
Peak Whale Oil

The World & The Whale
Chantelle Mitchell and Jaxon Waterhouse

Will Failure Save Us? Take 2.0
Oron Catts

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Cool Change Contemporary

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So man's seconds tick. Oh! How immaterial are all materials!
Moby Dick, Herman Melville

Consider two scenes of transgression: The spurt of oil from a derrick in a desert somewhere not here coats the earth; slick, spilling, spreading. Aspirated water emerges from the blowhole of a whale, misting into the air before becoming indistinguishable from the seas it falls back into. Boundaries are crossed; surface tensions break. Spaces are entered, contaminated.

In the spurt of oil, we apprehend the undoing of terrestriality, an escape from the stratigraphic prison and a display of geologic liveliness. Here, non-sentient matter spreads, coats and entangles; uncanny, and at times grotesque. The spray of water from the blowhole of a whale is also a reassertion of liveliness, but one which is of a particular affective resonance to us human onlookers. This may be due to a kinship felt for fellow oxygen-breathing beings, but is more likely to do with the storied relationship we have with cetaceans. Within cultural and historical frames, whales have come to occupy a place that troubles the traditional human/more-than-human divide.[1]

This iteration of *Peak Whale Oil* concerns itself largely with the spill, the puncture and the permeation. The slow outward creep of oil leaking from a barrel, the penetration of the earth in search of fuel, the spurt of oil, and the clouds of polluted smoke filling skies. The spill, the puncture and the permeation see a coating of things, a troubling of categorisation. *How do you contain a spill that extends beyond the physical?*

1. We consider here their empathy and displays of grief, demonstrations of complex social behaviour, communicative capacity and that mishap with the Voyager Golden Record, that saw whale calls included within the recordings of human/earthly greetings.

The oil spills, while the whale contains. The oppositional forces of containment and movement hold the world in a constant tension; one that is increasingly subject to slippage as the anchors that hold the world in place give way.

The escape of the oil signifies its intrusion into other spaces. Changing form, it reappears in global markets, engines, oceans and bodies. After millennia cradled within the earth, human agency has opened this geologic Pandora's box, unleashing contamination and calamity upon the world. This calamity has enabled, and is enabled by, the cycles of capital. This spill sees boundaries continually affirmed and transgressed, with the human/more-than-human divide enabling a world that infringes upon those of others. In some cases, inside others.

Rebecca Giggs writes of the horror of learning of a sperm whale washed up on a Spanish coastline, found to contain an entire greenhouse inside its belly. Its stomach, a cetacean treasure chest; containing all manner of household objects, a storehouse for things where they shouldn't be. This extends too, to a microscopic level; the whale becoming a pollutant, cursed as it is with a physiology that traps contaminants within its body. All the stories across history of people swallowed up into the belly of the whale, inverted.

As Alaina writes, we see familiar faces reflected back at us in the oily installation contained within the gallery. Expanding this outwards, in the slick of the oil spill, we see the history of humanity rendered as the crudest of oil paintings.

As in the mirror of the slick, we see ourselves reflected in the form of the whale. Inside the world, the whale; inside the whale, the world. Our two scenes of transgression become many, and our human bodies become further implicated by the mark of microplastics amidst within our bloodstreams. With transgression, comes contamination — penalties we continue to pay.

Will Failure Save Us? Take 2.0.
Oron Catts

The common reading of *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* tells us that the creature became a monster because his creator, Victor Frankenstein, ran away and did not care for him. An alternate reading is that the creature only becomes a monster when he witnessed Victor Frankenstein destroy his companion, throwing her body overboard into the sea.

When the creature meets Frankenstein, he pleads with Frankenstein to make him a companion. This companion, he argues, is all he needs to rectify his condition: "Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death…"[1]

If the story of Frankenstein and his creature is an allegory for the relationships between humans and their technologies, then the creature is tech 1.0 and the companion is tech 2.0. Here, the technology is asking for an upgraded addition to fix the problems generated by its very existence. So all that is needed to fix tech 1.0's (potential and real) harmful impact, is to create, using the same mindset and approach, tech 2.0.

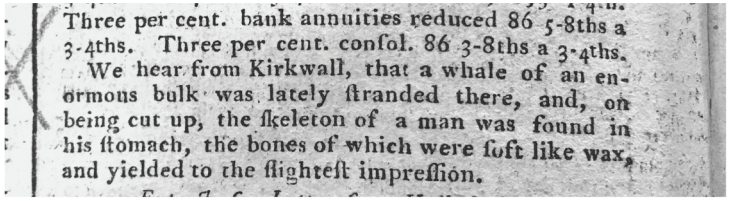
We will never know if this would have worked out in the Frankenstein case, as right before completing his work on the companion (tech 2.0), in his makeshift lab on the remote Orkney Islands, Victor gets cold feet and decides to destroy it. Victor presents a long and substantial list of reasons as to why completing the work on tech 2.0 is a bad idea. One of which is the real chance that tech 2.0 will be more powerful and more destructive than tech 1.0. He ponders:

1. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, Chapter 10, 1818 edition)

> "Had I right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? I had before been moved by the sophisms of the being I had created; I had been struck senseless by his fiendish threats; but now, for the first time, the wickedness of my promise burst upon me; I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race."

These are wise words to consider when we try to repair damages caused by our current technologies. However, can we trust Victor's motives?

Exactly two hundred years after the publication of Frankenstein, I decided to go to the Orkney Islands to seek some answers. What I found there made me reassess the validity of Victor's version of events. I wanted to see if I could find some material evidence to what I knew was a fictional story. To my complete astonishment, deep in the local archive I found a report in a Scottish newspaper from 1773, which is about the time the story was supposed to have taken place. In five short lines it reads: "We hear from Kirkwall, that a whale of an enormous bulk was lately stranded there, and, on being cut up, the skeleton of a man was found in his stomach, the *bone of which were soft like wax, and yielded to the slightest impression*." [2]


Three per cent. bank annuities reduced 86 5-8ths a 3-4ths. Three per cent. conſol. 86 3-8ths a 3-4ths.
We hear from Kirkwall, that a whale of an enormous bulk was lately ſtranded there, and, on being cut up, the ſkeleton of a man was found in his ſtomach, the bones of which were ſoft like wax, and yielded to the ſlighteſt impreſſion.

1773 news story about a stranded whale in the Orkney Islands, 2018.
Image Credit: Oron Catts, with permission from Orkney Library & Archive.

2. *The Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 31 July 1773. Emphasis added.

It seemed like I had found the body of the companion, thrown overboard by Victor, subsequently swallowed by the poor whale, and thus possibly poisoning it and causing it to strand. My curiosity was piqued by the description of the skeleton; I pondered as to what might cause the bones to be "soft like wax" and so crumbly. With further research, it seemed very likely that the body went through a process that is now known as Alkaline Hydrolysis. Patented in 1888 as a way of producing fertilisers from animal carcasses and slaughterhouse refuse, alkaline hydrolysis is currently promoted as a form of environmental cremation, in which 'The end result is a quantity of green-brown tinted liquid and ***soft, porous white bone remains (calcium phosphate) easily crushed in the hand***'. This makes sense, as the main industry in the Orkney Islands in the eighteen century was the production of alkaline (lye) from burning kelp. This brings us to Victor's attempt to make a companion for the creature. This now found evidence suggests that there is a very high likelihood that this experiment was contaminated with a high concentration of alkaline, hence the condition of the skeleton in the whale. Unwittingly, the whale invented the process of alkaline hydrolysis more than a hundred years before it was patented.

It seems that Victor actually failed to produce tech 2.0 (the companion). Rather than admitting his failure to himself and to the creature, he chose to claim the higher moral ground as to why he destroyed it. By doing so, he made a monster out of the creature.

Is it human hubris and our unwillingness to admit failure that makes our technologies so monstrous?

The body and the failure that Victor tried so hard to hide, came back to haunt us, delivered by the greatest messenger of all – the whale. It might have taken more than two hundred years for the truth to come out, but nevertheless, whales and archives have long memories.

Dealing with the crisis caused by human extractive tendencies and their associated technologies require foresight that we might not possess. The whales' party, when fossil fuel was found in Pennsylvania, depicted in the Vanity Fair cartoon form 1861, was premature and misguided. It represented hope. As Adrienne Mayor, History and Philosophy of Science Scholar at Stanford University reminds us: "For the ancient Greeks, hope was not a blessing but an obstacle to realistic Foresight." Their word for foresight was Prometheus.

So maybe the inability of Victor Frankenstein, the Modern Prometheus, to finish the companion, be it by failure or deliberate refusal, saved us from a far greater calamity?

This graveyard is a possible site from which Victor Frankenstein obtained material for the creation of the companion to the creature, 2018. Image Credit: Oron Catts.

Peak Whale Oil
Alaina Claire Feldman

A dark, thick substance with a hint of iridescence sits pooled on the gallery floor. The texture and color of this oil sharply contrasts with the white catchments and the pristine white cube of the sanitized gallery which encloses the installation. To soil this site—to cover the gallery floor in oil by spilling and re-contain it—points to the ever-flowing management of petrocultures and the institutions that fortify them. This might immediately conjure up notions of drilling, fossil fuels, and environmental hazards, but within the context of the white walls it also signals to the oil that flows through the largely unregulated art market as well, deployed through the purchasing and selling of artworks or through seemingly charitable board seats at museums worldwide.

Historically, similar looking installations produced in the name of art, such as Noriyuki Haraguchi's "Oil Pool" or Anish Kapoor's oft installed "Descension," do not reference the petroleum industry explicitly, but rather, put material to work for theoretical purposes with little to no signs of resistance. *Peak Whale Oil*'s spill is not hypothetical. Environmental issues are not sidestepped for critiques of participatory media or metaphor, but oil itself is the media and central concern. The spilling of toxic chemicals into the ocean is literal and it is urgent. Despite the current market disturbances due to Russian sanctions, the global demand for oil is still projected to be at 99.7 million barrels per day in 2022.[1]

There's another black substance that produces and maintains culture, and its usage, circulation and containment is just as illusive and complex as oil. In the mid 19th century, Parisian J.J. Grandville plunged the tip of his pen into a reservoir of dark liquid, ink, and carefully passed his hand along a page that would eventually turn his intricate illustrations into formalized prints. Producing artwork with such close contact to the artist's hand was part of a larger movement in France at the time. A number of artists were embracing etching and intaglio as a reaction against large scale productions that carved out images for mass media and mass production spearheaded by the Industrial Revolution.[2] Grandville would reflect on the ravenous ways in which European bourgeois society consumed their new world of industrialized commodities

J.J. Grandville, *The Lady Dog Playing Piano,* lithograph, 1852.

1. International Energy Agency, Oil Market Report - March 2022. IEA, Paris. https://www.iea.org/reports/oil-market-report-march-2022

2. Salsbury, Britany. "The Etching Revival in Nineteenth-Century France." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/etre/hd_etre.htm

and he would use his wet strokes as a tool to evidence the horrors of such consumption. He became famous for his imagery of faces of animals transfixed onto neatly dressed human bodies which suggested that these individual creatures had both civilized and bestial qualities. Through satire, animalistic characteristics were emphasized. This included images of a gowned piano player with the head of dog performing in her parlor, a suspicious lawyer with the face and ears of a rabbit, or a tempestuous judge with the face of a cat ruling over a circle of fellow felines. These parodies exposed both the human and inhuman, and the brutish culture of class and consumption.

"Grand Ball Given by the Whales," *Vanity Fair,* April 20, 1861.

randville's caricatures of people as commodities (and conversely, commodities as people), were incredibly influential on other artists as well as philosophers of early modernity. His breakthrough work was a series of collaborative articles drafted between 1840 and 1842 and published posthumously as a book in 1867. Scènes de la Vie Privée et Publique des Animaux (Public and Private Life of Animals) included writings by Honoré de Balzac, George Sand, Charles Nodier and others alongside the provocative illustrations of Grandville. Although he died prematurely in 1947 at only 45 years old, his work would continue to influence surrealists like Max Ernst (Une Semaine de Bonté, for example) but also cultural criticism of the time. Walter Benjamin used Grandville's illustrations in Le Diable à Paris (The Devil in Paris) for his critique of the French capital at the fin de siècle—"La Grand Ville" of Paris being a titular pun. "The enthronement of the commodity, with its luster of distraction, is the secret theme of Grandville's art."[3] For Benjamin, such illustrations reveal the fetishization of everyday commodities among the rising bourgeois class.

The luster that first propelled modernity and its shiny new commodities in the early 19th century was whale oil. It lubricated new industrial machinery and illuminated both homes and city streets alike. In "Oil's Origins of Modernization" Heidi Scott reminds us that whaling was exotic and romantic at that time. It involved risk, knowledge of the sea, and domination of a living creature, all of which the marketing of whale oil often relied on.[4] But while whale oil lubricated the machines, it was iron, coal and petroleum mined from the earth that ultimately fueled

3. Benjamin, Walter. "Exposé of 1935." In *Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002, 7.

4. Scott, Heidi. "Whale Oil Culture, Consumerism, and Modern Conservation." In *Oil Culture*, edited by Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 3-18.

globalization and a new era of capital accumulation by way of extraction.

Whaling was the first American industry to have a global impact, but was significantly altered in 1859 when oil was struck in Titusville Pennsylvania and subsequently the petroleum industry's demand and growth surpassed everything else. This event was widely popularized through a caricature of the oil industry heavily influenced by Grandville. In 1961, Vanity Fair magazine printed an illustration "Grand Ball Given by the Whales in Honor of the Discovery of Oil Wells in Pennsylvania" which depicts a jubilant black-tie event for male and female whales who dance, toast, and celebrate peak whale oil and the eclipsing of their own demise for that of the bounty of petroleum extraction. Grandville's influence is clear: the whales are dressed head-to-toe and exhibit human-like characteristics. If widespread marketing at the time depicted whales as subject of domination, this illustration marked a shift. The "whale" in whale oil was now completely overhauled as charismatic megafauna. The reader could find humor in the comically anthropomorphized whales rather than the fear and drama of the hunt.

In "Why Look at Animals" John Berger suggests that it's not humans who are becoming animals in such illustrations, but rather animals who are becoming more human-like. They are receding into the world of humans and fading away. "Here animals are not being used as reminders of origin, or as moral metaphors, they are being used en masse to 'people' situations. The movement that ends with the banality of Disney began as a disturbing, prophetic dream in the work of Grandville."[5] What the Vanity Fair illustration articulates is that whales had become so foundational to modernity that they no longer remained distant to us. Through violently extracted whale oil, we found whales in lampposts, in leather shoes, and in the soap used to wash our own bodies. The more whales became enmeshed in our lives, the harder it was to see them.

Is there a way to effectively reflect on the subjugation of the non-human and our perpetual need for new sources of energy? This installation is structured around the theme of violence in extractive capitalism, and while the pool may look like an inkwell, it's not mere metaphor. Gazing back upon the lustrous puddle on the gallery floor, its reflective qualities bring familiar human faces into perspective. Rather than see ourselves disappear from the equation, this installation refuses to ignore the human impact on the non-human. It casts the human perpetrator of uneven power explicitly within the material by incorporating our own reflection. In doing so, the viewer confronts their own reliance, interactions, and interrelationships within the longue durée of extracting value from nature.

5. Berger, John. "Why Look at Animals." In *About Looking*. London: Bloomsbury, 1980, 19.


OIL'S
WELL THAT
ENDS WHALE

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which this publication was printed, the Whadjuk people of Noongar Boodjar. Sovereignty has never been ceded.

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Cover Image: *Forestomach of a stranded whale, 2021.*
Image Credit: Oron Catts.
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