

With or Without Oil *Nordsjøen* and the Persistence of Norwegian Exceptionalism

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Abstract

Films provide fertile ground for examining how arguments about the Anthropocene are produced. In *Nordsjøen* (The Burning Sea, 2021), an oil spill is an opportunity to lay out a perspective of Norway and its relationship with fossil fuels. This article shows how, through an exercise of effacing and erasures, the film bends three basic rules of the catastrophe genre to conceive a society that parallels central notions of Norwegian exceptionalism. The disappearance of a struggle between 'good' and 'evil,' the elimination of economic or political greed, and the respect for scientific knowledge allow for the display of a society without struggles, guaranteeing well-being and nurturing a relation with more-than-human nature. In this context, oil extraction is presented as an encapsulated episode that, while having provided economic affluence for the country, has not affected an otherwise romanticized idea of the relation with the tenets of national exceptionality: economic equality, consensual politics and harmony with nature.

Keywords: Anthropocene, oil, Norwegian Exceptionalism, climate fiction movies, extractivism.

Resumen

Las películas son un campo fértil para explorar la producción de argumentos sobre el Antropoceno. En *Nordsjøen* (Mar del Norte, 2021), un derrame petrolero es la oportunidad para exponer una perspectiva sobre Noruega y su relación con los combustibles fósiles. Este artículo muestra cómo, mediante un ejercicio de borramientos y recortes, la película manipula tres reglas básicas del género de catástrofe para presentar una sociedad en línea con las nociones centrales del excepcionalismo noruego. La desaparición del conflicto entre el bien y el mal, la eliminación de la avaricia política o económica y el respeto por el conocimiento científico ayudan a mostrar una sociedad sin conflictos, que garantiza el bienestar y el cuidado de la naturaleza más que humana. En este contexto, la extracción de petróleo es presentada como un episodio encapsulado que, además de haber provisto beneficios económicos para el país, no ha afectado la idea romantizada de la relación entre Noruega y las ideas fundantes de la excepcionalidad nacional: igualdad económica, consenso político y armonía con la naturaleza.

Palabras clave: Antropoceno, petróleo, excepcionalismo noruego, películas de ficción climática, extractivismo.

Introduction

Since the discovery of the Ekofisk oil fields in 1969, fossil fuels permeated most aspects of the public conversation in Norway, from politics to visual arts and from economics to literature, sciences and education. There are obvious reasons for this centrality: for the last two decades, the Norwegian population ranks as one of the happiest and wealthiest in the world (Oxfeldt) and fossil fuels are a vital part of this wonder. As of 2022, oil and gas represented almost three quarters of the country's exports, while the state's overall income from petroleum made up a quarter of the country's GDP and 42 percent of the government's total revenues (Sandal). Per capita income in Norway is among the highest in the world today. Whereas the other Nordic countries have also risen high in these rankings, none of them have become so economically affluent, and none of them have seen their fate so closely tied to the development of a single industry that permeates most aspects of society. Significant aspects of what is widely recognized as 'Norwegian identity' have been affected or determined by fossil fuels: from the strength of the welfare state to the country's relation with nature, and from the vision of an egalitarian society at home to a benign influence abroad (Eriksen 20). Norway's relationship with oil thus develops both in the country's material existence as well as in the ways this materiality is experienced and (self-) defined.

In today's context, Norway stands as a vibrant representation of modern petrocultures: not only through the material conditions attached to the extraction of the energies of fossil fuels, but also through the ways they permeate social practices, imaginaries and visions. Reflections on "Norwegian Petroculture," particularly during this century, encompass a wide range of perspectives and genres, from novels to poems and essays exploring a critical perspective of Norwegian self-perceived exceptional relation with nature (Mrozewicz 86). Audiovisual approaches to petroculture arrived particularly late. The international success of the TV-series *Okkupert* [*Occupied*, 2015-2019], a futuristic political thriller in which Norwegian decision to halt the oil industry leads to a Russian occupation, is a prominent example of TV productions with an international outreach. Locally in Norway, *Likkeland* (*State of Happiness*, 2018) was a success among audience and critics. The two seasons focused on the southwestern city of Stavanger, 'the oil capital of Norway,' and the individual lives and social structures upended by the discovery of oil in 1969.

Interestingly, cinema is one of the few spaces in which 'the Norwegian Oil Adventure' [det norske oljeeventyret] has not been an important source of inspiration. In 2013, Nordisk Film released *Pionér* (*Pioneer*, dir. Erik Skolbjærg), a corporate coverup thriller dealing with a diver who suffers an accident while installing pipes in the first offshore platforms. The narrative engine, based on a real case, is not particularly focused on oil or on the accident, but on the labor disputes and the reactions of the company and colleagues in the aftermaths of the accident. Apart from that, no major movie production focused on oil and Norwegian petroculture. If "cultural representations of the fossil fuel industry appear rather late

in Norwegian” culture, as Furuseth and her co-authors point out, then movies in particular are the most recent to emerge (Furuseth et al. 14).

This fact alone justifies our attention to *Nordsjøen* (*The Burning Sea*, dir. John Andreas Andersen), released in 2021. But the movie’s treatment of Norway’s relation with fossil fuels also turns *Nordsjøen* into a fertile ground for examining Norwegian petroculture. The catastrophe at the center of the plot forcefully confronts (and emerges from) a current era in which “the chances of a happy ending to this fossil-fuel fairy tale are increasingly slim” (Sandal 2023). But it does so in a particular way. As this article shows, the narrative stresses the risks associated with oil extraction while at the same time preserving the national culture in which oil extraction is embedded. And it does so by bending three fundamental narrative strategies of catastrophe and climate fiction (Cli-fi) genres: it does not present any confrontation between good and evil; it does not portray economic or political power as a corrupting influence; and it does not present a clash between scientific truth and immediate interests. What emerges from this distinctive take on climate fiction is an after-oil form of Norwegian exceptionalism. The affluence resulting from fossil fuels has been historically conceived of as deriving from a way of managing prosperity that was supposedly unique to a Norwegian *modern* relation to nature, society and wealth, setting the country apart not only from other European welfare states but from other oil nations. Yet, at the same time, the movie offers a window into how the removal of oil from the equation would usher in an era of *romantic* rescue of Norwegian exceptionalism, grounded in the self-perception of a society that is economically egalitarian, politically consensual and respectful of more-than-human nature, as basic tenets that would explain the prosperity of the country’s population (Rees 45; Strang et al. 11).

Nordsjøen

Nordsjøen tells the story of three main characters involved in an incident at the offshore rigs of Ekofisk, the oil field found in 1969, 320 kilometers off the coast of Norway. Sofia works with Artur controlling Eelume, an underwater robot commonly used in offshore platforms for inspections and repairs. She is also involved with Stian, a worker at one of these platforms with a child from a previous relationship, with whom she is beginning to establish a relationship. While training with Eelume, Sofia and Artur received an emergency call from William Lie, head of security at the oil company SAGA that resembles the state-owned oil company Equinor: one of the platforms have partly collapsed for reasons they will have to determine. Once in the open sea, the robot feeds them with images suggesting them that the platform can explode, which it does moments later, sinking it entirely amidst a massive explosion. The following day, after Stian has gone to work on another platform, Sofia revisits the footage provided by the robot. She immediately realized that the explosion was not caused by a leak but by gas coming from under the seabed along a line of several kilometers, compromising more than thirty oil rigs, including the one where Stian is

working. While SAGA monitors an urgent evacuation from all platforms, Stian goes deep down the ocean to manually close off a pipe that could not be reached remotely. The massive explosion of several platforms occurs at that moment, while he is more than one hundred meters underwater.

The movie then unfolds along two parallel narrative strands of tensions. One strand follows SAGA's attempts to contain the damage from the oil spill, threatening not only Norway but Northern Europe as a whole. The efforts to figure out a solution involve the advice of technicians and experts from the company and the active engagement of the national government, consultation with the military, the presence of the oil minister at the emergency room in the company's headquarters, communication with the Prime Minister, and parliamentary support. The other, intersecting narrative, follows Sofia and Arthur in their efforts to find out if Stian is alive. They discuss with the company the chances of Stian's survival after the explosion and, if so, how to do everything within their reach to bring him back home.

Arriving in the theaters in 2021, *Nordsjøen* was the third installation within the burgeoning field of Norwegian big-budget disaster films, preceded by *Bølgen* (*The Wave*, dir. Roar Uthaug, 2015) and its sequel *Skjelvet* (*The Quake*, Dir. John Andreas Andersen, 2018). Produced all by Fantefilm, these Norwegian disaster films incorporate advanced visual effects and technologies to a narrative arsenal supported by budgets well above the country's historical average. In *Bølgen* and *Skjelvet*, the catastrophes originate in nature: a tsunami triggered by the collapse of a crevice in the first one, and a quake in Oslo in the second one. *Nordsjøen* is the first big-budget catastrophe movie about oil. Unlike *Bølgen* and *Skjelvet*, it presents the catastrophe as related to (and to some extent as the consequence of) oil extraction. At a crosspoint between disaster films and climate fiction, the movie inaugurates a reckoning by the Norwegian film industry with the country's reliance on fossil fuels and the environmental consequences of such entanglement characterizing the Anthropocene.

This engagement with the Anthropocene is compressed within a historical perspective in which past and future are not only temporal references but points of a moral arch. The movie starts with Lie's voiceover from a recent future describing images of a recent past evoking the early years of the Norwegian oil boom. "I was 18 in 1971" (30), he remembers, while the screen shows the grainy footage and desaturated color palettes that Furuseth and her co-authors associate with "Nordic melancholy" (Furuseth et al. 14): workers on a platform, heavy equipment, oil. "Yeah, it was such a high salary," Lie continues, reinforcing the innocence of the early days: "Zero training. We were just following the Americans" (1). Moving forward one hundred minutes later to the end of the film, Lie's voice resurfaces again, but the screen now is filled with a dark ocean under a gray sky and toxic clouds. "We thought we were a nation of oil," he reflects, now remorseful after the catastrophe. "But we're

essentially an ocean nation” (94).¹ What happens in between, the disaster itself, is the sinful era of oil extraction.²

The Narrative Axis of Disaster Movies

Disaster movies grew out of Hollywood big-budget productions during the last half of the twentieth century. In general, plots inscribed personal stories of love and survival within more cinematically powerful frameworks of enormous collapses. An effective composite of these two narratives required dramatic scripts and the latest available technology to simulate the fall of ships, planes, buildings, cities. The genre reached a production momentum in the 1970s, with 56 disaster movies released throughout the decade in the United States, including some iconic movies, such as *Airport* (dir. George Seaton, 1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (dir. Ronald Neame, 1972), *Towering Inferno* (dir. John Guillermine, 1974), *Earthquake* (dir. Mark Robson, 1974). In 1975, Steven Spielberg released *Jaws*, a movie that overtook *The Godfather* as the highest-grossing film at U.S. movie theaters. Disaster movies reached a peak with *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron, 1997), in which the basic features of the genre coalesced, from the technology involved to the basic narrative tensions. In 1998, *Titanic* became the worldwide highest-grossing film of all times and received 14 Oscar nominations.

While the destruction of massive infrastructure is a distinctive theme, authors make a case for a wider and “enduring, cross-generic appeal of cinematic representations of disaster” (Keane, 3). Plots, filming styles and technology changed over those decades, but three basic narrative tropes remained a fixture of the genre. One was the moral arch of a confrontation between good and evil, setting these movies apart from contemporary films, from science fiction to thrillers, in which ambivalence prevailed. Protagonists of disaster movies are portrayed in a stark moral contrast that usually overlaps with forms of class warfare. With the background of the golden age of American industrial society and the beginning of its decline, this clash evolved over time. The hardships of the American working class are crucial for *Airport*, in which demolition expert Guerrero plans to blow himself up on an airplane so that his struggling wife can collect the insurance money. The optimistic resolution portrays the behavior of the company as a social harmonizer. At the other end stands *Titanic*, where the social clash between working class lover Jack Dawson and abusive tycoon Caledon Hockley is irreconcilable, lending deeper significance to the ship’s wreckage. Main characters usually came from the working class, the scientific community or oppressed groups. Maurice Yacowar’s description of the U.S. 1970s largely applies more globally, as movies that “tend to take place in contemporary

¹ This and all the following translations from Norwegian into English are mine.

² I consider ‘extractivism’ beyond the specific economic action of extracting minerals and natural resources for the purpose of its commodification and more as a vision and a cultural logic, a moment “when the act of resource extraction becomes a policy, an ideology or a logic of extractivism,” as Szeman and Wenzel propose. Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel, “What do We Talk about When We Talk about Extractivism?” *Textual Practice*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2021, pp. 505-523.

settings and the characters represent a cross-section of American society” in which “class conflict is a major resulting factor” (Keane 13).

A second feature of the genre is the corrupting influence of economic and political power and the causal relation between that influence and the disaster or the attempts to confront it. Economic pressures prevent bureaucrats from acting responsibly, like the Mayor of Amity Island in *Jaws*, who downplays the shark attacks for fears that people will stay away during the summer peak. Passengers enjoying the luxurious Poseidon remain unaware of the owner’s demand to load more cargo and push the ship to greater speed than it can safely endure. *The Towering Inferno* convenes political and economic avarice: the fire starts when the company decides to turn on all the tower’s lights against technicians’ advice, and the developer James Duncan refuses to order the evacuation of the tower while ingratiating a senator in order to get an urban renewal contract. As Keane suggests, “the ideological reading” of the genre is “such that we go to see these films to watch the rich and greedy get their comeuppance” (Keane 75). At the height of American industrial expansion, disaster movies brought the role of workers in society to the screen and presented the uncertainties about the corporate culture that would flourish after the 1970s.

Finally, as a byproduct of the previous two features, a common piece in disaster movies is the role of induced human error in catastrophe. Such error is usually portrayed as the counterpart to an individual’s struggle against the odds: the newly arrived scientist whose advice to close the beach is ignored by the small-town mayor in *Jaws*; the engineer whose suggestion to evacuate the building in *Towering Inferno* is flouted by the developer; Captain Smith being bullied by the ship’s managing director into pushing the *Titanic* speed faster. Mistakes forced by economic interest or political negligence allow for the emergence of another ideal type: the scientist or professional whose advice is disregarded by the authority. Overall, the triad of good versus evil, political and economic greed, and induced human error, reflected the ambivalences about the transformations in American society during the 1970s, but remarkably, it has had an enduring power in structuring disaster movies up to these days.

Cli-fi

As a subgroup of disaster movies, climate fiction films (often referred as cli-fi) are those in which the events leading to the disaster are explicitly or implicitly related to climate change. Though they have their own specific dynamics, the genre remains solidly based on the three principles mentioned in the previous section. An early and pivotal reference of the cli-fi is *The Day After Tomorrow* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2004), presenting humanity at the mercy of a freezing storm that threatens to end life on earth (Feil 157). Since then, cli-fi movies have expanded their repertoire and narrative strategies, they have innovated in terms of gender dynamics and portrays of society and in the relation with more-than-human nature during the Anthropocene. We can see the evolution of the genre during this century in three films: *The Day After*

Tomorrow, Geostorm (dir. Dean Devlin, 2017) and *Don't Look Up* (dir. Adam McKay, 2021).

The Day After Tomorrow follows the actions of Jack Hall, a paleoclimatologist who detects sudden temperature drops at several weather stations and warns the U.S. authorities about an imminent brief but deadly ice age in the Northern Hemisphere. His advice is initially dismissed by the U.S. vice president, wasting precious time in ordering a massive North-South evacuation. Hall, at the head of a team of researchers, confronts scientific knowledge of an impending catastrophe with the realities of raw political power. Ultimately the government orders the evacuation of the Southern states to México, and recommends inhabitants of the Northern ones, now too late to leave, to take shelter. A more explicit tale of a lone wolf crusade against deaf power is *Geostorm*, where satellite designer Jake Lawson is moved aside from the direction of an international system of climate-controlling satellites by the U.S. Secretary of State, Leonard Dekkom. The plot confronts the two characters. Lawson tries to fix a malfunctioning satellite that is unleashing life threatening changes in climate. Dekkom hides from everyone the true cause of the faulty system: a virus introduced by his own people to strike enemies abroad while removing obstacles at home, thereby clearing his path to controlling American and global power. Lawson, like Hall in *The Day After Tomorrow*, is a male professional with a complicated affective life and broken heterosexual relationships. They focus on their work. Both, however, find in their bonds with their children an ulterior value to their actions—particularly Hall, who crosses the gelid Northern states to rescue his son, taking shelter in the New York Public Library.

Unlike these two films, *Don't Look Up* is a dark comedy. Here, the threat manifests as a comet that is about to destroy planet earth. When astronomy student Kate Dibiasky and her professor Randall Mindy go public with the news of the impending extinction, their words are reabsorbed as just one more cog in the news cycle, never taken at face value for the magnitude of the event. In the White House, the President meets them with indifference. NASA director, a political appointee, downplays the danger. By the time the comet is visible, Dibiasky and Mindy launch a campaign on social media under the tag “Just Look Up” only to be confronted by the NASA’s director anti-campaign, “Don’t Look Up.” As the comet gets closer, we see the secret deals between NASA director and billionaire Peter Isherwell for the mining rights on the incoming comet.

The movies’ ends differ: in the first two films, the world restores some form of idealized American power, divested of the arrogance that led to the catastrophes. In *Don't Look Up*, life on earth disappears and the wealthy insist on their same toxic behaviors, but on a different planet. But their narrative tensions remain unchanged.

The Nordic Way

Starting early in this century, the cli-fi movie industry in the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland) navigate the tensions between the

place of more than-human nature in what Pietari Kääpä defines as “the ideological framework of nationhood” on the one hand, and the environmental impact of their economic prosperity on the other (71). It’s a conflict located at the center of the public conversation. Nordic national identities are for the most part self-perceived as embedded in an enjoyment of nature and landscape by individuals and a social commitment to the preservation of regional ecosystems. This is particularly prevalent in Norway, where the notion that its citizens are closer to nature than people in other nations is widespread, and the concept of *friluftsliv* (outdoor life) is a constitutive part of the image of Norway as “the nation of nature” (Furuset et al. 15). Based on these beliefs, Nordic countries forged during the last decades of the twentieth century a leading role in environmental policies and activism, considering themselves global leaders in sustainable practices. In the case of Norway, unsurprisingly, this domestic and foreign role is in tension with the reality of the *oljefinansierte velferdsstaten* or “petro-welfare-state” in which good salaries, extensive benefits, and social services are determined by the Norwegian engagement with extractivism (Furuset 130). With the advent of the twenty-first century, a very different picture emerged for the Nordic countries as a whole: these nations are now judged, domestically and abroad, under accusations of ‘greenwashing’ and in terms of the impact of their affluence, consumption patterns and reliance on extractivism. Nordic cultural production grapples with these tensions in a myriad of ways.

Cinema in particular, as a “politicized form of cultural argumentation” (Kääpä 74), engages with, and produces, narratives about these conflicts that circulate throughout different social spheres. Cli-fi movies not only focus on purely environmental disasters, as in the case of *Bølgen*. Sometimes the catastrophe is associated with the extractivist practices that contribute to climate change but trigger also other incidents, as *The Abyss* (dir. Richard Holm, 2023), a Swedish movie about a town that sinks and collapses due to the nearby mining activity. The plot in thrillers like the Danish *The Shooter* (dir. Annette K. Olesen, 2013) grows around the image of a scientist who decides to shoot policymakers in protest against the government drilling in the Arctic. Here, tensions are explained through, but not created by, climate change. Others, like Norwegian *Cold Prey* (dir. Roar Uthaug, 2006) or Finnish *Rare Exports* (dir. Jalmari Helander, 2010) explore national folklore tales against the backdrop of a critical revision of the separation between human and non-human nature. Others are embedded in an ideological reflection about the current vision of Nordic presence abroad. In *Force Majeure* (2014), for example, Swedish director Ruben Östlund describes a family’s reaction to an accident in a ski resort in the Alps, exploring the tensions of a Nordic exceptionality ethos in tension with neoliberal values and patterns of consumption.

Bending the Rules

As the last installment of the trilogy started with *Bølgen* and *Skjelvet*, *Nordsjøen* populates the story with the recognizable features of Nordic identity. Here the

characters embody Norway as a nation of *friluftsliv* lovers who embrace the tradition of the cabin (*hytta*) outside the city. They enjoy a night at the beach around a fire, laughing, playing, embracing, and running naked towards the water, in a scene in which the erotic elements of the country's relationship with nature become apparent (Iversen). As in other Nordic films, gender roles here reflect an egalitarian society in which women hold power. The head of the oil company is a woman, as it is the unseen prime minister. More important, the female character, Sofia, is not only the leading actor, but she is also the one with the attributes of bravery, knowledge and decisiveness that moves the plot forward.³ As in most Nordic disaster movies, finally, class differences are not at the center of the plot, or they are mostly erased.

Building on this basic premise, the movie faces the dilemma of how to make intelligible the disruption caused by oil-triggered explosions within an idyllic social and environmental landscape. One possible option would have been to introduce into the story a critical perspective on these national and regional narratives, in line with the ways in which ecocriticism reflects on "the representation of non-human elements as part of the ideological framework of nationhood" (Kääpä 71). In those perspectives, "ecocinema provides a particular 'ecocritical' take on the logic of national cultural industries" (Kääpä 71), bringing cli-fi closer to a vantage point in which reflections on the Anthropocene engage with a critical reflection about ideas of Nordic nationhood—namely, economic affluence, mutually beneficial relation with more-than-human nature, egalitarian societies and consensual political systems.

A central argument of this article is that, while fossil fuel extraction generally exposes the contradictions underlying Norwegian prosperity, *Nordsjøen* presents dependency on oil not as a *symbol* of broader conflicts over wealth, affluence and consumerism, but as an *encapsulated* episode in an otherwise unaffected sense of national exceptionality. It does so by fundamentally bending the three rules of catastrophe movies presented above, effectively enacting an erasure of conflict.

In the movie, explosions spectacularly destroy offshore platforms. Nature responds to excessive drilling. First, the platform breaks, setting in motion the movie's plot. Then, the seabed gives in, and massive blasts sink a string of oil rigs. As if nature's forces were not enough, humans take over the task, with the Airforce firing on the collapsing platforms to prevent further damage. The "petroleumscape of the North Sea," a vast combination of raw nature and massive infrastructure that emerged in the 1970s, collapses (Couling 109). Images ingrained in Norwegian consciousness through museums, school programs, advertisement and sponsorship of international athletes as the backbone of national affluence are swallowed in a few scenes by the ocean. Yet the nation, as imagined by its domestic narratives, remains intact.

³ In the same direction, *The Abyss* went even further in this Nordic approach to gender: the female character not only is the head of security at a mine: it is her husband, while trying to leave the collapsing mine, who represents all the traits frequently attributed to women. He panicked while trying to move through a hole, becomes hysterical and unable to move, causing one female colleague to die and forcing his wife to hit him with a pipe in his head in order to move him up and away from the area.

Erasure 1: Conflict. First, the plot presents no confrontation between good and evil, turning the kind of society that audiences can infer from the screen as a community of only good doers, with problems but no conflicts, thus isolating the disaster from a criticism to the culture in which it takes place. Oil extraction, in this context, is a practice that has brought prosperity and environmental degradation, but it has not wreaked havoc upon the culture to which this practice belongs: the tenets of Norwegian exceptionalism remain intact. As in most catastrophe movies, Sofia, Stian and Artur are the flawless heroic protagonists. But the film also deploys a gallery of characters from different origins and with different interest, yet none of them act out of self-interest, selfishness, ignorance or greed, nor they confront the heroes in irreconcilable ways. Throughout the film, the head of SAGA is shown with a concerned expression but fully focused on both containing the accident and saving Stian's life. Her assistant seeks to comfort Sofia and is eager to pass along crucial information about Stian that she brings to the headquarters. Ronny, Stian's immediate boss, waits until the very last minute on the crumbling platform, engines on, for him to return from underwater, risking his own life and taking off a fraction of a second before the rig collapses. The minister of oil does not interfere in the technical conversation with any immediate political self-interest; even more, he guarantees the prime minister and congress' swift approval for the Airforce's involvement. Good prevails against no evil other than the accident itself.

The closest the movie comes to presenting a villain is Lie, the company's head of security, yet at every turn that the plot could have confirmed his darker side, he acts according to the common good. Right after reviewing the information provided by the robot, Sonia shows him the images suggesting that the accident was not a leak in the pipe but a much more dangerous movement underneath. Lie is struck by the information, becomes distant, and reminds her that she's under a non-disclosure agreement. The interests and image of the company might be a priority of the SAGA's men. Yet, he takes the footage with him and uses it to speed up the evacuation. He later explains in clear terms the causes of the disaster and comes up with the best possible solution to contain the spreading of oil throughout Norway and Northern Europe. His meditative and remorseful voiceover at the end of the movie confirms that the catastrophe has had a redeeming effect on him.

Creating a meaningful tension between good and bad would have steered the story toward connecting the conflict to broader collective struggles—yet the society depicted in *Nordsjøen* displays none. In fact, society almost does not materialize in the movie, as the director discards resources that are abundant in other catastrophe movies: from digitally generated crowds fleeing chaos to the simple use of TV screens that reveal to the audience a social fabric shattered by disaster. Here, as Franklin Ginn has analyzed in cultural productions during the Anthropocene, oil extraction and its tragic consequences are “fetishized to stand as ‘the problem’, masking the underline causes [of it]: the unequal socioeconomic and geopolitical networks” that enable them (Ginn 353).

Two elements come to aid to the erasure of social confrontations. One is the sense of a tightly knit community built around SAGA. Labor relations, family ties and friendship seem to be all harmoniously intertwined. Sofia manages to fly to the burning platform to rescue Stian thanks to Stian's sister, who is a pilot at SAGA. Stian's boss on the platform is also his weekend companion. Berit, the assistant to the company's head, knows Sofia and everybody else by first name. Lie, despite his hierarchical position, eats at the company's cafeteria, and when he feels the need to remove Sofia from the headquarters, security guards escort her silently, politely and with no violence. The environment around the company resonates with the early twentieth century paternalistic image of companies in small towns, of which Henry Ford came to epitomize in the U.S. SAGA is the authority that uses its power responsibly. Trust is tested across lines, but never broken.

The other element is the purifying role of fire. At the dramatic peak of the movie, Sonia, Stian and Artur are on the sinking platform and a sea of fire from the bombs launched by the Airforce advances towards them. Their only chance of survival is to quickly submerge in one of the submarine-like lifeboats. Yet, when they are all inside it, the cord that attaches the lifeboat to the platform is stuck. The only way to free the lifeboat is from the outside: one needs to make the final sacrifice, go back to the platform, cut the cord and release the boat with the other two characters inside. Artur does so, sealing the submersible from the outside with his two friends inside and releasing it to ensure their survival as the fire advances. With his only means of salvation departing without him, Artur is shown literally melting in the flames. There is something curious in his face: he does not look panicked or sad, but rather thrilled, ecstatic after having done the right thing. He is not engulfed by the flames of the Inferno, where sinners are punished; it is the fire of the Purgatory, where souls arrive eager to suffer and to be purified (Morgan 146). Artur ceases to exist, yet he is fully realized.

Erasure 2: Greed. The second bending of the genre's rules is the removal of any kind of economic or political interests from any form of corrupting influence in the decision-making process. None of the decisions that keep the narrative tension alive are distorted by economic greed or sectorial interests, which is even more remarkable in a plot built around oil extraction and its consequences. In fact, one of the few explicit references to the economy is when officials and member of the SAGA emergency team discuss the potential impact that the oil spill would have for the tourism and fishing industries in the Norwegian west coast and Northern Europe. Contrary to other examples such as *Bølgen*, in which the protagonist's boss doesn't activate the evacuation alarm so not to scare tourists during high season (in a reminder of what the major had done in *Jaws*), in *Nordsjøen* this information is immediately considered, processed and used to help speed up the process of bombing the leaked oil as to limit the spill and reduce the damage.

With no political or economic obstacles, decisions are swift. Nature asserts itself as it typically does in catastrophe movies: sudden and mighty, with active disregard for the small, evolving matter that would make it intelligible. These

aesthetic decisions are particularly relevant for visual descriptions of the relation between humans and nature in which, as Castro and Selgas argue, the “spectacular” and “instantaneous” replace “long shots and subtle details reminiscent of the extractive violence” (Castro and Selgas 9). Human solutions mirror nature in its expediency: the company suggests the best option is to bomb the oil so the flames consume it, the minister makes a call and gets the support from the Prime Minister and Congress. Minutes later, two F35 from the Air Force launch a few missiles over the leaked oil with millimetric precision. The fictionalized version effectively expunged from the process the entanglement of interests that would complicate the outcome. Oil spills are messy, but the ulterior efforts to contain their effects are just usually as chaotic.

A real case close to the one created in *Nordsjøen*, the Torrey Canyon of 1967, shows what the movie erased. The tanker ran aground on rocks, leaving more than 100 million liters of crude oil in coasts of Britain. Efforts to contain the spill lasted more than 20 days, officials delayed action for days waiting for the ship’s owners to declare total loss of the property so to avoid litigation. The crisis involved confrontations between the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and his cabinet, and between them and Parliament, civil society and local authorities. Before the decision to bomb was taken, the authorities tried to salvage the ship—breaking it in two in the process—then tried washing the sea with detergent and even bombing the water, yet failed to keep the fire under control. Anything but swift, the bombing itself lasted three days, during which RAF dropped 160,000 pounds of explosives, 10,000 gallons of aviation kerosene and 3,000 gallons of napalm (Sheail). Power struggles, inequalities, clashing interests and opposing views of society became immediately apparent, casting doubts about the very “natural” connotation of ecological disasters. As historian Mark Healey notes, “If these social structures are often invisible or taken for granted a major disaster can bring them into view, and open them to challenge” (Healey 12).

Erasure 3: Anti-science. Associated with this dimension is the third bent rule of the genre: throughout the movie, scientific advice is smoothly incorporated into the decision-making process, and it never clashes with other knowledge or interests. As in most catastrophe and cli-fi movies, scientists have a prominent and heroic place in the plot. Sofia and Artur work with Eelume, the underwater robot, feeding imagines and other information to SAGA officials working on the platform or from the company’s headquarters. It is not only the cutting-edge technology of Eelume that gives them a leading role in dealing with the explosions, but also the training, knowledge and principles that they bring to their job and that, taken together, form a defining work ethics for the scientific community. The movie introduces the two characters and the robot during a training session in which they seek to improve their performance. Later, when Eelume provides them with images of the explosions, they do not simply accept the raw footage as transparent information. Instead, Sofia returns to work, reviews the recording and realizes that there is a fault in the seabed.

Scientific knowledge and technology thus form the platform on which they decide on their heroic mission to rescue Stian.

While none of this is new to the genre, *Nordsjøen* introduces the innovation of valuing scientific advice. Scientists also provide the long-term data suggesting that the collapse of the seabed is linked to human's undeterred efforts to extract oil. Yet this point is only admitted in passing, and in the mildest possible terms, during the first emergency meeting at SAGA's headquarters. After the minister of Oil and Energy inquires about the cause, scientists use visual simulations on large screens to illustrate geological shifts occurring over millions of years. The cause? "Several reasons," a scientific advisor suggests. Among them, there is the chance that too much drilling has softened the seabed. "We've turned the sea bottom into a Swiss cheese," the scientist said, fleetingly, before being cut short by the head of the company: "Please, let's focus on what's important now" (36). Meaning: avoiding a cataclysm.⁴

The opportunity to frame scientific advice as the starting point for two competing narratives—one focused on the company's responsibility in the accident and one running forward towards the consequences of the company's actions—is carefully avoided. Rather, both stories blend into a partnership between science, business and officials. This is clearer than ever in the role of Lie. After analyzing the information provided by Sofia, Lie explains in clear terms the causes of the disaster and comes up with the best possible solution to contain the spreading of oil throughout Norway and Northern Europe. His meditative and remorseful voiceover at the end of the movie confirms that the catastrophe has had a redeeming effect on him. Science has helped to prevent the worst possible scenario; yet, unlike most movies in this genre, it did so without having to confront denialism, sabotage, shortsighted political ambitions or economic interests.

Conclusions

The first time Sofia and Artur are sent to investigate the situation at the rings, they load Eeluma along with other vital equipment and board one of SAGA's helicopters. As the chopper lifts off, the horizon expands, visually and otherwise. As the perspective widens, the image encompasses not only what Couling defined as the "petroleumscape of the North Sea" (109), its infrastructure and the vast ocean below: the wind turbines in the skyline announce also the end of an era. In the emergence of renewables and the remorseful final remarks about being an 'ocean nation,' we picture a future without oil, but more importantly, without further conflicts with nature. As it becomes clear, the problem has been oil as a material, and not the practices and discourses attached to its extraction, the exchange value and the social

⁴ This harmonic relation between science and power seems limited to *Nordsjøen* and its main object, oil. Other Norwegian disaster films remain attentive to the conflict. More recently, the Netflix Norwegian blockbuster *La Palma* (dir. Martin Sundland, 2024) portrays officials in Spain and in Norway as stubbornly rejecting warnings from both scientists, expanding the consequences of the volcanic eruption.

costs attached to oil once it is imagined as a resource. This narrative becomes more transparent when contrasted with *Birk & Magna: Gruvens mørke hemmelighet* (dir. Christer Steffensen, 2023), a Norwegian children's movie released two years later. The movie portrays the attempts of an energy company to expand its wind turbine operations in a small Norwegian town. Everything occluded in *Nordsjøen* is apparent here: evil characters threaten nature and human lives through extortion and violence against good-will characters tied to the community. Malevolent forces do so in seeking economic profit through the exploitation of nature. But even more interesting, evil and greed are represented not by the oil industry but by economic interests associated with wind energy, making clear that is not oil but *resourcism*, a radical and all-encompassing reading of the entire nature as a space for profit, which brings us to the brink of extinction.

Nordsjøen is certainly not a happy movie, yet it offers the comforting feeling of a way out of the fossil-fuel era that leaves unscathed the basic tenets of Norwegian identity—portrayed as something exceptionally different and superior to other national identities (Rees 45). Facing an oil spill of titanic magnitude, all members of society unite for a common solution: technology cleans up the mess, and new energies replace the polluting ones. Removed from the various systems of extraction in which oil is enmeshed, both the love for nature and the nihilistic anxieties about the Anthropocene hovering the movie become simply a means to escape from more intractable human problems—those of economic exploitation and political domination—that allow for the destruction of nature, human and otherwise.

As such, the sense of Norwegian exceptionalism looming over the movie is suspended in *petromelancholia*, as “a story about ‘unsustainable attachment’, about destructive love,” as Stephanie LeMenager elaborated (11). LeMenager presents *petromelancholia* as a literary genre different from *petrofiction*. Whereas the latter refers to “novels that make explicit the oil problem under debate,” the former discusses how “the petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of asphalt on the sole of one’s feet are incorporating practices” (LeMenager 26). *Nordsjøen* navigates the edge of both waters. The inhabitants of this town are removed from the experience of oil consumption and the habitus it entails, yet every centimeter of the fabric of this community is infused with oil. In this *petromelancholic state of mind*, the “painful detachment process” associated with *petromelancholia* is hovering on the horizon, imbuing characters with a sober realization of their poisonous wellbeing.

Present tensions around this “unsustainable attachment” reify a past portrayed as a combination of domestic social equality, national innocence and benevolent global impact. As the movie makes clear, the period between 1969 and today is an era in itself, defined by the discovery of oil. While the country became awfully prosperous, equality receded. Current estimates consider that in 2018 the wealthiest 10 percent owned 60 of the national wealth, in line with the U.K. and other European countries, while the richest one percent is also the sector paying the least

taxes in relation to their income (Aaberge). Scholars have also suggested that containment of the domestic inequality gap and of the environmental footprint of consumption and extractivism locates Norway as a late case of uneven and combined development, in which national class compromise and a conscious environmental policy are made at the expenses of workers and nature elsewhere (Bieler 240).

In this context, ‘exceptionalism’ operates a chronological transposition in which a nostalgic vindication of a distant past enables the obliteration of the immediate one. Oil is the source of prosperity and the cause of the loss of an idealized, innocent, and simpler social and natural landscape. The past is projected onto the ocean, a privileged medium for romanticized realities different from those human societies created on land. ‘Ocean,’ the last word in the movie, is the medium for longing for a perceived lost past, a reminder of what we really were before oil, and of what we can be again, as historian Helen M. Rozwadowski puts it, “a playground and retreat in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nostalgia for a lost maritime past [that] fixed the ocean in a perpetually pre-industrial moment” (Rozwadowski 160).

Since the 1940s, the majority of offshore platforms have been built “out of sight of land,” an invisibility that was “a function of where oil and gas deposits are located but also of political, economic and aesthetic considerations” (Polack and Farquharson 253). Yet, over the last decades, offshore rigs, still removed from the immediate encounter with ordinary citizens, have been incorporated into the Norwegian ecology of culture, labor, economics and ideology, not as a hurdle in the country’s relation with nature but as part of a modern reconfiguration of it. This spirit was particularly in situating Norwegian recent history and impending future, as the oil state company Equinor and other Norwegian corporations involved in a myriad of economic activities in the ocean—from water and wind energy to salmon farming and deep-sea mining—face backlash abroad and at home for their social and environmental impact (The Royal House 2021; McBride, 2023; Eidse-Frænkel, 2025). In *Nordsjøen*, the ocean is the space for reckoning with that legacy, while retaining the values that would warrant not only an exceptionalist national character but also future extractivist practices.

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