

What Was Lost in the BP Oil Spill?

David Bond

Dirty Energy—The Deepwater Horizon Disaster: First-Hand Stories from the Louisiana Bayou. 2013. A film by Bryan Hopkins. 94 mins. Distributed by Cinema Libre Studio.

The recent documentary film *Dirty Energy* takes itself to be a sweeping indictment of the BP Oil Spill from the perspective of those ordinary lives afflicted by the spill. The director, Bryan Hopkins, spent a near ethnographic amount of time in the Louisiana bayou after the oil spill. He had the good fortune to find a few genuine local characters and the good sense to let them do most of the talking. We meet fathers and mothers apprehensive about the toxic reach of the oil spill, fisherman ill at ease with their diminishing returns, seafood distributors wary of the suspect condition of their product, and the occasional environmental activist pointing the finger to remind us who exactly is at fault. Together, their voices have a sharpened poetry to them, mixing fear and fury, despair and dignity as each struggles to make sense of a world coming undone at the seams. We witness the waves of uncertainty and indignation that wash over Louisiana bayou communities in the long aftermath of the largest inadvertent oil spill in human history.¹ Although from time to time the film can perhaps too easily equate local

with true (a correspondence that anthropology has some history with), it offers a perspective that is woefully lacking in the more scientific and legal reckonings of the disaster: namely, the quotidian dimensions of loss in the BP Oil Spill. Just because some losses are difficult to measure does not make them unreal.

I know something of this. After the BP Oil Spill, I attended meetings across the Gulf Coast aimed at eliciting public input on the environmental damages of the disaster, namely how they should be measured and ultimately fixed. Hosted by federal agencies and held in high school gyms and community centers, these gatherings were curious affairs where lawyers, activists, and politicians melded with angry residents in a “public” lined up in rows of folding chairs. Most of those who spoke were from somewhere else: they showed up to lodge a scripted agenda into the official register. When local residents rose to speak no one quite knew what to expect. Their voices, unruly and unvetted, often gave a nightmarish account of the oil spill, one where crude oil and dispersant stretched into the innermost recesses of their lives. One woman handed out lab reports on her blood: “I have polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in my blood. I need help.” A doctor introduced his patients and invited those present to inspect their frail and failing condition: “The oil was in the water and now it’s in our blood. Feel free to question them.” Federal officials dismissed such concerns with the same polite refusal: “This meeting is about damages to the environment. Your concerns are best addressed elsewhere.” Occasionally, officials would discreetly pass these residents a brochure



entitled “Mental Health and the Oil Spill.” The federal response to these local residents was often as insulting as it was mechanical: public opinions mattered only in so far as they aligned with the official rubric of the disaster. When I asked one official how she coded such comments she replied she didn’t. “They don’t fit,” she said.

The official response to the BP Oil Spill did not take the experiences of local residents seriously. The affective and bodily registers of the disaster were not legitimate fields from which to build up a definition of the shape and spread of the oil spill. By and large, they were unfortunate superstitions best swept aside to make room for the tried and true procedures of scientific and legal fact. While my attention followed the labor at work in making those official facts, I was acutely aware of the many voices being left out. Who, I wondered, might take these voices seriously?

Byran Hopkin’s film *Dirty Energy* is a step in the right direction. With grainy snapshots of the television coverage of the oil spill and the dull roar of the gushing wellhead rising in the background, Hopkins opens the film with a jarring introduction to the BP Oil Spill. Cable news clips hint at a disaster of apocalyptic proportions while BP CEO Tony Hayward speaks softly into the camera about “taking full responsibility” and NOAA administrator Jane Lubchenco tells the world “it’s premature to say this is catastrophic.” No one, it seems, knows exactly what is going on. Hopkins then turns to the voices of residents and activists as the firm ground on which to explore what actually happened. He edits their reflections into a series of themes that give shape to the BP Oil Spill: environmental devastation, uneven restoration, BP’s negligence, government ineptitude, divisive compensation, the death of a way of life, and the simmering outrage that



remains. The voices of residents and activists gathered here depict the oil spill as an ongoing process of devastation, as a slow violence. The media event that was an unstoppable geyser of crude oil was capped three years ago. The quieter if no less consequential disaster of those lives battered and beaten down by the oil spill continues to unfold with no obvious end in sight.

The devastation of the BP Oil Spill continues to reverberate around the Gulf of Mexico. As fishermen struggle to find fish and shrimpers deal with mutated shrimp, a new sense of community is taking shape. This social world is most perceptible in the passing of what was once taken for granted, in the stark negation of normality. Memories of a previous way of life abound in *Dirty Energy* as key markers of what exactly has been lost. This dynamic is especially clear in discussions with commercial fishermen (it should be noted: these interviews cover a

rather narrow cross-section of Louisiana fishermen; the views of Vietnamese and African American fisherman would have been a welcome addition). These conversations stay close to the dawning realization that the natural abundance of the bayou might no longer be enough. Shot through with stunted ecologies and toxic suspicions, this previous abundance is fast becoming a potent memory. Reflecting on what has been lost in the oil spill, one fisherman summarizes: "Freedom. That's what it is, freedom." He goes on, describing the joys of owning your own boat and making your own way. Refusing to quit, he tells the camera, "My problem is I don't want to be a museum piece." In response to damaged fisheries and tepid demand for "Gulf of Mexico Seafood" (not to mention skyrocketing fuel costs), the federal government is funneling recovery money into vocational programs to train despondent fisherman in menial forms

of wage labor. One program helps them learn how to hook up homes with cable TV. Many fishermen brush aside such help; they talk of a lifetime spent building up the skills and means of commercial fishing and maintain that no matter the cost they are fisherman through and through. It's too late to change now. The film zooms in on a bumper sticker that became ubiquitous at many oil spill gatherings: "I fish, therefore I am." Fishing, it might be said, is fast becoming an unruly political identity as the oil spill makes the underlying vocation increasingly impossible.

Dirty Energy captures how fishing communities in the Louisiana bayou lived through and continue to live with the BP Oil Spill. It stops just short of placing these experiences into direct dialogue with the scientific and legal objectification of the disaster, but that is not really its aim. Oil companies and the federal government remain shady characters in this film, more the subject of accusations and conspiracies than of interviews. Despite its title, *Dirty Energy* leaves the question of what is so dirty about some kinds of energy regrettably untouched. This is, admittedly, a difficult question to ask on the Gulf Coast where everyone has a family member working in the oil industry and where everyone appreciates the fact that their young men can still make good money in the offshore boom. Those comments aside, the *Dirty Energy* is a solid documentation of the everyday qualities of the BP Oil Spill. This film's depictions of the uncertainty and indignation unleashed by the BP Oil Spill would provide a vivid platform for discussions of industrial disasters and environmental justice. In a classroom,

this film would pair well with Javier Auyero and Débora Swistun's concept of "toxic uncertainty" or Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" or even ethnographies of industrial disasters like Kim Fortun's *Advocacy after Bhopal* (2001) or Adriana Petryna's *Life Exposed* (2002).

Dirty Energy testifies to the urgency of paying close attention to the widening drift between how disasters are measured by experts and how they are experienced by local residents. The official response to oil spills and other industrial accidents has largely become a premeditated operation: all regimented brawn and no organic insight. As governments and energy companies work together to construct a more perfect containment infrastructure for all variety of industrial mishaps, we need to understand so much more about how these toxic disasters routinely spill over the spatial and temporal boundaries of a discrete event. Whether in amplifying existing inequalities or in introducing new coordinates of inequity, whether in grappling with how to live without or in valorizing what has been lost, disasters can continue long after the fire has been put out, long after the reactor has been shutdown, long after the wellhead has been capped, and long after the legal matter of guilt has been decided. On this front, the BP Oil Spill is still very much underway.

Note

1. For some perspective, the Exxon Valdez leaked about 300,000 barrels of crude oil over the course of about one day. The BP Oil Spill gushed about 5,000,000 barrels of crude oil over



a three-month period. Only Saddam Hussein's malicious burning of Kuwaiti oil fields surpasses the BP Oil Spill in the annals of largest ever. Moreover, the BP Oil Spill was a different kind of oil spill. Less than 10% of the BP Oil Spill rose to form a surface slick. The vast remainder of this spill—roughly 15 Exxon Valdez's—unfolded deep within the ocean itself.

David Bond is a visiting faculty member at Bennington College. **{{Please add a sentence or two about your research.}}**

