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The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after *Oil!*

Stephanie LeMenager*

In a subversive comic book that might be titled “Style Guide for the Long Emergency” but is instead titled *Fashion 2012*, cartoon characters ponder the role of aesthetics in a near future that delivers the convergence of peak oil and global warming.¹ Geologists suggest that the peak in global oil production already may have occurred, just as climate change forecasts point to the likely necessity of intensive energy consumption as we adjust to new, extreme weather. Though 2012 refers to the supposed end of the world by the Mayan Long Count Calendar, *Fashion 2012* posits not apocalypse but rather “people living, global warming, economic change” (Herbst 1). “I just don’t know how to dress anymore,” one character muses, “They used to say ‘dress for success.’ With the new reality, what is success when no one is getting rich?” (9). Another thinks, “I can’t afford to drive my car anymore . . . am I a failure?” (10). The small book pivots upon the brighter assertion of a third character that, “There are other things I can be” (15). But, as we turn the page, the cartoonist, Marc Herbst, introduces his own primary question, “What does that look like? . . . That is a question for artists” (16).

Artists and environmentalists both face the challenge of powering down to create smaller-scale, post-oil economies with imagination and courage. On YouTube, Rob Hopkins, founder of the “Transition Towns” movement for a sustainable post-oil future, urges us to remember that, although oil may be running out, imagination is not. “There’s no reason that the imagination and ingenuity that got us up to the top of the peak in the first place is going to disappear when we have to start figuring out how we’re going to get down the other side.”² Peak-oiler James Howard Kunstler

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vividly represents modes of fabrication not reliant upon petroleum infrastructures in his recent post-oil novel *World Made by Hand* (2008). For example: “Larry Prager was our dentist. With the electricity off most of the time, he did not have the high speed drill anymore. He got ahold of a 1920s pulley drill in Glens Falls, and Andrew Pendergast helped him rig it up to a foot treadle which Sharon could operate like a pump organ as she assisted her husband” (35). Kunstler’s post-oil *bricoleurs* animate a sentiment of hope within a future of diminished resources, just as Hopkins’s “transition tales,” which he tells to adults on YouTube and to children in public libraries, intend to create feasible, if imaginary, infrastructures for post-oil possible worlds. As Frank Kaminski argues in the first article to be written about post-oil fiction, post-oil authors recognize that people need “to be moved emotionally, as well as through their senses” (n.p.). Narrative art will be a key actor in establishing the ecological resilience of the human species. By Rob Hopkins’s definition, the resilient community must be flexible enough to reinvent its fundamental infrastructures, releasing itself from oil dependency to produce, largely by hand, all that it consumes. Holding a liter of petroleum, Hopkins gestures toward us with it from the visually dense YouTube screen. The pale brown contents of the glass liter bob up and down: “This liter of petroleum contains the same amount of energy that would be generated by my working hard physically for about five weeks. . . . The best place for this is to stay in the ground” (n.p.). What might *that* look like? The specificity of Hopkins’s “five weeks” of hard human labor generates muscle memory and an emotional drag upon his salutary call for post-oil environmental imagination.

This article offers a speculative treatment of the aesthetics of petromodernity, where petromodernity refers to a modern life based in the cheap energy systems long made possible by petroleum. Literature and film serve as my means of archiving sensory and emotional values associated with North American oil cultures of the twentieth century. My glosses, which are intentionally associative to express the newness of post-oil criticism, draw upon the work of environmentally sensitive social scientists who have made comprehensive studies of the relations of emotions to so-called affective geographies instantiated in the built environment. The point of such social criticism has not been to reiterate the hegemony of our petromodern sprawl but rather to explore how social affects might be shifted toward a very different looking and feeling post-petrol future.

Mimi Sheller has written about how the kinaesthetic and aesthetic dispositions created by acts of driving, which she sketches within the larger emotional geography of automobility, must be

taken into account as we confront the convergence of peak oil and global warming. Citing feminist and queer theorists' calls to recognize the body's investments in or divestitures from material culture, Sheller argues that any environmental argument against car culture must take into account the "affective contexts that are also deeply materialized in particular types of vehicles, homes, neighborhoods, and cities" (229). In brief, we have to consider the consequences of loving sprawl. One example of how ignoring such affective matters can backfire appears in a psychological study cited by the geographer and climate change consultant Susanne Moser, where people who had been educated about anthropogenic climate change said that they were more likely to purchase SUVs, in order to protect themselves from the extreme new weather (69).

While both Sheller and Moser are interested in emotions as indices of feasible environmental policy, the philosopher Kate Soper has asked, more fundamentally, if there can be an erotics of sustainability, an affective intensity attached to limited growth, or no growth, that might rival, say, the embodied intensities of petromodern consumer culture, with its pimped autos, supple plastics, and diverse hard-soft-and-wet "wares."³ Soper's foundational query is echoed by the cartoonist Herbst, who in addition to raising the dilemma of dressing for success in a failing or (optimistically) relocating economy, asks simply, "How does today's community gardener dress? How can we imagine what that acts like?" (7). Rather than give away the ending of Herbst's *Fashion 2012*, where a post-petrol style does begin to materialize, I'd like to press his question upon history, and particularly upon a history of environmental aesthetics and representation. The historical question that I see as relevant to Herbst's and Soper's concerns, as well as to the creative ventures of peak-oilers like Kunstler, is why petromodernity has enveloped the Euro-American imagination to the extent that "oil" has become implicitly synonymous with the world, in a large, Heideggerian sense of the human enframing and revealing of earth, thus the world we know.

As a recent Wikipedia entry asks, with unintentionally absurd poignancy: "Why is oil so bad?" This query will be my refrain, and what I mean by it is why might twentieth-century petromodernity offer strong resistance to the imagination of alternatives, even as we recognize its unsustainability? What interests me is why the world that oil makes remains so beloved, rather than the more obvious problem of why it is difficult to build an entirely new energy infrastructure. Following Lawrence Buell's investigation of "toxic discourse" in the late 1990s, I want to analyze petroleum media while remaining cognizant of pragmatic concerns but not

focused upon them.⁴ My questions are for artists, broadly speaking, rather than physicists or engineers.

One of the most truly revolutionary, in the sense of world-upturning, aspects of late twentieth-century environmentalism was its primary focus on the oil spill, which jump-started the US movement in California in 1969 and which offered a reinterpretation of oil extraction as death-making, rather than a realization of modern life. Yet most human survivors of the twentieth century, including a good number of self-identified environmentalists, are driving cars, using petroleum-based plastics, walking on asphalt, filling our teeth with complex polymers, and otherwise living oil. Peak-oil thinkers like Hopkins may be the deliverers of twentieth-century environmentalism's revolutionary promise. Yet the success of trans-local movements such as the "Transition Network" relies implicitly upon actual apocalypse and a drastic diminution of human population—prospects rather cheerily expected by some peak-oilers. Perhaps the insight here is that the human body has become, in the wealthier parts of the world, a petroleum *natureculture*, to use Bruno Latour's term for the inevitable intermixture of the self-generating (organic) and the made (7). Moreover, larger petroleum naturecultures envelop many of us as seamless atmosphere. We live the trope "oil weather," a trope that was coined by early-twentieth-century oil workers to describe the persistent fires so common to oil fields that they became naturalized as climate.⁵

The US has experienced the natureculture of petromodernity since roughly the 1920s, when, ironically, some labored to imagine living oil just as now others labor to imagine living without it. For example, Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (1927), basis for the Academy Award winning film *There Will Be Blood* (2007), is a novel committed to international socialism, a novel that explicitly equates the oil business with the technophilic horrors of World War I and a global economic restructuring that denies human-scale values. Yet this "committed" novel also generates a series of aesthetic images and environmental emotions that valorize driving and even the process of oil extraction, showing both of these industrial-era activities as modes of facilitating the body's capacity for self-extension toward *other* life. Early in *Oil!*, Sinclair writes of a father and son stopping by the roadside to put chains on their tires: "Dad wiped his hands on the fog-laden plants by the roadside; the boy did the same, liking the coldness of the shining globes of water" (8). Roadsides are prominent landscapes in *Oil!*. In the preceding scene, we have an example of literature doing what Elaine Scarry has described as "directing" the imagination's peculiar powers of virtual perception: images of gauziness and

transparency (fog, water) are overlaid upon another depicted surface (plants) to render the latter (plants) an apparent solidity (14–15). Sinclair’s image feels life-like. He transforms the roadside into a vivid imaginary place—one more capable of generating affective investment than sites of greater political value in his novel, such as his communitarian college, “Mt. Hope.”

1. Why Is Oil So Bad? *Because it has supported overlapping media environments to which there is no apparent “outside” that might be materialized through imagination and affect as palpable hope*

Sinclair’s *Oil!* is a type of peak-oil fiction, since it was written as a warning against global petromodernity from the moment of peak-oil *discovery* in the US—again, the late 1920s. The novel strives to imagine curtailing petromodern development in a manner complementary to the fictional post-petrol futures offered by recent peak-oil novels. In both cases, artists struggle to break out of media environments reliant upon petroleum infrastructure. Consider a scene rather late in *Oil!*, when Sinclair’s radical hero, Paul Watkins, lies dying in a Los Angeles hospital. The reader has been directed to feel outrage at Watkins’s injury; he was beaten at an IWW rally by Red-baiting so-called patriots. As Watkins loses consciousness, Sinclair, in a rare nod to Modernist technique, intercuts the absurdly pleasant song playing on a neighbor’s radio with his manifest plot. The controlling voice of the novel, at this point an earnest Socialist youth, is silenced by popular lyrics: “What do I do? / I toodle-doodle-doo, / I toodle-doodle-doodle, doodle-doo!” (543) Given that Sinclair was not a playful prose stylist, this rare instance of heteroglossic frisson points archly to the manner in which the comic potential of a modern consumer culture already founded upon cheap energy challenges the intention of “doing,” as in acting in a manner that is truly counter to petro-capitalism.

The novel itself is a media environment that refers to (and is referred by) other media environments supported by petroleum, from the fictional auto dealerships that Sinclair tells us sponsor the fictional neighbor’s radio broadcast to the actual petroleum involved in the manufacture and transport of the novel. In the late 1920s, commercial book manufacturers might rely upon coal-generated electricity, perhaps even older steam or hydropower technologies; one could still find commercial presses operated by treadles, like Kunstler’s vintage 1920s dental drill—but these probably would be printing small-town newspapers.⁶ However, it

is possible that petroleum-based fuel was used in the transportation of Sinclair's book, by light truck, even in the late 1920s. The total distance for book shipment then could not have approached the average 1.25 billion miles that books travel today, primarily in trucks and container ships.

The 2007 edition of *Oil!* that I refer to in this essay is heavily indebted to petroleum. The ink that creates the words on the page of my edition of *Oil!*, words that direct my imagination and activate my senses, is largely a mixture of petroleum-based resins and oils. I literally enter an immersive literary environment through petroleum-based language. My critical reflections upon this literary environment will also take form as petroleum-based language. Of course, petroleum in the form of diesel fuel has supported my book's travel, and the travel of its component parts, namely its paper. Electricity, fuel oil, and natural gas have kept press equipment running, heated and lighted buildings that house press equipment. The book has occupied many sites, some of which exist solely for it, such as its place of manufacture, storage warehouses, retail stores, libraries, private homes. Ultimately my edition of *Oil!*—well, not mine, but one like it—could be thrown away and driven to a landfill. Imagine, then, more diesel.⁷ To step outside of petromodernity would require a step outside of media, including the contemporary printed book. As Marc Herbst might query, *What does that act like?*

The inescapability of petroleum infrastructures in the twentieth century has entered literature in the form of both dystopian and utopian imagery. This imagery became of particular literary interest in the 1950s and 1960s, when petromodernity reached its classic phase within the US-built environment. I use the term "petrotopia," signifying petroleum-utopia, to refer to the now ordinary US landscape of highways, low-density suburbs, strip malls, fast food and gasoline service islands, and shopping centers ringed by parking lots or parking towers. My inclusion of the term "utopia" in a description of a far from ideal environment draws upon David Harvey's critical assessment of utopianism as a hegemonic "spatial ordering" (160). Harvey recognizes the implementation of utopianism to result in political systems that "strictly regulate a stable and unchanging social process," such that "the dialectic of social process is repressed" and "no future needs to be envisaged because the desired state is already achieved." The building of the auto-highway-sprawl complex has been a utopian project. We can recognize its origins in the Radiant City of Le Corbusier or the massive highway projects of Robert Moses—disasters on the human scale, for the most part, born of what Corbu called the "rapture of power . . . and speed" (xxiii), often racially

inflected schemes to eliminate urban “blight,” and more broadly the potential of traffic, né commerce, to expand the band-width of information and pleasure.⁸

As utopia, petrotopia represents itself as an ideal end-state, repressing the violence that it has performed upon, for example, south Bronx neighborhoods leveled for freeway development or the wetlands below New Orleans which were filled to build suburban homes. While petrotopia represses the dialectics of social and ecological process, it foregrounds a temporal schema that serves its goals. Sprawl and spread suggest movement outward, in time, but minus an ethical imperative that ascribes notions of consequence to time. In its amoral, monstrous reproduction of itself in its own image, petrotopia resembles the species of utopia Harvey describes as the processual utopia of free market ideology, which, when it “comes to ground,” produces space to restlessly destroy and reorganize it in the service of (petro) capital (177). This relentless production of space creates problems of scale that, in turn, invite the return of repressed consequences, irreversible damage.

The points at which utopian imagining, “the infinite work of the imagination’s power of figuration,” in theorist Louis Marin’s terms, meet a discrete unit of narrative time, something that happened and cannot be undone, can be instructive of how petrotopia betrays itself, tipping back into the more solid proposition of socio-ecological disaster (413). Temporally discrete “event” produces rents in the petrol screen. This essentially formal problem of narrative structure challenging an ideology reliant upon iconicity and image has been discussed in philosophical terms as the bad faith of technocratic modernity. Environmental philosopher Barbara Adam names the fantasy of temporal “reversibility” as a fundamental principle of the technoscientific optimism growing out of the Cold War (41). The damage wrought by technoscience can be undone, in other words—that is the fantasy. It is my purpose here to consider a few events in cultural history where the specter of the irreversible interrupts petromodern ebullience, and the media environments sustained by petroleum infrastructure break to static. This static, the brief interruption of the message, may be the closest analogue to hope that we inherit from the twentieth century.

In the early 1970s, on the verge of the world oil crisis that would throw the US into doubt about the sustainability of its petroleum infrastructure, the German architect Reyner Banham experienced a conversion. After years of reviling the decadence of US car culture, Banham fell in love with Los Angeles. For him, the fact that Los Angeles seemed to have been built for the purpose of

“direct personal gratification” (94), with its robust public “architecture of commercial fantasy” served by ubiquitous freeways, signified a savage “innocence” (104). His Romantic, distinctly European exoticization of US frontierism in *Los Angeles: An Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971) makes it a distant cousin to Chateaubriand’s *Atala* (1801), the early European invocation of the American noble savage that inspired James Fenimore Cooper. Banham named Los Angeles’s auto-infrastructure “autopia,” ironically and apparently coincidentally also the name of a ride Walt Disney designed for the Tomorrowland section of his California theme park, one where children drove miniature, gas-fueled cars. For Banham, Los Angeles’s autopia becomes a virtual network of organisms (humans, cars, signage, freeways) engaged in mutual, sustaining relations as a “fourth ecology” within the urban region.

Banham naturalizes the urban petroscape by explicitly comparing it to Los Angeles’s coastal ecology, which he links to human practice and co-partnership in the name “surfurbia” (19). Place, ecologically speaking, becomes a system of use, of living. This is the vernacular reading of the built environment also evident in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) and in the work of Jane Jacobs, but with an interesting premonition of cyborgism. Both “the freeway system in its totality” (195) and the “seventy-odd miles” of “white sand running from Malibu to Balboa” (19) suggest to Banham democratic access and transcendental values, “a state of mind” (195) that creates humans living in the Los Angeles basin as “Angelenos” (19). Banham’s likening of the Los Angeles highway-system to the beach as similar civic commons falters at only one point within his poetic analogizing, and that is in the discrete historical moment when smog “came” to Los Angeles, in the mid-1940s. In the midst of asserting (in one of his most polemical claims) that traffic does not have a negative social effect in Los Angeles, Banham concedes that smog, emanating from traffic, does: “[I]t is the psychological impact of smog that matters in Los Angeles. The communal trauma of Black Wednesday (8 September 1943), when the first great smog zapped the city in solid, has left permanent scars, because it broke the legend of the land of eternal sunshine. . . . To make matters worse, analysis showed that a large part of the smog . . . is due to effluents from the automobile” (198). That cars could make a city black figures for Banham as an eclipse of the utopian imaginary of California in much the same way that Bill McKibben, in the late 1980s, hailed anthropogenic climate change as the end of Nature. Southern California, with its sunshine and endless opportunities for self-extension via gadgetry, was, for the twentieth century, the

Nature of the Modern, a perpetually available Nature open to the varied practices of industrial leisure.

When the paradise of modernity met smog, the *LA Times* initially reported the city besieged by a “gas attack”; the event at first appeared mysterious and inexplicably severe, vaguely linked to “industrial stacks and vehicle traffic” (“City” 1). The southern California press offers an archive of shock and at times absurd efforts to indict the atmosphere for, it seems, breach of contract. “One municipal judge threatened to adjourn court this morning if the condition persists” (“City” 1). It took years for the oil refineries and smelters in the industrial grid south of Los Angeles to curtail emissions, and automobiles weren’t recognized as the major cause of the problem until the 1950s. The Air Quality Act of 1967 gave California the right to enforce anti-pollution measures stricter than those required by the federal government—an exceptional right which was recently reanimated by proponents of higher “C.A.F.E.” standards for the state.⁹ Smog threatened to change California’s literary genre, from a paradisaical allegory to a narrative heavily reliant upon cause-and-effect, concluding, at best, in the treatment of effect, or remediation. Climate-amenity migrants were scared by southern California’s “atmospheric freaks,” and both tourism and real estate values suffered (“Atmospheric” n.p.).

Personal means of remediation, such as the “smog mask,” the “smog suit,” and even smog-proof makeup, suggested a smog lifestyle that was both ironic and earnest, insofar as it connected Los Angeles’s maturation as a city to the pollution crises of other great industrial metropolises.¹⁰ London’s Great Smog of 1952, caused by sulfur dioxide emissions from coal fires, originated the smog mask that became both solution and joke for Angelenos. The artist Claes Oldenburg’s drawing “Smog Mask” (1966), now hangs in the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. A profile of a woman wearing a mask that appears as a giant penis and scrotum, the drawing in its current context comments upon the history of Los Angeles, suggesting southern California’s self-realization as a natureculture in which genetic mutation or at best cyborgism will replace the naïve “delights of out-door life” touted by turn-of-the-century boosters. In 1886, it was possible for an *LA Times* columnist operating under the nom de plume “Susan Sunshine” to state that “our houses may be flooded with fresh air and sunshine three hundred days a year” (3). In 1956, the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* recommends enclosing oneself in a personal climate: “Want to Beat the Smog and Heat? Put on a Mask and Start a Fan.” A photograph of one Carl Bishop of Long Beach illustrates the technique of creating personal weather,

warning that Mr. Bishop, looking elephantine rather than penile in his smog gear, might scare off “the door-to-door salesman” (“Want” n.p.). The effects of smog on Los Angeles sociality are implicit.

Smog suggested a climate of irreversibility, damage wrought by modernity, and therefore a climate of environmental melancholia. From the 1940s smog crisis onward, Los Angeles has offered a front line in the ongoing battle for the meaning of “the environment,” whether this will be a term denoting non-produced life or a broader designation of the lifelike objects, infrastructures, and screens that humans make, sometimes in concert with nonhumans. In sum, Los Angeles poses the question: is “environment” life or media?

The seemingly postmodern idea of the environment as screen, specifically, may originate in southern California well before the smog era. In the peak-oil discovery moment of the late 1920s and early 1930s, when California was producing 20% of the world’s oil, numerous derricks and other industrial structures presented an aesthetic problem to Californians almost as inescapable as smog. In 1930, the firms of Olmsted Brothers and Bartholomew and Associates submitted a report to the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce titled *Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches in the Los Angeles Region*, which offers a curious amalgamation of conservationism and technophilic fantasy. The report is familiar to historians for being a ghost in the archives, a much-written-over layer of the city palimpsest that represents an alternative to contemporary Los Angeles’s freeways and strip malls. Olmsted and Bartholomew offer a gentler petroscape in which highways, which the planners termed “pleasure parkways,” justify their existence by providing exemplary views (qtd. in Hise 23).¹¹

The word “parkway” indicates a history of auto usage that predates the 1930s, in which cars were imagined as touring vehicles rather than simple means of getting from one place to another; roads, in turn, were conceived as scenic drives. As Kenneth T. Jackson notes, “extraordinarily wide, these elaborate roads [parkways] were seen as extensions of the developing park system, intended to provide a pleasant pathway from one open space to another” (75). Curvilinear, planted avenues created the picturesque look of early twentieth-century suburbs. What is significant about the Olmsted and Bartholomew plan for Los Angeles County is that it proposes a road system made up almost entirely of parkways for an intensively industrializing urban region. This plan, again, pivots upon the idea of screens. “Screens” for Olmsted and Bartholomew mean landscape features that can be allocated generously to hide ecological wounds (qtd. in Hise 29).¹²

Their screening strategy qualifies as what Marshall McLuhan, always essentially interpreting media as environment, called the “puny and peripheral efforts of artists” to register adjustments to new scales of technological development that were bound to change human sociality (70). The architects’ generous plantings and carefully constructed views are attempts at a faux “atmosphericity” that covers the sights and sounds of industries producing biochemical effluents already building toward the smog crisis.

The genealogy of Los Angeles’s car culture from the production of cheap petroleum coming out of California does not figure in the Olmsted and Bartholomew plan at all. This is odd, given that the spread of derricks into southern California beaches and residential suburbs constituted a huge problem for regional planners in this period, who were torn between promoting industry and real estate. Derricks blocked ocean views and made surrounding communities ugly. Because oil deposits were often located just off shore, derricks tended to mass along the coasts on the most valuable beach properties. The Olmsted and Bartholomew report includes one photograph of Signal Hill, the Long Beach neighborhood that Upton Sinclair uses as a model for his fictional town of Prospect Hill in *Oil!* and that came to be called “Porcupine Hill” due to the massing of oil derricks upon it. Under the report’s grainy photo of Signal Hill, a caption suggests that “along the ridge among the oil wells a parkway is needed” (qtd. in Hise 25). This caption and photograph, not at all elaborated in the body of the text, seem stunningly incongruent. Would the insertion of a pleasure parkway for leisurely driving among the oil derricks reframe them as an aesthetic good, or is the point to screen this massive development along a highway corridor that walls out the preconditions of its own presence with “plantings”? The intentions of the urban planners’ single assay at oil field design cannot be recovered, but their indication that form might be achieved against the historical problem of irreversibility makes their plan for Los Angeles recognizably modern.

The industrial practice of diffusing the aura of a thing by “bringing it close,” as Walter Benjamin describes the achievement of reproducible images, shows up here in the possibility of making a roadway into the surreal landscape of the derricks, a landscape that the road would then remake as screen experience—visual “interest” without the symptoms of threat or power that might be implied by keeping such things as oil derricks at a distance (222–23). Olmsted and Bartholomew’s plan for Los Angeles participates in the tight-cropping of devastated landscapes that has recently been attributed to the monumental images of industrial waste made famous by Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, in his series

Manufactured Landscapes (2003). In both cases, a media game replaces the idea of a world as “total environment or surround space,” in media theorist Marie-Laure Ryan’s phrase. The public, the players, are asked to manipulate perspective, to experience point-of-view, to embrace a version of environment-as-play that need not stand for anything outside of itself or concern itself with what it might stand for (91). Such clever gamescapes fail to recognize the real possibilities of remediation and yet are genuine assays at agency in the face of petroleum’s self-referential, total world—of its “ubiquity made visible,” as Roland Barthes imagined the twentieth-century presence of (petroleum-derived) plastics (97).

2. Why Is Oil So Bad? *Because of the mystified ecological unconscious of modern car culture, which allows for a persistent association of driving with being alive*

The first chapter of *Oil!* reminds contemporary readers why Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., who was the son of the architect of Central Park, might mistake driving for “outdoor recreation” in the 1930s. What the car suggests in *Oil!* is not the speed/power complex easily associated with modernity but rather a series of encounters with rich ecologies supported by the automobile’s prosthetic body and a rhizomatic network of 14-foot-wide “highways” that figure as openings rather than means of interpellation. Sinclair’s boy-narrator, “Bunny,” son of the oil magnate “Dad” Ross, who drives the car, identifies “jackrabbit” and “butcher bird” and “road-runners” from the passenger seat (15); he notes the manner in which the automobile “unrolls” “new vistas . . . deep gorges, towering old pine trees, gnarled by storms” (6). Taken together, auto, highway, and scenery act as a moist media, to borrow Roy Astor’s term for media that is at least partially organic. The road and car make the child’s experience more life-like. Sinclair indicates that Bunny’s passenger-side viewing facilitates an “imagining” not available to his father, who drives (14).

In the same historical moment that Sinclair writes, Frederick Olmsted, Jr. designed the infrastructure for passenger-side fancies like Bunny Ross’s, creating the now familiar features of state and federal park roads, such as turnouts, spurs, and loops, in a report he completed prior to his plan for Los Angeles, the *State Parks Survey of California* (1929). Unlike the Olmsted plan for Los Angeles County, much of *State Parks* has come to fruition in today’s built environment. Commissioned by the Save-the-Redwoods League, this report emphasized the importance of state control over what Olmsted terms “foregrounds of more

notable and valuable landscapes enjoyable from the road,” another version of environmental screening that set real limitations on industrial forestry (29).

Up through the 1920s, when California voters approved a road-accessible state park system, the car was conceived as a means of achieving a premodern vision of nature that had been lost to the railroad.¹³ Like preindustrial transport by horse, cars allowed closer, slower viewing than had been possible in trains. Auto-tourism captured the US middle class in the early twentieth century and was boosted by auto club campaigns to “See America First.”¹⁴ By the 1950s, the fact that automobiles could reach speeds up to 100 miles per hour and that over 40,000 miles of freeways were in the making shifted the ecological significance of cars. The new car “problem” received articulation in the Wilderness Act of 1964, which prohibits motorized vehicles from federally designated wilderness—a promise not clearly met, as Edward Abbey famously notes in his manifesto on industrial tourism. Abbey chides the park system for road-building that caters to “the indolent millions born on wheels and suckled on gasoline” (423).

At roughly the same historical moment after World War II that the auto-freeway system began to be associated with destructive human indolence, the road novel reached its classic form in the US. This immense field of fiction might be viewed as a nostalgic response to older modes of transportation, including slower driving and bus touring, although it also suggests the car’s final triumph, as a virtual body, over non-produced (organic) life. Road fiction invites a confusion of driving and narrative itself as modes of movement and the enactment of time, as if driving were a fundamental cognitive process, like narrative, as well as a fundamental physiological experience of being human, in time. As we anticipate a near future of two billion cars, the ecological unconscious of North American road fiction grows more troubling. While environmental historians have written extensively about the car’s relationship to environmental imagination, I think it worthwhile to touch briefly on what automobility as media can tell us about US environmentalism’s affective entanglement in oil.

Let us experiment with just a few chosen objects. Consider, for example, that McLuhan described the car as “hot media,” a device so perfectly attuned to the human senses that it precludes critical thought and allows for a simulation of living, and living more.¹⁵ Consider Lionel Trilling’s classic reading of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and the “curious moral mobility [the novel] forces upon us,” as if it applied not to our reacquaintance with romantic love through pedophilia but to our acquiescence to

the petrophilia that makes *Lolita's* 27,000 miles of driving imaginable (371). Gas stations are crucial switch-points in *Lolita*, “where my destiny was liable to catch,” quips Humbert Humbert (211). Gas stations generate ekphrastic moments where the novel pauses to reorganize itself around the architectural information (“whitewalled tires,” “bright cans of motor oil,” “that red icebox” [211]) of what pop theorists recognize as the most universal commercial structure of the twentieth century. Ed Ruscha’s pop photo essay *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963), with its emphases upon figures, prices, flags, and commercial ciphers such as “regular,” “Standard,” and “service,” economizes the theory of “contemporary decadence,” in Ruscha’s words, that Nabokov also ties to the gas station through an infinite referral of the road genre itself to rape (qtd. in Marshall 62). *Lolita* repairs to a gas station toilet to address her hurts after her first “strenuous” sex with Humbert, and ever after the gas station signifies that she is a child who has been abducted and yearns to escape.

Consider that Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), the US road novel most readily compared to *Lolita*, offers the internal combustion engine as complementary in its material effects to the atom bomb. The bomb, as Sal Paradise muses upon it from the window of an old Ford, is the reason for being “beat,” insofar as it “had come [and] could crack all our bridges and roads,” thereby wrecking the physical means of escaping boredom, parents, and small towns (299). Sal narrates Dean Moriarty’s aggressive driving as an enactment of anxiety, in Freud’s sense of anxiety as preperformance—in this case, the preperformance of the auto wreck that haunts all twentieth-century American boys. “[Dean] passed the slow cars, swerved, and almost hit the left rail of the bridge, went head-on into the shadow of the unslowing truck, cut right sharply.” This incident reminds Sal of an auto accident that killed a “famous bop clarinetist” on another summer’s “red afternoon” in Illinois (237). The car wreck and the bomb are instantiations of otherwise vague “white sorrows” that link Kerouac’s Beats to the white counter-culture which made environmentalism hip in the late 1960s. In the wake of the classic road novel, Ralph Nader would publish *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965), initiating a consumer movement against auto-industry deregulation that also assisted contemporary US environmentalism, in its expression as regulatory activism.

As media that allied human freedom to kinetic stimulation, cars made the mass death promised by the bomb more intolerable, more symbolic of what it might mean not to move or feel. Cars made the human body more valuable, pleasurable, and fun. They also caused, and still cause, more human deaths per day than any

single agent, forcing questions about human consumption, the price of the mediated self made possible by cheap energy. For Americans, the car and the road enable the sense of radical materiality—feeling embodied—that has been theorized as ecological affect, implicitly in Bruno Latour’s contribution to Actor-Network-Theory and more explicitly in corporeal feminism.¹⁶ The US road novel archives human coming-to-knowledge of itself as volatile *matter*. Twentieth-century US environmentalism holds phenomenological debts to car culture which entangle it in unhelpful body sensations and narrative emotions, like petrophilia and white flight.

3. Why Is Oil So Bad? *Because its biophysical properties have caused it to be associated with the comic lower bodily stratum. In brief: oil has been shit and sex, the essence of entertainment*¹⁷

The biophysical properties of oil made it difficult to demystify, especially in the 1920s when the US approached peak-oil discovery with the excitement attributable to other mining events, like the Gold Rush. Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* debuted at a moment of heightened public ambivalence about oil extraction. Of course, oil continues to generate intense ambivalence as we recognize a future of post-peak scarcity. Oil’s “liquid mobility” and “subterranean” origin, as Michael Watts observes in regard to oil’s symbolic resonance in contemporary Nigeria, continue to suggest “all manner of extraordinary magic events,” including the contrary fantasies of “life without work” and the “power to tarnish and turn everything into shit” (212).¹⁸ While the extraction of oil cannot be performed without labor, the spectacle of it gushing from the earth suggests divine or Satanic origins, a *givenness* that confers upon it an inherent value disassociated from social relations. A former Venezuelan president poetically referred to oil as “the devil’s excrement” (qtd. in Watts 212). Oil’s dirtiness and fecal qualities, as a “black and sticky fluid” emerging in the wake of pressurized natural gas, have served not only to naturalize it but also to place it within a comic, relatively open narrative frame (Watts 191). The representational problem oil presents to the committed artist, be he a socialist such as Sinclair or an environmentalist, has to do with oil’s primal associations with earth’s body, and therefore with the permeability, excess, and multiplicity of all bodies deemed performed *and* given. While the documentary realist can present the immiseration of oil workers or the pollution of environments

The representational problem oil presents to the committed artist, be he a socialist such as Sinclair or an environmentalist, has to do with oil’s primal associations with earth’s body, and therefore with the permeability, excess, and multiplicity of all bodies. . . . [O]il itself retains the indeterminacy and openness to mystification of a living/performing spectacle.

subjected to oil mining, oil itself retains the indeterminacy and openness to mystification of a living/performing spectacle.

The spectacular nature of the oil strike, in that it allows an audience to experience discovery with its own senses, confers an illusion of democratic access to such scenes, in addition to an illusion that oil, and its profits, belong to everyone. While in many American countries oil has been recognized as the property of the nation, in the US oil rights almost always have belonged to private owners.¹⁹ Though recognized in certain environments such as city or state-owned beaches as a public resource, oil primarily has been used to defend private land ownership *as the basis of democratic access* to social goods within the US. Yet the aesthetic properties of oil as sight, sound, and smell, especially in the “mysteriously thrilling” performance of the gusher, perpetuate the fantasy of public participation (Sinclair 78). In Sinclair and in nonfiction accounts from the 1920s, lines of cars show up to witness strikes and gushers, prototypically modern miracles.²⁰

In the novel *Oil!*, oil itself returns, with almost every representation of its discovery, as an excessively embodied figure, the viscous medium of unregulated play. It is apparently more alive than its human witnesses. Paul Thomas Anderson’s loose film adaptation of *Oil!, There Will Be Blood* (2007), captures aspects of oil’s liveliness in Daniel Plainview’s (aka Dad Ross’s) first oil discovery, when in the midst of the well’s gush oil splashes onto the camera lens, leaping toward the viewer in what would be a marvelous 3-D effect had the filmmakers employed that technology. Plainview’s turn toward the Satanic bears relation to oil’s power of self-propulsion. During the well fire in Little Boston that maims his son HW, Plainview callously ignores the boy, standing spell-bound before a (computer-generated) column of burning oil. That oil has a greater life-value than the human is signified by the film’s scaling of Plainview and his roughnecks as small figures in silhouette against the brilliant column of oil and fire. In Sinclair’s *Oil!*, narrative point-of-view assists oil’s capacity to stimulate excitement. Moments of oil discovery in the novel are filtered through the preadolescent consciousness of the oil magnate’s son, Bunny. “There she came! . . . [T]he spectators went flying to avoid the oily spray blown by the wind. They let her shoot for a while, until the water had been ejected; higher and higher . . . she made a lovely noise, hissing and splashing, bouncing up and down!” (78) For a 13-year-old male narrator, industrial-scale pollution and waste translate into arousal and premature ejaculation. In Bill Brown’s elaboration of “thing theory,” such literary re-signifying might be construed as a revelation of the emotional history in oil,

“the anxieties and aspirations that linger there in the material object” (935).

Early twentieth-century photographs from US oil camps in California and northern Veracruz tend to be comic, emphasizing the spectacle of the gusher and its blackening of oil workers, local buildings, and landscapes. Such photographs suggest an industrial blackface whose secret joke is the multiform agency of money, rather than whiteness. However, race played an important role in the early oil industry. California oil camps were segregated and predominantly white, while US companies in Mexico maintained a rigid racial caste system among their “white,” Chinese, Mexican, and indigenous workers (Santiago 164). Yet the scale of the industry—again, not calibrated to human values—makes possible representational sleights-of-hand where racialized bodies, and labor itself, might be occluded through a mediated visibility. Such occlusions became significant for the oil industry’s promotion. Edward L. Doheny, the oil baron whose life story Upton Sinclair drew upon for *Oil!*, helped to create a genre of pro-oil propaganda in the 1920s that has a recognizable legacy in US popular culture through oil epics such as the film *Giant* (1955) and even the television series *Dallas* (1978–1991). Though Doheny lived in southern California, his most extensive oil interests were in Mexico, along the gulf coast’s so-called Golden Lane, from the port city of Tampico to the indigenous town of Tuxpan. This essentially off-shore location for early US oil corporations allowed for less regulation and more strenuous manipulation of imagery.

In *Mexican Petroleum* (1922), a booklet issued by Doheny’s Pan American Petroleum and Transport Company and co-written by Doheny, a company clerk named W. J. Archer describes the oil-soaked workers who sealed off a notoriously wasteful gusher called Cerro Azul No. 4 at an oil camp in Veracruz: “No photograph could adequately portray the appearance of [these men]. Their clothes were drenched with oil until their weight became insupportable. Hands, faces, everything were [sic] a shining black. Every tool, every piece of equipment, every building within range of the well, glistened and dripped in the sun” (102). In the photograph that accompanies this description, we see the men standing in a receding arc like actors making a curtain call, with oil-soaked bodies turned to brilliant, reflecting surfaces. They are metallic and stationary. In a text where the racial difference of ethnic Mexicans raises concerns (Doheny and Archer anxiously reiterate their loyalty to the US company), a group of workers become universalized, iconic. In fact, all of these workers were apparently “foreign,” in other words non-Mexican and theoretically white. The value of the photographic image inheres in its making this

fact irrelevant, in its superimposition of mineral wealth upon multivalent skin. Blackness has nothing to do with race in this image, but rather with the emptying of the signifying potential of culturally particularized bodies toward a deflecting sensational effect.

What is literally depicted in such images of oil-soaked men is industrial pollution. The photographic image, with its relatively low narrativity and under-determined temporal dimension, “crops” pollution as a story that unfolds slowly over space and time. The industry pamphlet recasts the massive spillage of Doheny’s poorly regulated gushers, which we now know caused extensive damage to local Mexican ecologies and food systems, in terms of a visual and stationary art: “[E]very leaf, every flower, every blade of grass now vivid with greens and brilliant colors . . . was converted as if by magic into the fantastic dream of some futuristic painter, all a glistening black as if fashioned of highly burnished metal” (Archer 96). *Mexican Petroleum* betrays a surprising interest in aesthetics. We can see in this early industry literature a working-through of the greenwashing associated with today’s oil corporations, most notoriously British Petroleum’s \$200 million rebranding campaign (as “BP” or “Beyond Petroleum”) in the mid-1990s.

In fact, Edward Doheny’s Cerro Azul well cast miles-long blankets of crude upon the Mexican countryside that surrounded it. The oil, acting as an efficient herbicide, killed flora within days of exposure—but this is the revisionary narrative of an environmental historian (Santiago 125). For Doheny, in 1922, it could all be conceived in terms of “marvels,” special effects *avant* the apparatus of the green screen or CGI. *Mexican Petroleum* points to the complementarity of the “youngest of industries,” the film industry, and the oil industry. “No [still] photograph” can convey “the force” that Doheny unleashes, the pamphlet asserts (Archer 98). Doheny insists that he must maintain a film crew on site at his Mexican camps. Film’s capacity to capture time, and in effect to document the destruction of the gushing well, allows Doheny to ally himself with the potency of both oil and time. Filming oil becomes, early on, wedded to extracting it. As Rahman Badalov has written of the film industry in the oil-rich nation of Azerbaijan, “It was inevitable that the paths of oil and cinema would intersect. . . . The struggle to harness this energy gushing forth has become our destiny” (57).

Oil fires, in particular, have been compelling to the film industry from the time of the Lumière Brothers’ short, “Oil Wells of Baku: Close View” (1896), which Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann analyze as a potentially environmentalist film. Depicting a small human figure moving back and forth in front of a raging oil-field fire, the film demonstrates an interest in

establishing visual scale. Yet the apparent unconcern of the human actor erases the risks of pollution and loss of life. The actor's blasé turns the fire into an everyday event, even as we recognize fire as the film's object of interest, an object significantly larger than the human. There is incongruity here which inspires wonder, the desire to figure out what we see for ourselves while believing ourselves, represented through the surrogate of the film's confident human figure, to be safe. Murray and Heumann recognize "Oil Wells of Baku" as the first in a series of films treating disastrous oil fires where "the notion of spectacle obscures or even erases ecological readings" (50).

The ambivalent relationship between film and the ecological history of oil again shows itself in the mid-twentieth-century Hollywood production *Tulsa* (dir. Stuart Heisler 1949), which garnered an Oscar Nomination for Special Effects in 1950. The brilliant, Technicolor fire scene in *Tulsa* made it the most expensive film to be produced by the limping Eagle-Lion Company, a B-movie production outlet, in the late 1940s. This oil fire scene offers a rich texturing of hot colors along with morally inflected visual pleasures such as the slow crumbling of massive industrial structures like derrick towers. The fire is set by a Native American character, Jim Redbird, as played by Pedro Armendáriz, who has been outraged by the oil industry's devastation of Cherokee ranches. *Tulsa* attempts to tame the spectacular entertainment offered in its extended treatment of burning oil, which marks the high-point of the film in the sense of both its diegetic climax and mimetic aspiration, by framing it within a didactic conservation narrative.

Drawing upon associations of fire with ritual cleansing, *Tulsa* invites an interpretation of the explosive oil-field fire as a moral lesson, on the scale of apocalypse, for its female lead, played by Susan Hayward. Hayward's red hair and sexual voracity as the character "Cherokee Lansing" index the entertainment values of fire itself while denigrating them, too, as illicit consumption. *Tulsa* is set in the 1920s, during Oklahoma's oil boom, and Hayward—portraying a greedy oil baroness who erases her modest Native American ("Cherokee") origins—performs the female overconsumption that would characterize the 1920s in popular history after the sacrifices of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Lansing's chastening by fire restores her, and the Oklahoma frontier of postwar nostalgia, to the patient discipline of the film's ideal husband, an ecologically sensitive oil geologist played by Robert Preston. Still, as Murray and Heumann quip, "it is the massive fire scene that sells the film" (48).

With an edge, Vietnam-era cynicism, *Oklahoma Crude* (dir. Stanley Kramer 1973) reanimates the plot of *Tulsa*, gendering petrophilia as excessive female desire in the character “Lena Doyle,” played by Faye Dunaway, in order to test the links between cheap energy and modern feminism. In this comedy on the brink of the first oil crisis of the 1970s, the female lead’s will to produce is answered by scarcity, oil sands “dry as a popcorn fart” that realize her desire to become a “third sex” by “screwing herself” only too literally. Lena’s father, “Cleon” (John Mills), dies in the process of defending and working her rig; her own body is exhausted, half-starved, and humiliated by labor at the derrick and self-defense against the private army of an oil company that jumps her claim. As *Oklahoma Crude* concludes with Lena smeared in greasy crude and calling tentatively after her mercenary lover (George C. Scott as “Mase”), the humiliation of the feminist blurs into an indictment of Western boom mentalities, as if modern gender performance itself were a type of greed, and work, humiliated by ecological limits. The film’s explicit critique of feminism is uninteresting, but its insight that some of the most apparently progressive aspects of modern selfhood stand to be humiliated by oil scarcity feels prophetic. Crouching with Lena in front of her spent well, the film audience was prepared, as of 1973, for the end of petromodernity as we knew it.

Yet the “energetic therapy” of the 1970s’ oil shocks did not produce the “taste for asceticism” imagined by Jean Baudrillard and by diverse advocates of living small, convivial modernity, and the “autonomous house” movement, which taught Americans how to make their own solar-powered homes (197).²¹ Film renewed its commitment to petroleum as spectacle, even in anti-imperialist documentaries such as Werner Herzog’s *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), or with ambivalence in Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*. More needs be said about *There Will Be Blood* as an “oil film,” since it is not necessarily readable as a film about oil, at least not in the topical sense of the contemporaneous petro-thriller *Syriana* (dir. Stephen Gaghan 2005). The film’s rich ambience and the exaggerated performance of Daniel Day-Lewis as oil magnate Daniel Plainview releases it, to an extent, from political contexts. Yet both filmic ambience and Day-Lewis’s performance can be read as commentary about oil. Released on the eve of the oil price spike of 2008, *There Will Be Blood* offers a nested nostalgia, for oil production, first, and secondarily for the body effects made possible by petromodernity. The film’s final shooting script suggests the vision driving what critic Kent Jones characterizes as its “sensorial bonanza.”

Anderson's script obsesses upon the resistance of bodies, their heft, the friction of their interaction. He attributes strong agency to both organic and inorganic bodies; arms, mules, deserts, pulleys, trains. "Daniel is pushing a cart with the upper half of his body . . . then he drags himself to catch up with the cart—he does this over and over and over and over again across the desert floor" (3). This scene as written in Anderson's final shooting script describes Plainview's struggle out of the New Mexico desert after he breaks both ankles falling down his silver mine. The scene was never shot, and what we see in the film instead is Plainview, with one broken ankle, push-pulling himself across the desert. The physics of the enacted scene could not accommodate the gross humiliation of the body ("over and over and over and over") that Anderson wrote into the script. Similarly, the script version of the roughneck Joe Gundha's death overmatched what was materially practicable on set. In all caps, Anderson shouts his aspiration to replicate the sensorial intensity of a man falling into a well, slowly suffocating in oil mud: "VERY GRAPHIC. [Gundha's] HEAD LANDS IN THE MUD AND BEGINS TO DROWN. THE HOLE IS VERY VERY THIN—BUT HIS WEIGHT AND THE SLIDE KEEPS TAKING HIM DOWN . . . THE IMAGE AGAIN. CAMERA UNDERNEATH THE MUD. WATCHING THIS MAN DIE INSIDE THIS HORRIBLE DEATH" (48). The audience will never see through this lens underneath the mud, the mud's point of view of a drowning human face.

What a remarkable image that would have been, homage to the labor of the roughneck through the most horrific possible imagining of his physical overcoming by earth, his antagonist and rival. In a crude Marxian sense, Anderson could be said to pursue the dis-alienation of labor, at sites where human physical energy learns of its own limitations through the resistance of other matter. What we do get, in Gundha's death scene, even as it is filmed, with the actor skewered by a fragment of the drill, or in the opening scenes of Plainview hitting rock with pick-axe in the silver mine, is the feeling of fabrication—what it feels like to make, and to be remade by, the physical world. Here is essentially the same affective investment in fabrication played up in peak-oil novels such as Kunstler's *World Made by Hand*, the "do-it-yourself" solar house models of the 1970s, or, for that matter, *Moby-Dick* (1851), which previews the birth of petroleum-derived energy in the later 1850s through a scrupulous accounting of how humans make whales into oil. We hope that there will be blood in this literature of fabrication, if only blood from an errant thumb subjected to a hammer, so that we might see ourselves (again) in the world we make.

Fundamentally, *There Will Be Blood* enacts a mourning for production, oil production specifically and manufacturing more broadly. It makes perfect sense that this mourning would take place in a US film of the early twenty-first century—and that this film itself should attempt to replace its lost objects (physical labor, local production, oil) with body effects, the produced sensation that Linda Williams describes as film’s “system of excess” and a normative means of popular entertainment (3–6). *There Will Be Blood* is a melodrama, one of the excessive, popular genres, insofar as the masculine emotions that it explores are not repressed and in fact explode in Plainview’s verbal tirades and extravagant gestural ticks—body techniques so flamboyant as to place Day-Lewis in the category of “special effect” for one reviewer (Klawans 33). Infantile emotion and self-conscious body work contradict what might be called the empiricist, mineral realism of Daniel Plainview’s character type, the self-made tycoon we’ve also encountered, for example, in *Chinatown*’s Noah Cross. The excessive Plainview becomes a body double for oil itself, in all of its abject impurity as me/not me, inside/outside, alive/dead. Libidinous rage leaps out of the man, machinic quirks overmaster him, his kin have “not a drop of me” in them, granting an uncanny biological literalism to the betrayals of sons and brothers that haunt less extravagant male melodrama, like classic Westerns. Every humiliation heaped onto the “oil women” of *Tulsa* and *Oklahoma Crude* appears hugely magnified in the humiliations of Plainview, the preacher Eli Sunday, the child-man HW, and voiceless characters such as Gundha.

Humiliations on screen invite the viewer’s masochistic pleasure, and the film effectively mixes up the registers of pleasure and pain by allying similar sensational effects with contradictory narratives of injury and triumph. The splice of the drill cleaving Gundha’s upper body echoes the satisfying clank of Plainview’s pick-axe against silver and the heavy splat of bowling pin against skull in the final scene of Eli Sunday’s murder. The rich aural dimension of *There Will Be Blood* invites deep mimicry in its audience, which Anderson heightens through HW’s deafness, producing an aural point of view for HW through which we hear only “internal” noise resonant of blood flow and heart-thump. Disability often works in fiction to provoke heightened awareness of sensory knowledge. But sound is by no means the only or even strongest body effect generated by *There Will Be Blood*. One could read the film through its visual investments in textural surface, from the porous human skin to the scratchy weave of pulley ropes, and through its precise, almost muted color palette, framed by the anomalies of bright-black oil and fire. My point is that the film

gives almost too much sensory information, as if it mourns not only its earlier industrial setting, petroleum “made by hand” in southern California, but also the film medium itself, its dream of a virtuality in which body effects break free of actual, situated matter.

When Plainview delivers his final line, “I’m finished,” at the scene of both a murder and an archetypal mode of twentieth-century industrial leisure, the bowling alley, we have to ask—with him, perhaps—what is finished. I do not see *There Will Be Blood* as a peak-oil narrative, but as a signal of the moribundity of twentieth-century stories about modernity, particularly the US frontier myth that explained modernity to the twentieth century. The film is “about” obsolescence as an excess of feeling, extravagant feeling that is the wake of spent stories and modes of production. In this sense, *There Will Be Blood* is about peak oil and the peaking of the film medium itself insofar as it has been dependent upon petroleum.

Film stock, like the ink used in modern print media, is essentially petroleum. In recent years, polyester or PET film stock has been experimentally recycled into fuel (“UCLA” 25). To some extent, digital technologies promise to liberate the physical bases of film from petroleum, though the intensive use of fuel oil, tires, and diesel generators for set lighting will keep the film industry an environmentally high-impact business well into the future. Many filmmakers, including Paul Thomas Anderson, now publicize the “carbon neutrality” of their films. *There Will Be Blood* promotes itself as “100% carbon neutral” because its producers purchased carbon offsets from NativeEnergy, a nonprofit organization that helps finance the construction of Native American, family farm, and community renewable energy projects—primarily wind farms. Carbon off-sets are the easiest way for the industry to earn green credentials, since its production technologies still rely heavily upon the burning of fossil fuels. Ironically, *There Will Be Blood* utilized film techniques of the 1930s and 1940s to achieve a cinematographic style that is particularly steeped in oil.

The film’s on-location shooting in Marfa, Texas—at the same site where the oil epic *Giant* was shot a half-century earlier—has been touted by its DP Robert Elswit as a return to authentic filmmaking, “when truckloads of equipment went to the middle of nowhere and stayed there” (qtd. in Goldman n.p.). Location filming typically requires road building and asphalt paving to accommodate equipment-laden trucks, and it is cited in UCLA’s *Report on Sustainability in the Motion Picture Industry* (2006) as a major source of environmental degradation within the industry. Anderson eschewed the use of digital dailies for *There*

Will Be Blood, which meant that film dailies had to be shipped from Marfa to Deluxe Laboratories in Hollywood, to be developed and shipped back to Marfa for viewing on site. A great deal of fuel enabled this film's sensory bonanza. "The color space of motion picture film is completely different from digital color space," Elswit notes; *There Will Be Blood* was designed to look like a twentieth-century film (qtd. in Goldman). Elswit and Anderson created an authentically filmic style using twentieth-century photochemical processes rather than newer, arguably more sustainable digital technologies. Only two major sequences in *There Will Be Blood* had to be "digitally scaled up," according to Robert Stromberg of Digital Backlot: the massive blood flow from Eli Sunday's crushed head at the end of the film, and the leaping oil and flames from the film's gusher fire in the fictional town of Little Boston. The filmmakers built one derrick in Marfa, which they set on fire and filmed, but their petroleum-fueled fire failed to create a "feeling of power, of the pressure just underneath the surface of the ground" commensurate with what they imagined as viewer expectations of burning oil (qtd. in Goldman). Industrial Light & Magic stepped in to meet the standards stoked by prior oil media, from the time of Edward L. Doheny's primitive reels. We have learned to expect of oil maximum motility and liveliness, as if it were blood.

The lines of cars that still congregate at wildfires surrounded by television film crews in the inland suburbs of San Diego and Los Angeles Counties honor the spectacular legacy of the original oil gushers and the media that brought them to mass audiences. That legacy is our petromodern sprawl, the suburban strip malls, and housing tracts dependent upon the automobile and asphalt roads, the normative American infrastructure which, when it intrudes into southern California's dry chaparral, is also an invitation to fire. Visual, kinaesthetic, acoustic ("hissing"), tactile, olfactory—oil touches us intimately, and everywhere. That's entertainment.

4. Why Is Oil So Bad? *We gather to watch*

Notes

1. Discussion of the relationship of anthropogenic climate change, peak oil, and water scarcity is drawn from Catherine Gautier, *Oil, Water, and Climate: An Introduction* (2008), 81–82.
2. See Rob Hopkins, "Rob Hopkins Transition Handbook," *YouTube* 28 Feb. 2008, 28 May 2009 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGHRWpTcvg0&feature=related/>>.

3. Soper raised this question in her keynote lecture at the conference “Romanticism, Environment, Crisis,” University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 26 June 2006.
4. Buell points to the “pragmatism that plays a major part in shaping all agendas of discussion” as stalling the recognition of the discourse of toxicity that he eloquently delimits in “Toxic Discourse,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.3 (Spring 1998): 640.
5. In *Oil Field Child* (1989), Estha Briscoe Stowe makes reference to “oil field weather” (56) throughout and in reference to specific fires.
6. See Michael Winship, “Manufacturing and Book Production,” *A History of the Book in America Vol. 3, The Industrial Book, 1840–1880*, eds. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship (2007), 40–70.
7. Some representative publications treating the ecological impact of the printed book include Jim Milliot, “Toward a Greener Future,” *Publisher’s Weekly* (10 Mar. 2008): 26; Erika Engelhaupt, “Would You Like That Book in Paper or Plastic?” *Environmental Science and Technology* (15 June 2008): 4244; Greg Kozak, *Printed Scholarly Books and E-Book Reading Devices: A Comparative Life Cycle Assessment of Two Book Options* (2003), 23–34; John C. Ryan and Alan Thein Durning, “Newspaper,” *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things* (1997), 13–20.
8. See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (1985), chapters 11 and 12; Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982), 290–312; James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape* (1993), 97–100.
9. See Chip Jacobs and William J. Kelly, *Smogtown: The Lung-Burning History of Pollution in Los Angeles* (2008), 176–78; Daniel Sperling and Deborah Gordon, *Two Billion Cars: Driving Toward Sustainability* (2009), 188.
10. “Want to Beat Smog and Heat? Put on a Mask and Start a Fan,” *Long Beach Press-Telegram* 27 Sept. 1956, 3 Aug. 2009 <<http://www.newspaperarchive.com>>; “London Plays Deadly Game in the Smog,” *Oakland Tribune* 3 Dec. 1953, 3 Aug. 2009 <<http://www.newspaperarchive.com>>; Fitzhugh White, “In 50 Years,” Letter, *Los Angeles Times* 22 Dec. 1954, 3 Aug. 2009, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times* (1881–1986), A4; *Smogtown* 131–32; 111.
11. The Report’s concern about the “dwindling” of “scenic resources” specifically cites development of beach properties that preclude “the enjoyment of views out over the sea from the highways along the shore” (23).
12. Eric Avila points to the effects of later-century freeway screening in *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (2004): “Dense landscaping or concrete walls alongside freeway arteries, for example, obstructed the driver’s passing glance at the sights of the city. This kind of visual screening sustained ignorance of, or indifference to, the surrounding built environment and negated a sense of passing through the city’s landscapes of work and community” (213).

13. The term “premodern” is from Gabrielle Barnett (32), “Drive-By Viewing: Visual Consciousness and Forest Preservation in the Automobile Age,” *Technology and Culture* 45 (Jan. 2004): 30–54.
14. See Barnett 34; Warren Belasco, *Americans on the Road* (1979), 22.
15. McLuhan distinguishes hot from cool media in *Understanding Media*, 36.
16. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005), 63–121. Environmental criticism establishes a rich conversation with science studies and corporeal feminism in Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, *Material Feminisms* (2008).
17. The phrase “lower bodily stratum” is Mikhail Bakhtin’s, as quoted in Stott 87.
18. For more discussion on the magic and violence attributed to oil production, see Jennifer Wenzel, “Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature,” *Postcolonial Studies* 9 (Dec. 2006): 449–64.
19. See Myrna I. Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution* (2006), 338–39; Paul Sabin, “Beaches versus Oil in Greater Los Angeles,” *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles*, eds. William Deverell and Greg Hise (2005), 95–114.
20. See Briscoe, *Oil Field Child*.
21. For a discussion of convivial modernity and varied architectural responses to the 1973 oil shock, see *Sorry, Out of Gas: Architecture’s Response to the 1973 Oil Crisis*, eds. Giovanna Borasi and Mirko Zardini (2007).

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