

## Petrocultures

**By Karina Baptista | August 17, 2017**

Environmental crisis, which is coterminous with late capitalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, has unequivocally revealed humanity's historical locus as that of petromodernity; that is, as a modernity espoused and sustained by the incessant extraction of oil. For this reason, the social continuities and discontinuities of this historical period—such as the widespread development of public infrastructures contingent on the supply of oil and the disuse of renewable and more easily accessible resources for petroleum-based products—can and should be considered the bases of petrocultures. Broadly defined, the term “petrocultures” refers to the social imaginaries constituted by the knowledge, practices, and discourses resulting from the consumption of and subsequent dependence on oil.

Although petrocultures involve a variety of social, economic, and political manifestations, they have also been defined in terms of cultural representations. In their introduction to a special issue on the topic by the *Journal of American Studies*, Ross Barnett and Daniel Worden (2012) provide such a definition: “oil culture [is] the broad field of cultural representations and symbolic forms that have taken shape around the fugacious material of oil in the 150 years since the inception of the US petroleum industry” (269). Although Barnett and Worden’s definition focuses on the American ambit, the repercussions described project onto a global scale. Thus, aesthetic practices, cultural forms, and public discourses reveal the status of oil on two levels: first, as what Imre Szeman (2012b) dubs an “ur-commodity”, the source of all moving matter as concerns the travel of bodies, products and their ready availability (3). Second, as an “ontological construct” that, following Barnett and Worden, shapes social and political life (269). In cultural representations of oil, it is possible to find material ranging anywhere from novels, art, film, television, and war propaganda to more institutionalized manifestations such as museums, schools, universities, and the press.

The emerging scholarship on petrocultures has taken on the task of investigating the cultural import of the materiality of oil in society, uncovering it as an ideological substratum in contemporary culture. In doing so, it marks a shift in the humanities, a field which until very recently had taken the ubiquity of oil for granted. Szeman, along with Jennifer Wenzel, Stephanie LeMenager, Peter Hitchcock, Frederick Buell, and Graeme Macdonald, among others, have led the pioneering work.

LeMenager’s (2014) *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* is a seminal text for the study of petrocultures. The book considers various types of texts, including graphic novels, photographs, and government reports in an attempt to analyze the ways in which they register the affect associated with the permeation and saturation of oil into almost every aspect of life. LeMenager assesses major oil spills and their consequences in American policy-making before delving into an analysis of petrofictions so as to examine, among other things, the location of sites of extraction and its relationship to urban planning. One of her

major contributions is the correlation she establishes between oil-extraction practices and narrative aesthetics, thus further demonstrating the multidirectional feedback loop between natural resources, consumption, and culture. In her review of *Living Oil*, Wenzel (2014) delineates the contours of the aforementioned loop, especially as it is expressed through the use of specific words:

[LeMenager uses] the verb to materialize to describe her fundamental task, teasing out its various connotations of making material, representing, narrating, making visible, [...] an apt term for the contradictory elusiveness, invisibility, spectrally, and spectacle associated with oil and its relation to human bodies, work, and labor. (511)

In this way, the materialization of oil goes beyond the making of a petroleum-based product. It makes the culture of oil a tangible element, one that it is lived, but not always recognized as such.

Along with LeMenager, Buell (2012) has investigated the materiality of oil in both literal and metaphorical terms. In his "History of Oil Cultures," Buell distinguishes between "material culture" and "symbolic culture" (273), both of which modify society's concept of the psyche, the body, and the environment. His discussion of the terms reveals that the first denotes the transformations brought about by the petrochemical industry while the second refers to cultural representations in art and literature. Especially prominent is his conception of history as a succession of "energy systems," which he believes "are constituted by sociocultural, economic, environmental and technological relationships" (273). These energy systems, which are characterized by the dominance of a particular source of energy, such as coal and petroleum, have changed the lifestyles of entire generations. This, Buell argues, marks a significant change in economics as society has passed from coal capitalism to oil-electric capitalism, and that, in turn, has been conveyed and perceived in a variety of cultural representations.

Recent advances into the epistemologies of oil, i.e. how one comes to know about petroleum, have also contributed to the study of petrocultures. In an article titled "How to Know about Oil: Energy Epistemologies and Political Futures", Szeman (2013) considers three specific "energy epistemologies" (148): the historical, the artistic and the political via an academic text, a photo exhibit, and a media campaign for the extraction of oil. Szeman thus highlights the manner in which oil shapes society's understanding of it. In his own words:

Despite being a concrete thing, oil animates and enables all manner of abstract categories, including freedom, mobility, growth, entrepreneurship, and the future of an essential way—an insight that recent cultural criticism is beginning to use to interrogate the energy-demanding structures and categories of modernity (146).

The epistemologies of oil that Szeman analyzes further articulate the relationship between the materiality and abstractions of oil. His undertaking, however, does not diverge from what many a petrofiction has attempted to do in representing oil. If for Hitchcock (2010) the power in the aesthetics of petrofiction derives from its ability to represent the forces behind oil production and the disparities produced by it, for Szeman the best way to deal with the consequences of oil is "by trying instead to make more fully sensible the shape and form of the world to which oil gave birth, the world that oil continues to fill with the energy the world

needs to survive” (156). Szeman’s approach resonates with that of LeMenager in uncovering the materiality of oil culture. In other words, Szeman attempts to make visible the elements that give rise to petrocultures in an analytical rather than an artistic way.

On a final note, it is imperative to mention the Petrocultures Research Group at the University of Alberta led by Sheena Wilson and Szeman (2015). The group was founded in 2011 partly as a response to the extraction of oil in the Alberta Oil Sands. Per their “Mandate,” the aim of the group is to “support, produce, and distribute research related to the social, cultural and political implications of oil and energy use on individuals, communities, and societies around the world.” In their “About” page, the scholars involved provide the following list as a sample of the issues that guide their investigations: labor in petrocultures; the composition of communities in historical and contemporary oil economies; education in energy societies; the intersection of cultural and environmental issues; land and mineral rights, community safety, race in petrocultures; gender issues and women’s rights in male dominated labor markets; politics and social-political life in petro-states; and the various forms of cultural production, such as art, literature, film, that attempt to represent and address the socio-cultural realities of living alongside oil technologies.

As the scholarship of petrocultures evinces, while the material realities of oil are lived everywhere, the social imaginaries that shape those lived experiences are better perceived and understood through an analysis of their cultural import. The shape and form of petrocultures do take place in the practices of everyday life, but their full realization only comes about in the various representations that deal with them in terms of the body, the psyche, and the environment. Thus, the study of petrocultures is more than apt to reveal the ways in which oil sits at the center of society’s cultural imagination and to provide an outlet to decenter it in the name of more sustainable sources of energy.

**Below is an introductory list of various cultural representations that address the subject of oil. They are ordered by category and subsequently by date of publication.**

#### **Art Exhibits and Hybrid Works:**

“Iridescent Gift of Death” (1969), David Snell

Black Tide?/Marea negra (2003), Allan Sekula

Black Sea Files (2005), Ursula Biemann

Sorry, Out of Gas: Architecture’s Response to the 1973 Oil Crisis (2008), Giovanna Borasi et al.

Oil Landscapes (2009), Edward Burtynsky

#### **Comic Books and Graphic Novels:**

Fashion 2012: A Relational Style Guide for the Next Decade (2009), Marc Herbst

Oil and Water (2011), Steve Duin and Shannon Wheeler

I’m Not a Plastic Bag (2012), Rachel Hope Allison

#### **Courses and Seminars:**

Introducción a la “Clima-Ficción”: Representaciones narrativas del cambio climático (2016), Centro Universitario Regional del Este (CURE)  
PEI Obert Petróleo (2017), Programa de Estudios Independientes del Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona (MACBA)

### **Documentaries:**

A Crude Awakening (2006), Basil Gelpke and Ray MacCormack  
Crude: The Real Price of Oil (2009), Joe Belinger  
H2Oil (2009), Shannon Walsh  
Petropolis (2009), Peter Mettler  
Dirty Energy (2012), Bryan D. Hopkins

### **Films:**

Giant (1956), George Stevens  
There Will be Blood (2007), Paul Thomas Anderson

### **Historical and Theoretical Approaches to Oil:**

The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria (2005), Andrew Apter  
Oil on the Brain (2007), Lisa Margonelli  
Oil, Water, and Climate: An Introduction (2008), Catherine Gautier  
Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and Forces of Capital (2013), Matthew Huber  
Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil (2011), Timothy Mitchell  
After Oil (2016), Petrocultures Research Group

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Frohardt-Lane, Sarah. 2012. “Promoting a Culture of Driving: Rationing, Car Sharing, and Propaganda in WWII.” *Journal of American Studies* 46 (2): 337-55.

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Worden, Daniel. 2012. "Fossil-Fuel Futurity: Oil in Giant." *Journal of American Studies* 46 (2): 441-60.

Yaeger, Patricia. 2011. "Editor's column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources." *PMLA* 126 (2): 305-26.

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