

1. Videos

When black gold becomes “crude”

By
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In Brut (“Crude”), Dalibor Frioux imagines a time in the near future when Norway - its coffers stuffed with petro-crowns - floating in the midst of a world in crisis, impoverished and deprived of mobility due to a lack of oil – whose price has risen to 310 dollars a barrel.

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The novel Brut takes place in Norway. A worldwide economic crash, recession and widespread corporate collapse – all of which leave Norway unscathed and far removed from continents ravaged by violence and pollution – is the backdrop for this book.

Extract 1: The landscapes of increasing scarcity of oil

“The price of oil was rising as never before. It now had to be hidden, escorted and surrounded by the kind of splendour once reserved for royalty. The price spikes of the 1970s and 2000s seemed ridiculous by comparison, with the barrel having reached 310 dollars and stayed at that price for nearly six months now. From the depths of her hotel rooms, Kathryn watched, fascinated, at the experts’ flashing diagrams explaining the laws of price-setting, stressing that the world had fallen into an era of recession. She wanted to understand the figures dancing before her. Demand and speculation were such that the Spot market was now leading the dance with short-term forward contracts, offset by pressure from nation states and the nationalisation of several major oil companies. At 310 dollars a barrel, it seemed the price had gone beyond what was needed to ease demand and satisfy oil-producing countries. A psychological bubble worthy of the year 1000 was keeping the price per barrel 20-30 dollars too high. The Dubai-quality crude being supplied to Asia was the most sought-after, followed by the North Sea Brent oil provided by Norway. At such prices, air travel had lost two-thirds of its customer base; nobody wanted to pay for business class for these ladies anymore. For average models, however, landscape overlay with a few digital alterations would be amply sufficient. From Moscow to Madrid, and from Los Angeles to Shanghai, neither the agency nor its clients cut back on the accommodation, however; probably because luxury hotels were those where informal surveillance was the easiest. Controls at airports and the entrances to towns and cities were becoming interminable and irritated everyone. It was becoming almost impossible to have romantic shoots in front of a famous landmark as they were surrounded by so many barriers. Movement had become suspicious. Terrorist attacks had toughened anti-terrorism laws. And most combustion engines – namely planes and cars – had been grounded. Being part of a group of young, beautiful, wealthy women – who had given a week’s advance fame – was one of the few remaining ways of avoiding checks and suspicion in public places. Public transport was now getting three times the funding roads had previously received. Yet, the generally-held view

was that most jobs could be done, at least partially, from home; the four-day week was ideal for children and organising the work-life balance – and would save millions of barrels of oil. The few planes in operation were filled with business leaders, celebrities and senior officials, all of whom taking Kathryn for a hostess. She was casting a weary glance at the pattern of the land that was changing unbeknownst to her, bereft of fuel. Along the former main roads, the social outcasts and the deaf were repainting the blackened plaster façades of their homes, and no longer had to close their triple-glazed windows or shout at the children playing football on the tarmac outside. Everywhere, urban sprawl was being erased by bulldozers: distant suburbs were being replaced with upscale community gardens, parks and forests. Cities merged, driven by a centripetal force. Some of the pioneers of this urban exodus were helping to restore old farmhouses whose dignity had once been stripped by a four-lane highway. Local authorities and estate agents, who were busy scouring areas newly zoned as building land and buildings suddenly rendered inhabitable, snatched up henceforth sought-after of land near airports. The homeless – regal in appearance, in their slums made of cloth and old newspapers under the motorway interchange – fought off speculators. Like tourists, raw materials also struggled to move. The hands of long-distance lorry drivers softened in their pockets. Employment offices talked to them about retraining for the green tourism sector, even though they had grown used to their families, in homes lost in the folds of the map, welcoming them like some kind of weekly messiah – albeit without the sermons and the moralising. At night, farmers no longer listened to the radio in the cabs of their diesel tractor, contenting themselves to slowly graze the surface of their fields for sowing, without plowing. Farmers once again looked into the eyes of their pigs, distractedly, sparing a thought as well for their bargain calves, which they let roam free an hour a day by sheer idleness. As far as the eye could see, craters, quarries and forests flayed on all sides attested to the search for hydrocarbon, saddles and shovels used to soak bark and exhume the remains of these plants and animals that, long ago, fell to the ocean floor.” Such is the landscape created by the explosion in the price of oil, and the increasing scarcity of oil.

Extract 2: the tyranny of local

The following extract talks about the tyranny of local - that is, the political consequences of the disappearance - or near disappearance - of oil as a source of energy for mobility. “Daily life, conversations, thought, politics, human desires had, up until now, involved the fun element of hydrocarbon - the beat of the global village – while in the most spoiled, comfortable countries, the United States first and foremost, the shortage felt like an attack on democracy, a putsch by things on mankind. Forced to speak their own language and remain on their native soil, most felt as though they were under house arrest. The shutting down of engines was general apprehension; switching off the lights at night, a funeral wake. We would have liked to denounce the fascist factions and leagues brimming with fanatical virtue that would have taken over the mechanism of leadership, the media, the economy, the universities and the art world – imposing their censorship, their sadness, their nauseating revolutionary calendar, their celebrations, their adulterated and static sense of joy, and their musty “return to the earth” morality. Like Churchill in 1940, we would like to have waged war with all the strength and energy that God gave us, to wage war against a monstrous tyranny that never before has been recorded in the dark, deplorable catalogue of crimes against humanity: the decline of oil. But this time, the coup d’état was being carried out by Mother Earth herself: she had given birth to her limits. Maddening the markets, Black February had been the catalyst for all sorts of shortages. Fossil fuel, clean water and metals for fun and progress had all become scarcer. Panic, skyrocketing prices and the paralysis of vehicles had imposed a Pax Rustica on industrialised countries. It was a peace that delighted reactionary aesthetes, avant-garde philanthropists, Cassandra figures of all types, rancorous environmentalists and all those who lived by the symbols of the New Testament and moralistic rhetoric. But the democratic, hysterical, obsessive, over-informed, faint-hearted crowds - with their guts and sexual appetites filled with speed, their cosmopolitan pleasures and their advertisements all conditioned by the need for speed - couldn’t help but dwell on the end of the playground. They withered their leaders and experts, criticised their parents for daring to bequeath them this world of frustration, and accused their children of simply existing and continuing to eat and breathe. At the same time, they scourged themselves in endlessly recycled opinion columns, televised interviews with themselves, lengthy psychoanalysis sessions and indignant blogs whose sheer volume outnumbered the people

living on planet Earth. Where oil had once provided the pleasures of life, it now inflicted shortages that were administered with the kind of brutality of liquidators granting or denying the deepest desires.”

Extract 3: Social frustration

The third extract deals with the social frustration caused by this return to local life, and the end of the limitless mobility that oil had made possible: “For years, international newspapers had been talking about the same two things: oil shortages and weaning. In the 2010s, faced with an emerging crisis, the middle classes and their governments began to make a few requisite gestures, without actually believing what people thought they knew. These acts of common sense were like a grandmother who, similarly, never threw anything away and never took a bath. Ecology was trendy, just one more freedom, a New-Age decor for “business and fun as usual.” You could take a weeklong, all-inclusive trip to Rio – as the adverts in the subway promised – and then get back on your bike from Monday to Friday, complaining about drivers. The Filipino designers, the Brazilian creatives and the Japanese Trend Creators were able to throw a cloak of hedonism over the tidal wave of constraints forming in the distance. Meanwhile, nations produced vast, simplified information campaigns full of Zen words that spoke about the liberating, joyful effect of making savings, and of simplicity. All of this was accompanied by scientific facts in small type at the bottom of the page and a website for those who were really interested in the hard truths. The fashion pages and practical advice pages of women’s magazines had no equal when it came putting the crisis into perspective – viewing it in terms of positive psychology, a new look, sexual potential and the places to check out. And for those who still weren’t reassured, a nod of the wig or an assured look from a celebrity did the trick. Knowing that she had gone to Sydney in business class rather than in a private jet made it easier for people to give up their holidays. All together, watching one another, plagued by envy and spite, and haunted by the thought of free riders, the parasites who took advantage of other people’s efforts to enjoy themselves, they were going to reduce the speed limit on motorways but to make it easier to show children the landscape, insulate their homes, but to increase people’s spending power, rediscover seasonal fruit but to increase their life expectancy, install ultra-thin solar panels on their roofs, support geothermal energy, lighten the meals on planes and lose weight but only to be more attractive and better able to sell themselves. With Black February and the final surge in the price of fossil fuel energy came the moment when the voting middle class – that supreme housewife and keeper of every continent – was no longer able to dance to the music of ecology, because it was simply too slow, even for the lustful slow dance of rediscovered connections. Because now, they had got to the heart of the matter. Even for a good cause, even for the Earth, it was too reminiscent of old wars, rationing and regression. Life expectancy would stagnate, and there would be nothing fun, nothing sexy anymore; rather, it was like the shadow of an orgiastic past cast on a frugal present. No more scraping together cultural capital, while brandishing one’s environmental convictions and innovative techniques; there wouldn’t be many cheats left to denounce either, as, with restrictions and fear came uniformity. The collusion between the contents of the earth’s subsurface and the most whimsical parts of the human soul was over. No more ‘Holiday On Oil’, no more perpetual motion. The distances abolished by the Global Village were restored by the return of earthly space, small roads and immobile seas. It was the perfect crime, a conspiracy in which everyone was involved. Oil had been this stew of corpses, pressed over millions of years by all the earth’s cylinders and turned into a liqueur that allowed all the spinning tops to turn. So, for the time being, everyone was in the same boat, in the middle of an ocean and without fuel; a boat overflowing with people, made-up and ready to go out, their heads full of memories of past parties, desire and rancour.”

Oil: the energy of mobility and emancipation

Such is the backdrop for the novel’s opening. The story then returns to Norway. The main character of the novel is effectively oil, which is not just a neutral liquid that people put into their fuel tanks – one we barely feel or see, that might soil our hands or trousers a bit but is soon forgotten. On the contrary, it’s depicted as a magical liquid - a sort of filter, an elixir, exciting and anxiolytic at the same time. So oil is the energy of mobility par excellence. That is because it alone can be so much embedded in the object it vehicles. We know that, historically, oil was originally prized as a means of light, with the famous oil

lamp, and later as a means of heating. But clearly, its real triumph was as the energy behind cars, triumphing over steam. In the 19th century, races were held between petrol-powered and steam-powered cars. Needless to say that the petrol-powered cars proved much more reliable, and outperformed the steam-powered vehicles, which ultimately stepped aside. It was the invention of the four-stroke engine and the carburettor, which turns oil into an inflammable mixture, which paved the way for its success. Thanks to its liquidity, ductility and stability, oil can be used in all types of engine – from motor scooters to space rockets. However, oil is even more advantageous than that: It is also an energy source in places where there are no networks; diesel generators can run on polar ice floes, or in the heart of Amazonia. Oil is also what allows us to break free from the Earth's gravity. Oil has given us a vision of our blue planet – the only thing with an energy density great enough to take us out of our natural habitat and allow us to see it from anywhere from space. So, oil is the most widely-available energy for the most widespread dreams of emancipation and conquest. From the scooter that takes a teenager from his or her village, to the rockets that put satellites into orbit; from a father's chain-saw at the back of the garden, to the generator installed on an ice floe, oil is the liquid that wrests us from sensory and social routine, that gives us ubiquity, and that gives us a power to act that far exceeds our muscular capacity. No source of energy has been so closely associated with our bodies or taken us so far. In this sense, oil is emblematic of political ideals, social emancipation and self-transformation — an ideal of progress.

Oil, a symbol of individuality against society

An American historian recently wrote a book called 'Carbon Democracy,' which has just been translated into French. In it, he makes this connection between political and democratic progress in Western countries during the late 19th early 20th centuries on the one hand, and hydrocarbon - notably coal - on the other. For him, coal is one of the factors that explains the great social gains achieved by the working class. Why? Because coal brought together large numbers of workers and miners around mines, and large numbers meant the proletariat was in a position of strength and could negotiate - through the power of strikes - to secure social gains. By contrast, oil is a remote energy and has not given the same position of strength to the European proletariat. The American author goes as far as to say that oil was chosen as the principal source of energy after World War II because of this anti-social union aspect, since oil requires much less monitoring and far fewer intermediaries on European soil, or at least, in industrialised countries. It is well known that oil has been the energy behind the consumer society in the United States since the 1920s, and after World War II in Europe. Oil, and its ultimate tool - the auto-mobile - became the major symbol of freedom and individualism. It can safely be said that hydrocarbons, and oil in particular, have long been the basis for the collective belief that there are no limits.

Oil, the blood of societies, and disproportionate energy

Oil not only helps us to overcome the Earth's gravitational pull, or to create an energy source in the complete absence of networks in the middle of a forest, on an ice floe or in the ocean – it is also the negation of all limits: geographical limits, but also limits in urban development, as there can be no urban sprawl without oil at affordable prices. It also defies anthropological and military limits. It is well known, for instance, that during World War II, there was a massive showdown to seize oil reserves. By making oil the lifeblood of societies, modern economic policy became wedded to a kind of geological hubris – an excess that made this subterranean liquid made from millions of years of decomposed microscopic organisms the incredible source of energy it is, one whose sheer density of compacted energy brooked no comparison. What is more, it enabled a kind of expansion of our humanity that wasn't exactly inhuman – since that would imply a moral judgment – but rather 'ahuman'. One engineer was able to calculate the equivalent in slaves to a barrel of oil, i.e. the work that can be done by various machines on one barrel of oil, compared to the same work done by slaves. It can certainly be said that oil, among other factors of course, allowed for the abolition of slavery. One could calculate the oil equivalent in slaves, horses and animals, along with the equivalent amount of soldiers, dreams and disorder in a single barrel. One could, of course, also talk about the equivalent amount of poison in a

barrel of oil, because we know very well that, before we could remove all the oil, gas and coal that lies beneath the Earth's surface, there would be no atmosphere. In other words, before we run out of oil, we will run out of air.

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Futures

Policies

- Ecological transition

Theories

- Art & Science



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