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Daniel Worden, *Petrochemical Fantasies. The Art and Energy of American Comics* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2024), 212 pp.

Research in the interdisciplinary and intersecting fields of environmental humanities, energy humanities, and petroculture studies illuminates the complex yet often elusive connections between modern culture and fossil fuels. In his book *Petrochemical Fantasies*, Daniel Worden analyzes various ways in which the medium of comics has been linked to fossil fuels, particularly oil, although not exclusively. The titular concept of “petrochemical fantasies” is defined in the introductory chapter as “the clusters of conventions and tropes that naturalize and romanticize fossil fuel culture” (25). Worden positions his work as a contribution to “an environmentalist history of American comics” (21) and the book can be aptly described as a thematic and genre-focused literary history of comics, ranging from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Rather than presenting a singular chronological timeline, Worden divides the book into five primary chapters, each focusing on specific facets of the relationship between comics and energy.

In chapter 1, he examines the material and representational connections between energy transitions (from biomass and water to coal, and later from coal to oil) and comics. He highlights how the industrialization of the printing press facilitated the mass production of comics and how comics, in turn, expressed, represented, and commented on the new experiences of speed and power enabled by fossil fuels.

Chapter 2 investigates how cartoons and comics depicted and became intertwined with the rise and proliferation of automobiles from the early twentieth century onward. Notably, many of the earliest examples, particularly of cartoons and newspaper comic strips, exhibit a rather ironically critical perspective on the emerging technology. Subsequent comics, such as Sidney Smith’s *Old Doc Yak*, tend instead to normalize, idealize, and romanticize automobile culture as a lifestyle.

In the next chapter, Worden explores the connections between the American oil and automobile industries and comics. His main examples are pamphlets directly produced by companies, such as *Standard Oil Comics* and *Gulf Funny Weekly*, which included promotional comic strips serving as advertisements for the petroleum industry. Worden further traces this idealization of fossil fuel use to the superhero

comics subgenre that gained prominence from the late 1930s onward, interpreting characters like Superman as representations of superhuman powers and speed afforded by fossil fuels. This discussion progresses in the fourth chapter, where Worden examines how petroleum-based synthetic materials, such as plastics, inspired the highly flexible bodies of many comic characters, particularly superheroes like Plastic Man and Elongated Man.

In the final chapter, Worden discusses how comics from the 1970s onwards have addressed environmental issues, including anthropogenic climate change and the necessity to move away from fossil fuels. The examples discussed in most detail in this chapter are from recent years and include Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land*, Pablo Fajardo, Sophie Tardy-Joubert, and Damien Roudeau's *Crude: A Memoir*, Andrea Wulf's *The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt*, Inés Estrada's *Alienation*, and Rob Guillory's *Farmhand*. In his conclusion, Worden expresses optimism that such comics may contribute to realizing a more "sustainable future" (143).

Although the environmentalist and climate change-related comics that Worden explores towards the book's conclusion are certainly worthy of attention, their inclusion also constitutes a deviation from the focus on "petrochemical fantasies" as defined in the introduction. The works discussed in the last chapter certainly do not constitute such "fantasies" themselves, but are meant to counteract the naturalization and romanticization of fossil fuel culture that characterizes most of the other texts discussed in the book. There are also other examples in Worden's study that I find somewhat hard to classify as "petrochemical fantasies" based on his own definition, such as superhero comics influenced by and reflecting on nuclear energy, a form of energy that, while sharing some characteristics with fossil fuels, is not strictly "petrochemical." A more detailed explanation of the overarching theoretical and methodological approach could have provided greater cohesion, and a better understanding of how (and why) certain parts of the empirical material were selected. This concerns also Worden's explicit limitation to American comics, even though some of his most prominent examples are translations of texts from other geographical origins. These include the Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer's *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck*, originally written in French, or the aforementioned *Crude: A Memoir*, also initially published in French. While there certainly are good reasons for including these, it would have been helpful to make these reasons more explicit as well as to reflect on the importance of translation regarding the relation between comics and fossil fuel culture.

However, these are minor shortcomings, and *Petrochemical Fantasies* offers valuable insights into the various ways the medium of comics and diverse forms of energy use have co-evolved over time, mutually influencing each other. Many of the texts Worden discusses are relatively unknown today but likely exerted significant influence on numerous recipients. Particularly enlightening in this context is Worden's description of how petroleum companies utilized comics as educational tools to teach young audiences about the benefits and necessity of fossil fuels. This was achieved through advertising pamphlets like the aforementioned *Standard Oil*

Comics, as well as collaboration with major producers of established comic series. For instance, Exxon and Walt Disney joined forces to impart energy-related “knowledge” to young readers in several 1970s and 1980s publications, such as the comic book *Mickey and Goofy Explore the Universe of Energy*.

The numerous black-and-white and color plates included allow readers to gain a more immediate impression of many of the examples discussed in the book. Worden’s study could have been considerably longer, and one would often wish for more detailed analyses of the texts covered. However, it represents a promising beginning that will undoubtedly inspire further research into the multifaceted relationships between comics and energy cultures.