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Gasoline Dreams: Waking Up from Petroculture (Orpana, 2021)**Bibliographic reference**

Simon Orpana, *Gasoline Dreams: Waking Up from Petroculture* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2021).

Abstract

Orpana's graphic novel *Gasoline Dreams* offers critical perspectives on especially the psychoanalysis of consumption of oil that reveals the illusionary nature of the pleasures and excitements of automobility and the industries that support it. The book delivers alternative imaginings by which readers can better understand the wide range of theoretical methods by which dissent can be formulated.

- 1 Much of the critical and creative work around the cultural import of oil has examined the complex ways in which it is “hidden in plain sight”, i.e., obviously central to modernity, and yet rarely a prominent element of the narrative of the forces that gave shape to it. This recoding of oil from repugnant substance to virtually veiled has enshrouded it in layers of fantasy and seductive connotations. The task of many scholars in the energy humanities has been to undo its hiddenness and to debunk its many myths as a step towards weaning ourselves off the substance and to insist, through the various readings on offer, on oil’s cultural, social, and narrative importance.
- 2 *Gasoline Dreams: Waking up from Petroculture* (2021) by Simon Orpana offers such a reading of oil’s well-concealed importance. Moreover, Orpana’s ambition is to also show the characteristics of fossil fuel culture in order to attempt to undo its hold over us. It bears similarities to Nick Sousanis’ doctoral thesis in comic form, *Unflattening* (2015). Like *Unflattening*, *Gasoline Dreams* is packed with ideas expressed in words and in black and white drawings. It consists of eight chapters, as well as an introduction, a foreword by Imre Szeman and an afterword by Mark Simpson.
- 3 The past few years have seen an abundance of work coming out of the field of energy humanities. This has contributed to the growth of cultural self-awareness which of course includes the capacity to critique the sort of energy we consume. Ironically, that which funds the perspectives offered by the humanities, more broadly, is sufficient surplus energy.
- 4 Orpana gestures towards this tension between work and compliance with fossil-fuel capitalism when towards the conclusion of the book, he suggests interrupting one’s own productivity: “if you have to work, find ways to slow it down and direct the system’s monstrous energies against itself”.¹ While a spanner in the wheel of progress might be an effective form of industrial sabotage, it is not clear how this will facilitate a widespread awakening up from gasoline dreams.
- I take more inspiration from Adrienne Maree Brown’s notion in *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (2019) in which she, like Orpana, similarly suggests an awakening. However, unlike Orpana, Brown believes in locating a source of well-being within ourselves, making us self-sufficient and less dependent on high-octane pleasures. This discovery of joyous possibility within oneself, she suggests, will translate into a joy of working towards social change, such that it might even be possible to transition to a less fuel-dependent lifestyle. Orpana comes to a somewhat similar realization in the final Chapter “The Beach” when he offers an analysis of the utopian potential of skateboarding: “In a world that has been made over in the image of cars and petroleum, street skating uses the same technologies and infrastructures to help the streets remember the beach”.²
- What is exciting about Brown’s notion of pleasure activism is that she wants to think of change through bringing about a changed subjectivity, not just an informed subjectivity. For energy humanities to continue making a contribution, it will need to move beyond the supposition that petro-modernity has somehow miraculously produced subjects that can now offer humanity a solution, an escape or an awakening from our gasoline-infused dreams, while at the same time being products of modernity, or “petro-subjects” in Orpana’s terms.³ Vanessa Andreotti’s thoughts on this in *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity’s Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (2021) are most helpful for questioning the validity of any solution or clever decoding that “petro-subjects” come up with.
- In his foreword to *Gasoline Dreams*, Szeman does not question the benefit or even the right of subjects of petro-modernity to correct the wrongs of petroculture: “the circumstances

¹ Simon Orpana, *Gasoline Dreams: Waking Up from Petroculture* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2021), 226.

² *Ibid.*, 218.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

we find ourselves in demand nothing less than taking up the challenge of flipping the impossible to the possible and do so with the speed of a revolution”.⁴ A key outcome of the scholarly work of energy humanities must be that this assumed “we” is effaced once and for all. Who is this “we” that can supposedly imagine themselves a way out of being hostages of petrol? How could we for one second believe that it is down to the pride and vanity of the privileged global north to once again think it can solve problems related to energy transition and global warming?

8 To his credit, Orpana includes the views of indigenuous thinkers in his book, specifically in Chapter Four “Quilting Point”, the most thought-provoking chapter. To introduce the book, however, Orpana sets the stage for what are some key concerns for him, including what he calls the “false liberation”⁵ offered by the car and the apocalyptic look and feel of a polluted Vancouver, Canada. The statement in this short introduction “This is what the apocalypse looks like, but we accept it as an everyday reality”,⁶ haunts the rest of the book as Orpana sets himself the task of discovering how it is that we have come to accept the extreme as part of mundane everyday reality. This disconnect becomes the guiding query throughout the remainder of the book, taking the author on a wild, and at times rather bumpy, ride with plenty of detours through psychoanalysis, philosophy, film theory, Marxism, and material culture theory.

9 What makes this a roller-coaster of a ride through cultural history is not just the range of theorists and material consulted, but also the higgledy-piggledy arrangement of the ideas. The eight chapters seem to eschew telling a story in a historical or logical sequence, perhaps to underline Orpana’s rejection of the logic of the highway and linear progress. That said, it nevertheless returns, compulsively even, to the troping of automobility as the emblem of freedom in petro-modernity.

10 Instead of a simply recognisable narrative sequence, each chapter includes studies of the dark heart of the petro-dependent human psyche using thick strokes of black to indicate expressivity, angst, and despair. Less dream and more nightmare. Most compelling for Orpana are concepts to do with addiction and cultural dysfunctions, layers of his text which thicken or blur the boundaries between sleep and wakefulness.

11 As noted in Chapter One (“Petroculture”) “the task of transitioning from fossil fuels, while daunting, is an opportunity to re-imagine our society and selves”.⁷ Yet, the author’s frustration is with our propensity to remain unperturbed in face of the calamity posed by global warming: “Being in flames around us, our oil-soaked culture, with all its speed, distractions and excitement, largely works to keep us asleep”.⁸

12 Chapter One contains a lengthy petrocultural reading of John Krasinki’s thriller *A Quiet Place* (2018) that focuses on the gendered association of masculinity with driving (as well as space travel) as a key dream of mobility that we subscribe to as people and nations especially in the privileged global north.⁹ Orpana’s emphasis on film gives his cultural readings a broad relevance for readers as he unpacks the human dimensions of our relationship to energy. And situating gender and domesticity within petroculture as he does here, succinctly opens up two relatively new areas of analysis in energy humanities. This raises questions regarding the similarities and differences in the ways that economies of energy and gender foster oppression.

13 Interestingly, while considering cinema, Orpana gives a fascinating petrocultural gloss on the zombie trope in popular consciousness: here, humans whose lives depend on the smelly, “decomposed bodies of past life forms” confront smelly, decomposed bodies of past humans.¹⁰

4 *Ibid.*, xi.

5 *Ibid.*, 1.

6 *Ibid.*, 6.

7 *Ibid.*, 16.

8 *Ibid.*, 23.

9 *Ibid.*, 27-37.

10 *Ibid.*, 46.

- 14 Through this reading of *A Quiet Place* specifically, and indeed throughout *Gasoline Dreams*, Orpana successfully shows that in itself an increased environmental awareness will not lead to shifts in attitudes and a decrease in energy consumption. Rather, what is required is a more clear awareness of the causal connections between the wellbeing and affordances we enjoy and the harm this brings to the environment. Orpana shows how our “entire way of life” including some apparently positive values such as “mobility, progress, productivity, freedom” rests on an increasingly unstable foundation supplied through fossil fuels.¹¹ Orpana shows that other, more sustainable, values are conveyed and kept alive through storytelling and performative practices, which is why I applaud his use of the graphic form as well as his inclusion of film analysis and his own autobiographical note in the acknowledgements section of *Gasoline Dreams* that notes that the writing process of this book coincided with the beginning of a healing process from psychological depression.¹²
- 15 Central to Orpana’s book is that the stories we tell about ourselves register, often unconsciously, key historical and contemporary manifestations and imaginings of energy. Understanding this affective narrative of energy and how it has evolved in our lives is a critical undertaking of the utmost relevance if we are to create a holistic view of the relations between energy and climate questions together with questions of social justice, gender equality and resource distribution and management. *Gasoline Dreams* dives into these fictional cinematic representations of energy subjectivity as a vital strategy in preparing for a sustainable energy transition that does not lose sight of the ethical affordances gained through the petroleum era. But we are also obliged to suspect that some of those affordances and the values they founded will not be part of a post-petroleum culture. As Orpana summarises: “we still do not know ‘human nature’, only human potentials under petroculture”.¹³
- Attending to this energy literacy allows Orpana to frame and critically examine the challenges associated with climate change on a level deeply relevant to people’s beliefs and dreams. Ultimately, the fullest significance of *Gasoline Dreams* is its potential role in transforming the energy transition into an opportunity for social reform or as Imre Szeman says in the foreword, that it be a manifesto for a revolution.¹⁴ I shall return to this question of what *Gasoline Dreams* can and cannot do later on in the essay.
- Chapter Two “Big Oily Dreams” positions the global north as the vampires of oil “sucking up more than our fair share of energy resources”.¹⁵ But unlike the vampires of the television series *True Blood* (2008–2014, Alan Ball), we are yet to find a fuel replacement such as “true blood” that satisfies our lust for energy without harming the rest of the world. Having been vampires of the world’s life blood, circumstances oblige us now to seek a more “true” form of sustenance, something less damaging to the host as well as to our future prospects. Although our use of sacrifice zones puts our extraction activities out of sight, as this chapter shows, the distance between here and there is now collapsing and once again the road and the car become an index for Orpana’s critique of petroculture.
- As subjects of petroleum, Orpana argues, we remain within the confines of a society organised around the production and consumption of oil and other fossil fuels. Both the public and private lives of human beings are circumscribed by petroculture. As Orpana shows in Chapter Three “Attachment”, energy vitally affects what we care most about. Once again, the pages reveal the car and the road as contested spaces, with Edward Munch’s figure from “The Scream” (1893) precariously placed on the highways and the ramps, his slender body also morphed into a pipeline, demonstrating the conflation between cultural expressivity and fossil fuels.¹⁶ The chapter concludes with a reading of *Easy Rider* (1969, dir. Dennis Hopper), a film that reenforced the notion

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹² *Ibid.*, 246.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

that modern concepts considered the bedrock of the humanities, including freedom and progress, have coevolved with the affordances supplied by, especially, the fossil energy regime.

19 Chapter Four “Quilting Point” continues the project of redefining energy in human and ethical terms. It sheds light on how energy is used defensively, to prevent the majority of the world’s population from sharing in its affordances. Without attending to these deeply human dimensions of petroleum as a quilting point suturing many (sometimes contradictory) aspects of human endeavour, any changes we make will be temporary and ultimately unsustainable. Here, Orpana imagines a “petrol gland”¹⁷ as such a point, “the juncture where the base material of petrol intersects with our hopes, fears and fantasies”.¹⁸ This point becomes the “keystone” of gasoline dream interpretation which, in Freud’s account of dreams, is not open to direct interpretation but is still understood as a dense portion of the dream from which “the dream-wish then arises”.¹⁹

20 Chapter Five presents a full display of petrol subjectivity that is powerfully drawn by Orpana to show that it is no longer possible to distinguish the consumer from the substance consumed. A petrocultural version of Frankenstein’s creature presides over a vision of despair (“it is not our lifestyles that are under threat. Rather they threaten us”), his gaze full of grief and pain and his torso either a dark bilious cloud of smog, volcanic ash, or perhaps this is a figure already transmogrified into oil or oil personified.²⁰ This page gives the reader a chance to contemplate more fully the title of Orpana’s book. Is it the dreams produced by gasoline or is it in fact that gasoline herself dreams us, her subjects? And yet on this page we also see that our predicament is also the condition for a possible reparation and rebuilding of “a world to rediscover once we embrace energy transition”.²¹

Chapter Six tackles “scenario planning” as what is usually practiced by oil companies such as Shell to propose a limited range of possible strategies to crisis none of which will upset the harmful growth-profit model they wish to maintain. As Orpana summarises, “scenario planning’s seemingly collaborative and open-ended form of storytelling helps contain, disguise and discipline discordant voices that might otherwise disturb the status quo of petroculture”.²² One take home message here is that so-called solutions to the climate crisis that do not address the problem of global inequity are merely trying to shore up the colonial capitalist system that has brought about the problems we face. The chapter opens with an imagined implementation of “stratospheric sulphur release” aimed at making the sky more reflective of heat from the sun. It does seem to avert global warming but with a concomitant instability in weather in some parts of the world and resulting protests and the need to violently suppress them. Orpana concludes that, despite the apparent success of the technology, “it would almost certainly reinforce the hegemony of the same technocratic and corporate elites who steered us into the current crisis”.²³ Orpana mounts a detailed critique of the shortcomings of Shell’s “Scenarios to 2050” which “assume the expansion of oil production as a given”.²⁴ Discussion of the financial instruments and operations that come into effect in some of these scenarios was somewhat dizzying for this reader though others better versed in the complexities of such terms as “futures contracts”, “leveragable event” and “priceable risk”²⁵ will doubtless appreciate these sections. Finally, Orpana finds more hope in the possibility of collaborative restoration among “the growing legions of wilful and reluctant exiles from petroculture”.²⁶

Chapter Seven, “Excess”, feels a little like an appendix providing a deeper historical background to expectations of endless capitalistic

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Ibid.*, 181.

²³ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

growth as one of the underpinnings of the climate crisis. Orpana refers to Alain Badiou's announcement that the neolithic revolution is the only real one, our current crisis being just the final working out of that breakthrough.²⁷ Key to the neolithic revolution was the relatively sudden development of agriculture and the creation of means of storing surplus produce and the associated birth of a class with control of and access to the surplus and thus with less need to work. Orpana makes clear that associated with the neolithic economy (and ours as its direct descendent) is its contrast with earlier indigenous structures especially in their support for generosity toward strangers.²⁸ Orpana cites Badiou's suggestion that we need a second over-turning in response to having reached the limits of the neolithic revolution "that would restore humanity's fundamental unity".²⁹ This chapter that began as a useful appendix on what we might term "deep economics" and that also contains a useful account of Bataille's nuanced concept of unused or unuseable surplus as "the accursed share",³⁰ also offers an intriguing though, for me, somewhat confusing detour into a psychoanalytical reading of *Taxi Driver* (1976, dir. Martin Scorsese). Having said that, I know there will be readers who will appreciate a detailed consideration of the significance for the film and for petroculture overall of the Freudian death drive³¹ along with Slavoj Žižek's updated Lacanian version of it³² together with other neo-Freudian ideas.

23 Orpana's final chapter, "The Beach", evokes the revolutionary hope associated with May 1968 via one of its slogans – "beneath the pavement, the beach" – to affirm the enduring existence of a robust, terrestrial materiality still capable, with the right collaborations, of supporting life and humanity.³³ There is a reassuringly autobiographic feel to this chapter as it recalls

Orpana's experiences of the freedom and subversiveness of street skateboarding in his hometown as a kid.³⁴ He proposes this as an activity symbolising freedom from petroculture available within its infrastructure³⁵ and contrasts its sense of community and camaraderie with the middle-class fantasy of individualism associated with surfing. At the heart of Orpana's respect for street skating is an alternative work ethic able to overcome repeated setbacks. This segues onto something akin to magic as monotonously repeated failed attempts to master a move "coalesce into a newly internalized ability to do what previously seemed impossible".³⁶ In a fascinating move, this focus on work transitions to a careful consideration of Maurizio Lazzarato's call to inefficiency and laziness as a means of refusal of petroculture's subjectivisation under the banner of productivity.³⁷ In a moment of quiet achievement, Orpana gently reminds us of his own contribution here: "comics are a terribly inefficient way to express ideas and research, from a time and energy perspective".³⁸ Nevertheless, I cannot help but admire Orpana's dogged insistence on expressing his ideas in this self-confessedly arduous and "inefficient" manner. To this I can add that ideas presented in this form demand a proportional extra effort from the reader as well! Readers will have to decide for themselves based on their own time and energy economies whether or not this way of reading is or is not in fact a labour of love of the human potential as yet unrealised under the economic regimes that have occupied our world for the past 10,000 years.

24 While I'm impressed with Orpana's genuine contribution towards the establishment of an energy epistemic drawn from theory and fiction, I'm not convinced that the notion of waking up from petroculture constitutes a new beginning. For me, a radical beginning implies a catastrophic ending, and so it simply is not the case, as Orpana puts it, that the apocalypses on our screens "are

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

³² *Ibid.*, 196 and 198.

³³ *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-219.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

disguises for things that have already happened to us”.³⁹ It seems clear that much, much worse is yet to come with the ramping up of global warming, species destruction, humanitarian crises and general planetary distress. Given the hardship of things to come, I wonder about the pleasures that petroculture has made possible. We know that oil is a finite resource. We know global stability is seriously threatened as oil reserves run out, become harder to locate, or, when located, more expensive and dangerous to exploit. What will be the consequences on our sense of well-being and the sociality that oil makes possible when we wake up from gasoline dreams?

25 Although the final page leaves the reader with the promise that “The true adventures lie

ahead”,⁴⁰ the ashen pages of *Gasoline Dreams* leave few cracks for the light to get in. On the other hand, what also seems clear is that Orpana also knows how dire the situation is and will become. In fact, notwithstanding glimmers of careful hope, Orpana’s book is largely plunged in darkness or half-light as his imagery relentlessly registers the pervasive miasma (often literally in parts per million) of petroculture and the dark dreams in which it immerses its subjects. And so I believe that a significant part of what *Gasoline Dreams* offers is an exercise in how to retain the word hope as a meaningful term while clearly understanding the immense scale of the task before us and future generations in making that happen. I look forward to Orpana’s next creative project.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 238.

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