



BLACK SEA FILES

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Black Sea Files is a territorial research on the Caspian oil geography: the world's oldest oil extraction zone. The overall focus of the two-year video exploration is the spatial and social transformations introduced by the gigantic infrastructure project. Passing through the Southern Caucasus and Turkey, the newly built pipeline pumps large amounts of new Caspian crude oil from Azerbaijan to the world market. In record time, the representation of the region has changed from that of a politically unsettled and impoverished post-Soviet periphery hosting a million displaced people, to a space where energy and capital flow at a rate that is remarkable even by world standards. In the wider picture, the oil pipeline is the first materialization of a larger European plan to expand access to Caspian oil reserves, moving even further into post-Cold War territories. A veritable Super-Silk Highway is the long-term vision behind it, and it will encompass a fully integrated transportation and communication network linking Europe with Central Asia. The pipeline is a geo-strategic project of some political impact, not only for the powerful players in the region, but also for a great number of locals: farmers, oil workers, migrants, and prostitutes. These are the subjects that populate the video, turning the corridor into a complex human geography. While migration and displacement are a major historical experience in this part of the world between the Caucasus and Turkey, it is crucial to conceive of migration not as a singular phenomenon but one among many strands of interaction between regional and national spaces. In this instance, the video looks at the movement of people in relation to flows of resources, capital, information, and images. What is at stake here is not only a matter of oil, land and power, but also a centralizing practice of image making that needs to be dispersed to include the many sidelines and secondary landscapes in the extended geography of Caspian oil.

International media coverage on these recent developments feature images and reports of the political elites signing contracts, rubbing new oil between their fingertips or cutting ribbons at inaugurations. These images will not be given high priority in this context because they offer little insight in the complex regional relations or local textures. The signing of big deals entails a million small contracts and negotiations, the pushing of resources on a macro level is accompanied by a multitude of human trajectories on the ground. In the Caucasus, history seeps through the thin crust like oil does on the Absheron peninsula and any current attempts to lay the grid of a new ordering system over this space will have to negotiate its past. Whatever is taking place at the moment, it will always be in negotiation with the compressed imaginary

about the space and never in control of it. In an effort to reformulate the cultural construction of oil, it is on those subjects that the Black Sea Files concentrate.

METHODOLOGY

I do not pretend to grasp the complexity of the region in its overall political and cultural dimension. Nonetheless, I attempt to shed light on a subjective, but interrelated, series of scenes and plots. Varying in scale, the files speak of grand ideas and sordid conspiracies, remote ordering systems and their prosaic local upshots; they detect plans within plans, seeking to understand their strategic purposes and operational failures, and the meaning they have in terms of human experience. It is the ensemble of the files that reveals their interconnectedness.

The video writes a fragmentary human geography through a rather heterogeneous assemblage of videographies made during three trips to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, with extensive text research, media clips and reflections being made in the aftermath. All this material needed to be organized, and I opted for an open structure, indicating progress, which tend to contain unique combinations of documents whose logic often lies entirely with the author. In the case of transnational politics, data can come from geographically dispersed sources, linked only through a political relationship that is not always obvious for the uninitiated. The relations reveal themselves during the investigative process and through the figure of the researcher. While generally my practice can be understood as a cognitive method akin to those used by geologists, journalists and anthropologists, this was a very subjective way of organizing knowledge, which, in my view, is more closely related to secret intelligence than, say, anthropology, because of its inherently transnational procedure and the pursuit of hidden and restricted knowledge. With Black Sea Files I make a decisive attempt to insert myself into the range of investigative practices performed in these different spheres of knowledge.

Cluster: Black Sea Files

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