



## Peak Oil at the Movies: Oil Crash & Crude Impact

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Documentaries are as old as film itself with non-fiction, explanatory, motion pictures literally *documenting* events in the 19th century. A mainstay of factual television broadcasting documentaries have recently broken new ground with a series of high profile, lucrative, theatrical releases such as Super Size Me, Fahrenheit 9/11 and most notably Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth.

Peak oil proponents have also adopted the format with the 2004 release of [End of Suburbia](#), [Peak Oil: Imposed by Nature](#) in 2005 and [The Power of Community - How Cuba Survived Peak Oil](#) early 2006. More recently two new documentaries have been touring the film festivals in search of distribution deals, first [Oil Crash: A Crude Awakening](#) and towards the end of the year [Crude Impact](#).

Director, James Wood, was able to screen his film, Crude Impact to the delegates at the ASPO-USA conference in Boston (Oct06) and co-producer/director, Ray McCormack, screened his film, Oil Crash: A Crude Awakening in London (Nov06).

One of The Oil Drum's main objectives is to educate and raise awareness of energy depletion and specifically peak oil. How successful have End of Suburbia and the rest been at addressing these goals and how influential can documentaries be in general - is An Inconvenient Truth a turning point in the public's opinion on climate change? What role do documentaries play in educating and raising awareness of critical issues?

Below the fold we have my review of Crude Impact and Jane Cownie (from [PowerSwitch](#)) has kindly reviewed Oil Crash. Direct comparisons can't be made as I haven't seen Oil Crash nor has Jane seen Crude Impact.

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## Oil Crash: A Crude Awakening

Switzerland (2006), Dir Basil Gelpke and Ray McCormack, 85 mins.

<http://www.oilcrashmovie.com/>

*Click play to view trailer*

Sunday 19th November, National Film Theatre, London Shown as part of RESFest10 on Everything Under The Sun-Day, “a series of screenings and events with a social conscience”.

A Crude Awakening The Oil Crash offered those new to peak oil an informative and engaging introduction to the topic. At the same time, the movie remained poignant to, and well-accepted by, those informed on the topic. A blend of interviews and relevant cinematic clips provided the information content of the movie, with cartoon and 1950s-style American public information video interjections creating entertaining quips, easing its heavy message.

The opening sequence was a quintessential montage of peak oil related clips (oil pumps, car packed roads, manufacturing plants) and voiceovers lamenting on the prevalence of oil in our everyday lives. Next, cut to Matt Savinar (of [Lifeafterh The Oil Crash](#)) sitting in front of a military style backpack and cardboard boxes labelled ‘Emergency Purified Drinking Water’, uttering words including ‘civilisation’ and ‘collapse’, and you’ve created quite a captivating introduction! Indeed, it was nice to see a new face in amongst the peak oil regulars of Colin Campbell and Matt Simmons, and it provided a good array of peak oil opinions. Other speakers included Roscoe Bartlett (Republican member of the US House of Representatives), David Goodstein (California Institute of Technology; author of Out of Gas: The End of the Age of Oil), Terry Lynn Karl (professor of political science at Stanford University), Fedhil Chalabi (executive director of the London-based Centre for Global Energy Studies and a former Iraq Oil Ministry undersecretary), and Robert Ebel (chairman of the Energy Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, co-director of the Caspian Sea Oil Study Group and author of numerous books on the oil industry).

This movie was done in a more linear and easily digestible format than The End of Suburbia or Peak Oil: Imposed by Nature. It delivered the introduction, physicality’s, and consequences of PO in that order, giving those new to the topic a grasp of each aspect before moving on to the next. Each was broken into various aspects by bold titles introducing a certain point. The introduction could possibly have been broken down, just a bit more, to open it right up to people who have never even thought about where their energy comes from never mind that it is under threat.

What was particularly good was the emphasis the film makers placed on oil field exhaustion, and that there are actually (many) currently depleted, and hence now disused, oil fields the world over; a point many new comers to peak oil don’t realise because it is not widely publicised, for

obvious reasons. The examples used were in Texas, Azerbaijan, and Venezuela. Along with this was stunning cinematography of rusting pumps, polluted water, and the physical degradation of the land at each site.

Although a major section of the movie concentrated on the American dimension of peak oil, it was altogether a much less American-centric view than *The End of Suburbia*. Indeed, it raised the point well, pointing out that the American way of life will be that much more vulnerable due to the majority of their towns and cities being built on a car-facilitated design, in contrast to most European cities developed long before the car's inception.

The movie also made very clear the link between oil supply and war- retrospectively, currently and imminently. It highlighted the connection to the Middle East and the point that we are increasingly dependent on unstable countries, found therein, for oil supply. It also delivered well the complicated interplay between powerful, oil-rich regimes and their disenchanting people, creating intra- and inter-border tensions, citing the example of Saudi Arabia.

However, points that possibly could have done with more emphasis, and that may have struck more of a chord with new audiences, were the connection between oil and food supply, and the full economic consequences of oil depletion. Although both were illustrated well they weren't expanded upon greatly. A position that many people take on initially trying to rationalise peak oil is that, yes, it will create more geo-political tension, even conflict, and the price of petrol will rise but that these are things going on all the time anyway. Many feel these aspects do not have huge implications for their own life or that they have little power to stop them anyway. The movie did explore the economic consequences of oil price spikes, with comparison to the Great Depression, but not really on a devastatingly personal level.

Probably the most disappointing aspect of the film was the subsequent question and answer session with co-producer and co-director, Ray McCormack. When asked how the issue had impacted on his own life he remarked on how he lives without a car but other than that 'what can you do?'. His lack of urgency for any personal preparation for mitigation of peak oil hinted, slightly, that the topic was primarily approached for the reason that it would make a striking documentary rather than as a means to spread the peak oil message (although the first reason will do the second very effectively). If anyone had been feeling slightly nauseous with angst after viewing the movie, McCormack's apparent lack of concern would have at best confused them, at worst placated them back into their comfort zone. Maybe he was just having a bad bout of Post-Peak-Oil-Awareness Depression (PPOAD).

Overall though, the movie was eye-catching, entertaining and startling in the right quantities. However, one audience question at the end pointed out the major problem with cinematic endeavours of this kind- when asked for a show of hands from those who had never heard of peak oil before coming to the movie, around 8 people out of 150 responded. In order for the movie to capture that audience, to whom the whole concept and implications of oil depletion are new, let's hope it will be aired at 8pm on terrestrial TV at some point in the near future!

J. Cownie (jane @ powerswitch.org.uk)

## **Crude Impact**

(2006), Dir James Jandak Wood, 97 mins.

<http://www.crudeimpact.com/>

*Click play to view trailer*

The screening of Crude Impact at the ASPO-USA conference in Boston (Oct06) almost didn't happen with Director James Wood only flying into Boston that afternoon with the film. In introducing the film Wood was humble, admitting some nerves screening the film to what he considered a home crowd.

Crude Impact isn't just a film about peak oil, it's far broader. In fact peak oil isn't even specifically mentioned until two-thirds through. This is to the film's credit allowing the relationship between oil and humanity to be developed before thinking about the future.

The cinematography, iconic images, symbolism, soundtrack and the overall production quality are absolutely top notch. This professional look and feel adds credibility to the message and I believe makes the film all the more watchable for someone to whom this subject matter is new. On the subject matter, the film is well structured covering importance of oil in human development, foreign policy impacts, human impact, uses of oil, environmental impacts, the role of the media, before moving on the peak oil itself and the impacts of peak oil for the future.

I was particularly impressed with the early linking of fossil fuels with population expansion, equating a species' evolutionary successes with its ability to extract energy from the environment. This is one of the first points the film makes, establishing the historic importance of fossil fuels and oil in particular. Food is highlighted as a critical use of oil, repeating the 10:1 energy ratio often quoted and that fossil fuels allow more energy to be used in the production of food than the food itself contains adding that for any other organism this spells extinction.

The film does not just focus on the energy and material side of things. The human and sociological impacts of oil are also considered. Rees questions the notion of material growth pointing out how we have far exceeded what is actually needed to be happy. Two examples of the negative impact of the oil industry are covered in detail, Texaco's activities in Ecuador and Shell's in the Niger Delta. In Ecuador Texaco took advantage of an inexperienced government and lack of regulation to exploit reserves in the Amazon rain forest employing methods disallowed in other provinces. One statistic presented is that during Texaco's time in the rain forest (1964-92) they dumped 18 billion gallons of waste water containing 2% crude oil into the environment, the equivalent of 30 times the oil spilt during the Exxon Valdez disaster.

In the Niger Delta the environmental destruction, particularly in Ogoniland is presented through story of Ken Saro-Wiwa's human rights and environmental activism and subsequent execution in

a case backed by Shell. The point here I believe was to stress the direct suffering both human and environmental associated with the production and ultimately consumption of oil.

Crude Impact is critical of mainstream media suggesting that if the true impacts of our current oil policies were widely known they wouldn't enjoy public support. Modern news coverage is criticised as "infotainment", regarded as profit centre rather than the public service it should be, telling us what is really happening in the world.

Climate change is covered with mankind's exploitation of fossil fuels described as the most significant thing humans have ever done, triggering perhaps the 6th great extinction event.

The subject of peak oil is covered very convincingly. Hubbert's story is presented with added credibility from Deffeyes' who worked with Hubbert at Shell. Of note are the fantastic graphical animations explaining the concept of peak oil, illustrating how production must follow discovery and how discovery has clearly peaked decades ago.

OPEC's reserve growth is questioned, the USGS estimates of remaining resources are claimed by Al-Husseini to be exaggerated and Deffeyes even mentions an email he received from the head of the USGS explaining how large estimates were needed to encourage people to search for more oil!

The viewer is left with no doubt we are moving from a time of cheap abundant oil to one of expensive scarce oil. The impacts of peak are presented as resource wars, civil wars within oil exporting countries and a weakened economy subsequently less able to respond to new challenges. As oil becomes more valuable increased human rights and environmental damage is likely. The fundamental problem we face is described as growth, a problem that can't be solved even if a new energy source is identified. Another limit will present itself, be it water, soil, phosphates etc. Population was mentioned at the start and was returned to at the end. Kavita Ramdas highlights the importance of women with respect to population stating that for every additional three years of education a woman receives reduces the number of children she has by one.

Crude Impact is a terrific film. I have no hesitation in saying it is the best documentary I have seen on the subject and I would feel very happy about recommending it to anyone. Key I think is its accessibility to someone with no prior exposure to the story of oil.

Speakers in the film include:

Thom Hartmann (author, The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight)

Chris Flavin (president, Worldwatch Institute, author, Power Surge)

William Rees (professor, University of British Columbia, originator of "ecological footprint" concept)

Amy Goodman (broadcast journalist, author, Exception to the Rulers)

Michael Economides (professor, University of Huston, author, The Color of Oil, editor, World Energy Monthly Review)

Michael Klare (professor, Hampshire College, author, Resource Wars, Blood and Oil)

Ken Deffeyes (professor emeritus, Princeton University, author, Hubbert's Peak, Beyond Oil)

Tundi Agardy (marine expert)

Richard Heinberg (author, The Party's Over, Powerdown, The Oil Depletion Protocol)

Steve Donziger (attorney, represented Ecuadorian plaintiffs against Texaco)

Sadad Al-Husseini (retired head of exploration and production, Saudi Aramco)

Terry Lynn Karl (professor, Stanford University, author, Bottom of the Barrel)

Mathew Simmons (chairman and CEO, Simmons & Company International, author, Twilight in the Desert)

Kavita Ramdas (Global Fund for Women)



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