usefulness”: by informing, educating, and entertaining. While film occasionally was used by specific social institutions to officially propagate oil as a resource or condition of modern life, it more often served to fuel the socially transformative potential of various micropolitical practices. Cinema, in other words, became a realm of activities meant to have public effect, and to shape the tenor of collective life, while not fitting into the traditional paradigms of political action, with bodily affect, social tempers, political moods, or cultural sensibilities as key targets.⁹ In focusing on this form of cinema as a medium for energizing micropolitical practices geared toward the adoption of petroculture, the volume seeks to demonstrate that an understanding of historical precedence, and of media history in particular, is important for managing today’s problem of energy and political agency.

Since the earliest days of cinema, many international companies have used film and later video systematically to educate their staff, explain and organize work processes, promote goodwill, market products, and record their own history. Since 1910, Standard Oil followed by Shell, BP, and Mobil have

been producing and circulating moving images for various purposes including research and training, safety, process observation, or promotion. General Electric, Krupp, Imperial Chemical Industries, and countless others made thousands of films, printed film catalogues and, set up film libraries all over the world where their films could be rented for free. Though it is estimated that 300,000 industrial and institutional films have been made in the United States alone—far more than any other type of motion picture—this film type is still little known. Such industrial and sponsored films include not only educationals such as *The Story of Petroleum* but also commercials and documentaries that formed part of a larger cultural project to transform the image of oil exploitation, creating media interfaces that would allow corporations to coordinate their goals with broader cultural and societal concerns. Beyond these films produced by oil extraction companies themselves, a host of other films has shown oil as both a source of energy and as resulting in a broad variety of products and services, including plastic or car travel. Such films are to be found everywhere, transgressing boundaries of genres, periods, and nations, including features, news items, or driving instruction films. How did film and later video, in their respective social and cultural contexts, enact forms of micropolitics that worked toward the goal of naturalizing the consumption of oil as energy and product, and thus to commodify oil? This is the central question at the heart of this volume.

In bringing up this and related questions, this volume also interfaces with the work of scholars who have begun to trace the history of how the “hydrocarbon imagination” has been central to the development of film as a medium, such as Nadia Bozak in her book *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* from 2013.¹⁰ In the humanities and social sciences, “petroculture” is a critical term often used to emphasize the ways industrial and postindustrial societies are oil societies through and through. They are shaped by oil in physical and material ways, from the automobiles and highways we use to the plastics that permeate our food supply and built environments. Oil literally propelled humanity into a different era of mobility and consumption. Oil companies, spearheaded by Standard Oil as one of the world’s first and largest multinational corporations, created new infrastructures around the globe, the conditions for mobility and travel, modern urban living standards, and a host of new products including plastic, fabrics, pharmaceuticals, and the film strip. Even for countries that were not oil producing themselves, petroleum became a key resource of Western life and the basis for “carbon democracies” based on “fossil capital.”¹¹ Subsequent oil-based riches, poverty, and industrial divisions of labor were thematized widely in media from the novel to the silver screen; up until the late 1970s, visual culture was almost constantly employed in campaigns to promote social and technical change. Moving

pictures—by many considered modernity's *Leitmedium*—and cinema culture were central to envisioning and shaping this future.

As this future has now passed, a post-petroleum view on the interlinkage of oil and media in the making of modernity appears overdue. Since the 1970s, eco-criticism has proliferated in the humanities, but petroleum extraction has not been studied in relation to global media culture. In filling this gap, our book examines modern media and petroleum extraction and consumption by breaking down its general research interest into questions such as: How have oil and moving images been linked in industrial, material, aesthetic, and social terms? How did the oil industry use moving images to organize petroleum extraction and to promote modernization? What was the historical role of film in informing, educating, or persuading mass audiences about this key energy resource, and how does these objectives affect our present future's ideas of sustainability and energy?

Ideas and ideals of progress, autonomy, or mobility have been centrally linked to the historical conditions of a fossil fuel society. These values are quite literally “fueled by fossil fuels, as are so many of the other values and aspirations that we have come to associate with the freedoms and capacities of modern life.”¹² Our modern imaginaries have been shaped by oil as both a form of energy and a product since the early twentieth century. In many ways, media power relates directly to both “biopower” (i.e., the management of life and population) and “energopower” (the harnessing of fuel), as the use of energy always is entwined with representations and narratives about modernity and the environment.¹³ No medium illustrates this better than cinema, given its dependence on fossil fuels and their photochemical derivatives. Accordingly, film and cultural historians including Mona Damluji, Rudmer Canjels, and Patrick Russell have in the past provided specialized accounts of how film has been used to promote petroleum in Iraq, the Netherlands, or the UK.¹⁴ This collection further broadens the scope by bringing these scholars in a dialogue with others in order to explore the relation of cinema to the history of petroleum extraction through the lens of industrial and sponsored film.

This volume connects existing research concerning sponsored, industrial, and educational film to issues of energy and ecology. Over the past twenty years, a flurry of international research activities has been initiated to study industrial, sponsored, and other nontheatrical films, including the biennial Orphans Film Symposium, since 1999; several special issues of the journal *Film History*; the edited volumes *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, *Useful Cinema*, *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, *Films That Sell: Moving Pictures and Advertising*, and *The Institutionalization of Educational Cinema: North America and Europe in the 1910s and 1920s*;¹⁵ filmographies and field guides;¹⁶ and the establishing

of specialized archives such as the Prelinger Archives in San Francisco. This volume is situated within this vibrant field of research on film and media. In doing so, it suggests petroleum extraction as a new analytical lens to revisit issues related to “useful cinema’s” usefulness, to bring up the term Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson apply in their anthology *Useful Cinema*,¹⁷ and invites to shed new light on documentary film history.

A.R.T., or a Heuristics for Analysis

In research on industrial and sponsored film, materials have often been analyzed following three sets of parameters. A first tendency has been to look out for generic patterns: the building blocks, structures, and, importantly, uses made of any given film, or what Thomas Elsaesser called the “three As,” that is, questions about the *Auftraggeber* (who commissioned the film), *Anlass* (what was the occasion for which it was made), and *Adressat* (to what use was it put or to whom was it addressed), rather than the auteur.¹⁸ Following the “three A,” in the sense of a largely text-based approach to sponsored film, archivists and scholars have compiled filmographies and charted the more familiar genres of oil industrial film production.¹⁹ These include widely circulating prestige documentaries, travelogues, advertising, sales promotion, and public service films alongside safety training and other instructional materials distributed only within the oil industry itself. Yet while industrial and sponsored filmmaking can be partly read within the established tradition of documentary history, not everything can be explained by pointing to genre conventions.

Certain conventions may exist that make a film recognizable as an industrial or sponsored film, but they are pliable to whatever organizational purpose the filmmaker has to meet, some scholars have argued.²⁰ From this point of view, industrial film is a strategically weak and parasitic form in the sense that it can assume the appearance of other, more stable genres and formats and pass as a scientific film, an educational film, or a documentary for specific strategic reasons. Consequently, a second tendency has been to complement the “three As” with the “three Rs,” or areas of purpose, that media can serve in industrial organizations: record (institutional memory), rhetoric (governance), and rationalization (optimizing process).²¹ Examples from the oil industry include company presentations at trade fairs that are records of a major event in the life of a corporation; splashy image films that are part of a rhetoric aiming to induce cooperation with the outside world; or instructional films that introduce workers to the safety requirements of oil drilling.

Behind this approach was not so much an intent to classify, but rather to raise a simple question: Why do industrial organizations produce, and store, so many media in the first place? Following the trail of the “three Rs,” a trail initially inspired by the writings of Lisa Cartwright on medicine’s visual culture, by organizational scholar JoAnn Yates, and especially James Beniger’s classic study, *The Control Revolution*,²² this second research tendency has come to focus on the pragmatics of film. It sees sponsored film as a *cultural* text that only can be read through the organization that produces it. It also proceeds vice versa, studying the ways film and other media technologies produce such organizations in the first place, by creating safe work situations or by managing workflows under water, for instance.

A third and final tendency in industrial film scholarship has been to go beyond a narrow focus on social and corporate organization by studying sponsored media as part of larger cultural series. Industrial and sponsored films are not only defined by their individual use; their usefulness is contingent to historical change and indicative of a broader relationship between culture and power. Emphasizing an institutional perspective, scholars thus have put a spotlight on the ways media coordinate their goals and interests with broader social and cultural concerns. Accordingly, they ask us to start our exploration by mapping the sites where such media are shown, to focus on their recurring topoi, and to understand them as ever-changing objects, rather than finite artifacts—subject to constant re-versioning and reinterpretation, as they continue circulating in society. Where and how, for instance, have such materials been programmed and exhibited? What stereotype formulas may we find in industrial and sponsored films, and how do they help compare or contrast the specifics of industrial filmmaking? Finally, how are ephemeral materials endowed with new meaning as they are becoming part of a canon of nontheatrical materials that is curated online, or made available on DVD?²³ This volume brings these three strands of investigation together, working out a selection of materials that highlights the dominant forms and formats of petroculture’s cinema.

Complementing the “three As” and “three Rs” of the earlier mentioned tendencies, we are thus also asked to pay attention to the topologies, topoi, and the transience of sponsored media, or what we may call the “three Ts,” if only to playfully suggest, by way of this acronym, a new meaning be attributed to the notion of A.R.T. Expanding the traditional canon of films and methods, contributions to this volume have these various “As,” “Rs,” and “Ts” come together in their explorations of the relation between moving images and petroleum extraction. This collection of essays consists of original chapters, eight of which are revised versions of papers presented at the symposium “Drilling through the Screen: Modern Imaginaries and the Oil Industry,”

organized in 2015 by the editors at Stockholm University, while an additional two have been commissioned for this book. Contributing to a burgeoning field of film scholarship, the chapters bear on the intersecting cultural histories of oil extraction and media history by looking closely at moving image imaginaries of the oil industry, from the earliest origins or “spills” in the twentieth century to today’s postindustrial “petro-melancholia.”²⁴

About the Chapters

Mona Damluji’s opening chapter outlines the challenges of navigating oil archives. Sponsored films have not been preserved or been the epicenter for research in film and cinema studies to the same extent as fiction films. Prints have often been destroyed when they were no longer useful and rarely been prioritized for restoration. The lack of documents regarding production and exhibition further complicates archival work. As Damluji points out, ours is a critical moment both in the history of oil and in the history of oil media. While oil companies now are recognized as “full-fledged historical actors” and as counterpart to what Andrew Barry terms the oil archives,²⁵ and although their websites may facilitate new forms of access to archives, these companies still pose a challenge to scholars when it comes to what is made accessible.

Oil rhetorics is by no means a new phenomenon. The oil industry was from the early days a highly political industry, as evidenced by its corporate communications. Jeremy Groskopf, in his chapter, takes up the case of *The World Struggle for Oil* (1923), a controversial, feature-length educational coproduced by the Sinclair Consolidated Oil Corporation and the Bureau of Mines. Groskopf analyzes this film as an example of the slippage, in corporate educational films, between education and indoctrination, testifying to the growing recognition of the political value in corporate rhetorics in early educational pictures.

Patrick Russell and Steven Foxon, engaging in a playfully written fictive dialogue between Royal Dutch Shell and British Petroleum, imagine how these two companies would have responded to each other in regard to their corporate film production. Based on archival work and practitioner interviews, Russell and Foxon explore and compare these companies’ cinematic narratives and their respective activities after the Second World War.

In her contribution to this volume, Susan Ohmer analyzes the collaboration between Walt Disney Studio and Standard Oil of California in a 1939 national marketing campaign to promote travel to the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. In newspapers, comic books, promotional films, and in

Standard Oil's own corporate publications, well-known Disney characters such as Mickey, Donald, Goofy, Snow White, and the Seven Dwarfs were used to draw attention to the exhibition as well as the drive to get there. Marina Dahlquist, in turn, brings up another 1930s case that illustrates the then new possibilities of petroleum-driven progress: Mobil's advertisements for lubrication and gas in the company's so-called Mobiloil Movies. Planned as elaborate tie-ins, movie-like storyboards were regularly published in magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Collier's*, intertwining modern automobile culture with Mobil products, new film releases, and glamorous Hollywood stars.

Moving images were also usually part of multiple-media efforts that included print advertisements, pamphlets, slidefilms, exhibits, and other materials. Gregory A. Waller's chapter examines the production and distribution of motion pictures as part of the extensive public relations efforts undertaken by the Oil Industry Information Committee (OIIC), a branch of the American Petroleum Institute (API) founded in 1948, as part of the organization's efforts to improve the public standing of the industry. The wide-ranging activities of the OIIC provide an illuminating point from which to study the broader field of the period's discourse about the petroleum industry, the mobilization of film and other media, and also the increasing prominence of public relations cinema in postwar America. The significance of industrial film in shaping public awareness about twentieth-century industrialization is also analyzed in Brian R. Jacobson's contribution. Taking a notorious 2012 gas leak at the Elgin platform, an offshore drilling rig in the North Sea owned by French petroleum company Total, as his case, Jacobson analyzes the moving image's critical role in shaping public knowledge about industrial processes within the company Total. Jacobson argues that already in the 1970s, in the wake of the oil crises, film productions established rhetorical strategies for smoothing over the risk and teaching the public about the rewards of offshore extraction that continue to structure industrial visibility today.

In the wake of the environmental exhaustion and political crises that the age of oil and oil politics has left us with, it's rewarding to return to the meaning of cultural work in relation to oil extraction. Ravi Vasudevan undertakes a mapping of the Burmah Shell Oil Company role in the development of film-making practices in India from its origins in 1928 to the 1950s. The company, whose remit was to retail petroleum products and market agricultural equipment, invested in advertising, publicity, and promotional material in print and audiovisual media, including advertising films. The company went beyond a purely instrumental relation to film production, producing advertising, promotional, instructional, and educational films, and films promoting postcolonial state planning. Its history invites us to locate documentary practice in a rather complex genealogy of institutions and functions—including the overlaps of

government, industry, market-driven, civil/educational, and aesthetic engagements.

The 1950s was a period of intense flux and political change, leading to an increase of countries that became independent from colonial rule. As a result, international operating companies were forced to change their operations in many (former) colonial countries, ranging from commercial strategies, staffing policy, or local and global public relations and advertisement strategies. In these changing times making use of local film production was seen as a useful and powerful instrument. In his contribution, Rudmer Canjels discusses the Nigerian Shell film unit that started in 1959, two years after the discovery of oil in commercial quantities and one year before Nigeria's independence. Manned by key creative and technical personnel from the main Shell film unit in London, the unit was however designed to be taken over by trained local staff. The films were mostly geared to possible new Shell workers, as part of the Africanization policy intended to increase the number of Africans in the workforce, as well as to politicians with whom Shell had to negotiate licenses, rentals, and royalties. The situation in South Africa was somewhat different. Jacqueline Maingard, in her chapter, focuses on the British scriptwriter and film director, Donald Swanson, who in the 1950s wrote scripts and directed films for the South African State Information Services, commissioned by African Film Productions, the production arm of the powerful Schlesinger Organisation in South Africa. By using the propaganda film, *South Africa's Life Line (Die Slagaar van Suid-Afrika)*, produced in the 1950s but exact date unknown), as case study, Maingard shows how the film came to emulate a mode and style of filmmaking Swanson first learned at Gaumont-British International in the 1940s, when he wrote scripts for the British Railways series. This early training, and the colonial films he subsequently made in Africa, positioned him in a network of colonial film and filmmakers that gave shape to his ideological worldview.

Notes

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- 4 Andrej Ivakhiv, "The Art of Morphogenesis: Cinema in and Beyond the Capitalocene," in Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (eds.), *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film* (Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016), 740.

- 5 See, for instance, various volumes of the *Transactions of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, published by the Society of Motion Picture Engineers.
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PART ONE

Oil Rhetoric

1

Oil Media Archives

Mona Damluji

My first encounter in an oil media archive was with a VHS tape in the British Petroleum (BP) Archive that could not be played. A second encounter had me handling a fragile film reel stored in its original canister. Viewing the oil company film on a Steenbeck in a dark basement-level screening room of the British Film Institute was a nerve-racking experience: the celluloid cracked insistently throughout, threatening imminent demise. Next came a stack of photo albums whose pages were filled with aging prints sealed underneath delicate plastic sheets. Individual images demanded every sort of speculation, since no names, locations, or dates accompanied the albums. While studying petroleum company-sponsored films of the Middle East, I have worked in several archives over the course of a decade in search of moving images, still photography, artwork, and other cultural productions sponsored by oil companies—what I call oil media. These earliest encounters troubled my assumptions about what conducting research in corporate archives would be like. How could one of the world's wealthiest and most powerful corporations be so inconsistent and apparently uninterested in archiving its media?

It was not until I later tracked down the existence of the lesser-known BP Video Library (BPVL) that I realized a major transformation of how the oil company approached media archiving, film in particular, was underway. Access to BP's film archive would soon be radically different from the experiences I described here. On my first visit to the BPVL, I marveled at stacked shelves of film reels and VHS tapes in an open plan room that housed hundreds of BP's sponsored films. On that occasion, I requested permission to view a pristinely kept print of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC)-sponsored film *Persian Story* (1952, Greenpark Productions). Afterward, I remarked to a friendly staff

person about the film's significance in the context of Iran's political history and her reply startled me. As it turns out, BP was in the middle of digitizing the collection stored in the South London video library and in less than a year the archived films would be available for anyone to watch online. Today, years after I began my research, BPVL's website offers open access to a searchable interface where visitors can stream digitized versions of the company's film holdings dating back to 1921.¹ At face value, the presentation of the online archive suggests complete access to BP's film history. And yet, my current research on Iraq Petroleum Company-sponsored films, which are almost entirely missing from the BPVL archive, has demonstrated that this is not the case.

In this chapter, I am concerned with how oil companies archive media in general and sponsored films in particular. When corporations do archive oil media, access to those repositories can be confusing and confounding. While some corporate media archives (like BP) are housed at a public university, others (like Shell) are just about impenetrable to academic researchers. Still others are altogether inaccessible. My purpose here is to begin to map the uneven terrain of oil media archives for academic researchers. What I call *oil media archives* includes the various manifestations of media collection and preservation by petroleum companies: online and offline, digital and analog, cataloged and undisclosed.

Oil media archives include films, videos, photographs, and other media objects, each ripe for analysis, and also the published and unpublished paper trails and oral histories that help to trace the complex origins, making, publicity, and reception of oil-sponsored media. As a counterpoint to the hyper-visibility of digitized films on the BPVL website, which I will describe and contextualize in detail in the latter half of this chapter, my early encounters in the BP corporate archive point to the existence of films that are thoroughly documented in writing but nowhere to be found or watched in the archives. These findings led me to consider the complex ways in which, as Renée M. Sentilles contends, "our relationship with sources [change] as they become more accessible, more abundant, and less tangible."² Entanglements and contradictions become increasingly apparent when moving between "real" archives—that is, material repositories containing historical documents and analog media objects—and their relatively accessible online counterparts.³ Generally, the separation of digital and nondigital practices of archiving films into online and offline spaces that do not explicitly refer to each other can be misleading. In the case of BP, it is apparent that available online and offline archives produce incomplete and disjointed collections of oil media; one should be careful to consult one and not the other.

This chapter sets out to make oil media archives visible and recognizable as "full-fledged historical actors" and a counterpart to what Andrew Barry terms

the oil archives.⁴ It opens a conversation about how researchers might navigate the numerous and variable practices of archiving oil media in the era of digitization. To do this, I examine how BP, the corporation whose archives I am most familiar with, archives its sponsored films and associated paper trails. I also draw attention to how their approach has excluded numerous films from their seemingly complete collection. In particular, I have determined that while the BP Archive acquired the Iraq Petroleum Company's paper archive, films were excluded from this acquisition. The BPVL is missing all but one of the company's sponsored films from Iraq, which are difficult and sometimes impossible to track down elsewhere. My focus on BP should not suggest that its practices are universal. Rather, it presents a case study of a corporation that is among the first to establish open free access to their online media archive.⁵ As I will discuss, BP's impetus to undertake a media digitization and archiving project should be understood as a calculated interpretation of the film collection's *commercial* value—licensing footage as a revenue stream—and *cultural* value—mass circulation of BP-sponsored images as well as promoting the idea of BP as a cultural sponsor.

BP's accessible visual media library of high-quality film footage fosters the reproduction of its content. The website's slickness—that is, the aesthetic simplicity, ease of searchability, and editorial freedom to select still images or video clips with precision—commands an authority to create and limit how oil and oil modernity is imaged and imagined for mass audiences. As I have written about elsewhere, nearly a century ago, BP and other oil companies established public relations offices to promote film sponsorship widely, from internal training films for oil workers to widely distributed prestige documentaries, or what I term “petrofilms,” for theatergoers, film societies, and classrooms.⁶ In short, today's digital media archive continues the BP's long-standing mission of shaping how audiences—inside and outside of the industry—see themselves in relationship to oil.

Navigating Oil Archives

In *Archive Stories*, Antoinette Burton's insists upon “the necessity of talking about the backstage of archives—how they are constructed, policed, experienced, and manipulated.” She reminds us that colonial archives “served as technologies of imperial power, conquest and hegemony” and therefore should not be mistaken as neutral repositories of documentary evidence.⁷ This reminds us to be attentive to the ways that archives mediate the production of knowledge and in particular how the archives of the world's most powerful