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It requires surprisingly little effort to produce an alternative history of the past century in which oil plays the role of the central protagonist directing and organizing human life activity. Narratives of the World Wars are still typically shaped around the brave (or foolish) decisions made by generals and politicians to attack this or that enemy position following the dictates of military strategy. But ever since armies became mechanized, air forces took to the skies, and navies began to rely on oil (instead of coal) to fuel their ships, much of what passes for strategy can be encapsulated in the simple dictate to gain and maintain access to oil at any cost. In WWII, Japan and Germany began from positions of energy weakness: no oil on native soil. As a result, the drive of the Germans to Russia and North Africa, and of Japan to Southeast Asia, was motivated as much by the need for energy to keep their militaries on the move as they were by popular national narratives gone awry. Of Pearl Harbor, oil historian Daniel Yergin has written that “the primary target of this huge campaign remained the oil fields of the East Indies;” the attack on the U.S. was carried out in order to protect the Japanese flank and to safeguard tanker routes to the home island from Borneo and Sumatra. A modern world history told with oil at its center would no doubt be reductive, missing all manner of important human social, cultural, and political developments: the cause of WWII was not energy security, after all. At the same time, histories told without considering oil fail to account for the ways in which our dominant energy source shapes our lives materially and socially.

Oil is a substance whose impact has left its traces everywhere. The twentieth century would not have been the same without a source of energy easy to store and transport—one with a huge energy output per unit of fuel and which forms the basis of all manner of other substances (from plastics to lubricants) without which it is hard to imagine life on the planet today. That oil plays an important role in our lives in ways that we might not have believed—or have wanted to believe—is a fact that seems, at long last, to have become a conscious part of our social imaginaries. There is certainly no other commodity that commands public attention like oil, from news about the consequences of oil spills to expressions of growing concern about the environmental impact of our CO₂ economies. The freedoms and new forms of community generated by wireless devices and instantaneous global communication systems remain weighed down by the physical necessity of oil to make social and economic systems operate. Global and domestic politics are increasingly organized around energy security, whether this takes the form of Gulf War military adventurism, battles over pipeline expansions, or strategic investments by nations and sovereign wealth funds in extraction sites around the world. At a moment in which the exemplary form of the capitalist corporation is the tech firm, oil companies still retain the position that they have for much of the last century amongst the planet’s largest, most profitable, and most powerful firms. In the twenty-first century, we are no longer as blind as we once may have been to the simple fact that oil matters, and matters a great deal.

In his prophetic 1992 essay “Petrofictions,” author Amitav Ghosh famously laments the lack of fictions addressing oil and what he terms the “Oil Encounter”—the historic intertwining of the fates of Americans and the peoples of the Middle East over this resource. Ghosh offers multiple reasons why the sixteenth-century spice trade—his point of comparison—generated greater fictions (for example,

Luís de Camões’s *The Lusoids* [1572]) and more of them than has oil, including the professionalization of contemporary fiction, which he claims has to come to focus on “a stock of themes and subjects, each of which is accompanied by a well-tested pedagogic technology.” But if there is a single, dominant reason for the dearth of fictions addressing petroleum, it is that

To a great many Americans, oil smells bad. It reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises; of thousands of dead civilians and children and all the troublesome questions that lie buried in their graves.... And to make things still worse, it begins to smell of pollution and environmental hazards. It reeks, it stinks, it becomes a Problem that can be written about only in the language of Solutions.

In the intervening two decades, and with even more urgency since the start of the new century, writers, artists, and filmmakers have taken up the challenge of producing the petrofictions we need to fully make sense of oil societies. In doing so, they have tried to avoid framing oil in the blunt language of solutions and problems. The very best petrofictions being produced today understand oil not as a social problem to be (somehow, miraculously) ameliorated, but as a core element of our societies. Ghosh is perceptive in diagnosing the (still) surprising lack of fictions dealing with oil, but his choice of the spice trade as a point of comparison is mistaken. We need petrofictions not only in order to narrate the points of encounter between societies and individuals produced by the trade of desirable commodities; we need them because oil (unlike spices) is an *ur*-commodity: the substance on which the globe depends to heat its homes, to move bodies and goods around, to build and maintain infrastructure—the substance that, for better and for worse, makes the world go round.

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This special section on “Petrofictions” contains reviews of literary fiction (Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, Gustav Meyrink’s *Petroleum, Petroleum*, Teddy Wayne’s *Kapitoil*, and oil in world literature); science fiction novels (Steven Amsterdam’s *Things We Didn’t See Coming* and Robert Charles Wilson’s *Julian Comstock*); experimental fiction (Reza Negarestani’s *Cyclonopedia*); graphic novels (Steve Duin and Shannon Wheeler’s *Oil and Water* and the collection *Extraction! Comix Reportage*); political criticism (Ezra Levant’s *Ethical Oil*); art and architecture (installations by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the photos of Edward Burtynsky and Ed Kashi, the artwork of Ernst Logar); and philosophy (Allan Stoekl’s *Bataille’s Peak*). The range of genres and approaches represented here provides a sense of the work being carried out on oil today outside of and in addition to the numerous non-fiction books and academic studies that are published every year (works such as Antonia Juhasz’s *The Tyranny of Oil* [2009] or Timothy Mitchell’s excellent *Carbon Democracy* [2011]). At a minimum, all of these texts highlight the important role played by oil in contemporary society and the importance, too,



of narrative in shaping the ways we understand, respond to, and engage with our oil ontologies; this is perhaps especially the case in those texts in which there is a failure or refusal to take up the challenge posed by the surfacing to consciousness of the implications of our being-with-oil, as is the case in Levant’s controversial book. While the great works of petrofiction for which Ghosh longs remain to be written (though Graeme Macdonald offers a concluding perspective that argues otherwise), the books reviewed here suggest that there is, finally, a move afoot to puzzle out the implications of our dependency, as much metaphysical as material, on a slippery substance that connects technological futures with prehistorical pasts in ways that cannot but be difficult to conceptualize.

In recent film and fiction, the devastating spread of viral pandemics has been used to allegorize our degree of global interdependence while also framing moral lessons about the consequences of human interference into Nature. In a manner akin to recent films and TV programs such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *Blindness* (2008), *Contagion* (2011), and *The Walking Dead* (2010–present), Alex Scarrow’s novel *Last Light* (2008) narrates the rapidity with which life as we know it falls to pieces in the face of a global crisis. In the case of Scarrow’s narrative, the breakdown of UK society does not come about as a result of an infection that kills people off or turns them into zombies. Rather, it is the coordinated destruction by terrorists of oil infrastructure—of the systems through which it is extracted, refined, and transported—that leads to looting, violence, and finally, death on a massive scale. The UK produces little of its own food and only some of its own energy; in an era of just-in-time imports, it has minimal stocks of food, energy, and other goods on hand to wait out a crisis. Scarrow’s sci-fi scenario leaves the UK devastated and directionless within a week. As his protagonists wander around an empty London cityscape in which they are subject to surprise attack by ragged and starving people, one has to remember that this is the outcome of zombification through oil and not disease. It might seem as if, for effect, I have here been overstating the significance of oil for contemporary life. However, novels like Scarrow’s push us to understand that the everyday is as full of terrors as the exceptionality narrated by epidemics—perhaps even more so because the comforts of routine and faith in the predictability of our systems makes us love rather than fear the world we have made.

Imre Szeman is Canada Research Chair of Cultural Studies at the University of Alberta. His most recent publications include After Globalization (with Eric Cazdyn, 2011) and Cultural Theory: An Anthology (2011).