

Simon Moe

Greenwashing the Apocalypse

How *The Burning Sea* (Andersen, 2021) Upholds
the Fossil Status Quo

Bachelor's thesis in Film and Video Production

Supervisor: Christer B. Andresen

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Art and Media Studies



Abstrakt

Denne bacheloroppgaven har som mål å bevise at filmen *Nordsjøen* (Andersen 2021) er implisert i grønnvasking av den norske oljeindustrien. Gjennom en visuell og narrativ analyse av filmen, samt en analyse av filmcrewet, produksjonselskapet og deres koblinger til den norske oljeindustrien, prøver jeg å bevise en bevisst innsats å grønnvaske denne industrien for økonomiske og produksjons-logistiske årsaker. Metoden baserer jeg på eksisterende filmteori, for det meste marxistisk teori med Karl Marx og Louis Althusser, Edvard Herman og Noam Chomskys tekst *Manufacturing Consent*, Georg Löfflmanns forskning på det amerikanske forsvarrets innblanding i Hollywood og Christer Andresen's bok *Norwegian Nightmares*.

Abstract

This Bachelor thesis aims to prove that the feature film *The Burning Sea* (Andersen 2021) is implicated in the praxis of greenwashing of the Norwegian oil industry. Through an analysis of narrative and visual traits of the film, as well as through an analysis of the production crew and studio and their contacts with the Norwegian oil industry, I attempt to prove a conscious effort to greenwash the industry for commercial and production gain. I base my methods in existing theory, mainly marxist film theory including texts by Karl Marx and Louis Althusser, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's work *Manufacturing Consent*, Georg Löfflmann's research on US Armed Forces interference in Hollywood film and Christer Andresen's work *Norwegian Nightmares*.

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1. Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to my mentor, Christer Bakke Andresen, who believed in this thesis throughout the research process and never failed to make me excited to make this thesis as good as possible.

“[...] The truly dangerous radicals are the countries that are increasing the production of fossil fuels. Investing in new fossil fuels infrastructure is moral and economic madness.”

- Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations (2022)

2. Introduction

2.1. Background

“We are on a fast track to climate disaster”, Antonio Gueterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, said at the launch of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on April 4th, 2022. While the covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have dominated the news outlets for the last 3 years, the climate crisis is still widely considered as one of the most pressing - and complex - issues humanity has to face in the 21st century. The severity of the crisis can perhaps be best illustrated by the strong words used by Guterres at the report launch. In the speech, he condemns states and private actors who are failing to perform the action needed to reach the goals of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement:

We are on a pathway to global warming of more than double the 1.5°C limit agreed in Paris. Some Government and business leaders are saying one thing, but doing another. Simply put, they are lying. And the results will be catastrophic. This is a climate emergency. (Guterres 2022)

2015 is not only the year of the signing of the Paris Climate Agreement; it is also the year when the Norwegian disaster film *The Wave* (Uthaug 2015) premiered to great critical acclaim and audience reception - the film sold 832 723 tickets - and caused a new wave (pun not intended) of Norwegian disaster films, portraying mostly natural disasters and their colossal, grandiose impact on Norwegians. (Andresen 2022, 146)

One of the latest iterations of this genre is *The Burning Sea* (Andersen 2021), a disaster-thriller about a fictitious major seabed avalanche, causing the destruction of numerous oil rigs and consequently a massive oil spill. The film premiered in October 2021, mere months before the release of the IPCC report Guterres refers to.

In this thesis I will argue that *The Burning Sea* is implicated in the practice of greenwashing of the Norwegian oil industry and specifically the Norwegian state-owned multinational fossil corporation Equinor.

I am going to base this argument in existing film and media theory, largely on the marxist theory of the superstructure, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's work *Manufacturing consent* describing a modern western media propaganda model, and Georg Löffmann's article on pentagon's involvement in Hollywood film. Additionally, I am going to present a summary on the development of disaster films in Norway as described by Christer B. Andresen in *Norwegian Nightmares: The Horror Cinema of a Nordic Country*.

2.2. Method

In the analytical part of this thesis, I am going to analyse the plot structure of *The Burning Sea* to identify what narrative tools the filmmakers use (or avoid to use) in order to greenwash the image of the oil industry. I am then going to explore the connections between the production team behind the film, and Equinor and any other major player in the oil industry. Finally, I am going to compare the narrative and visual qualities in *The Burning Sea* and in Equinor's marketing material, in order to prove a link between the two. Moreover, I am going to compare *The Burning Sea* to another Norwegian disaster film, *Troll*, and look at parallels between the two films.

Finally, I will explore the reception of *The Burning Sea* in Norway to assess the effect this type of greenwashing might have had on audiences and critics.

3. Existing theory

3.1. Film and Power

Relations between societal power and cultural products were described as early as by Karl Marx in his work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), according to Ruth Doughty and Christine Etherington in *Understanding Film theory*. Here, they present Marx's 'base and superstructure' model. This model has two parts. The first is the 'base' - which includes the 'forces of production' - that is the technology, tools, labour - and the 'relations of production' - that is the power relation between the owners or decision makers and the workers in the process of production. (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 2017, 105) The second is the 'superstructure', which relates "to the way a society things and the way it rules its people (the ideology and institutions that are the foundation of any society: law, religion, politics, media, education, etc)." (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 2017, 106)

Furthermore, Etherington-Wright and Doughty explain that according to Marx, cultural products have to be "examined in relation to their historical mode of production". This is because "the dominant thinking of any specific time would display the ideas of the ruling class [which] attempt to make the workers conform to their ideas". (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 2017, 106). In other words, popular culture represents the ideas of the ruling class as the dominant ones, forcing all other ways of thinking into the margins and preventing them from entering the mainstream. Therefore, "working-class people come to adopt the dominant class's ideologies", which results in what "Engels refers to as 'false consciousness'". (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 2017, 106)

Further on, Etherington-Wright and Doughty present the further development of marxist film theory through other writers. Central to this thesis are the ideas developed by Louis Althusser. He believed the relation between the base and the superstructure to be more complex and reciprocal, and argued that there are many factors that influence the outcome of a cultural product, in our case a film; including the economic climate, the prevailing social, cultural and political situation, and technical considerations. (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 2017, 107) Moreover, Althusser also develops the idea of 'symptomatic reading'. This is a form of reading texts (or other cultural products, like films) by looking "beyond the information

presented to consider what has been omitted; [...] rather than focusing on the questions asked, Althusser suggests that the reader should attempt to discern what is not being asked". (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 2017, 110) In other words, by analysing what is not being talked about one can find out what ideas, concepts or events the ruling class (through the media) attempts to silence.

A (relatively) recent development on relations between film and power has been done by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their work *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. One can recognize many elements of the ideas developed by the aforementioned writers also in this book, and the text itself is more a practical application of the aforementioned concepts than a theoretical concept. Specifically, Herman and Chomsky analyse the 'propaganda model' in the United States.

The most important takeaway from *Manufacturing Consent* for this thesis is the idea that the propaganda function that media has is not a planned or systematic conspiracy by specific people of power who would dictate the news or screenplays, but happens quite organically:

Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalised preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organisation, market, and political power. Censorship is largely self-censorship, by reporters and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and media organisational requirements, and by people at higher levels within media organisations who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalised, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centres of power. (Herman and Chomsky 2010, 56)

While Herman and Chomsky mostly focus on the news section of media organisations, it is useful to analyse the application of this propaganda model on the film sector. There is one notable example that has been quite heavily written on, both in academia and in popular media forums, which is the influence the US Department of Defence enjoys over Hollywood productions.

In his article *Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the Cinematic Production of National Security*, Georg Löffmann provides an overview of Pentagon's politics towards Hollywood. He writes

that “The US Department of Defence is actively involved in promoting and projecting a popular imagination of American military power and the geopolitical identity of the United States through its entertainment industry liaison”, and adds that “their frequent involvement in contemporary film productions shows that the Department of Defence and the Armed Forces are not just passive service providers to the film industry, but in fact an active part in the process of filmmaking.” (Löfflmann 2013, 283)

What is this service being provided to film crews by the US Armed Forces? Löfflmann explains these include technical advice, lending of military hardware such as tanks and helicopters, providing military personnel as extras, or shooting at military locations. He adds that these can “save a production substantial costs”. (Löfflmann 2013, 283) On the other hand, the US Armed forces gain a substantial benefit as well: it “allows the Pentagon great leverage in maintaining a positive image of the American military in the films it cooperates with”, (Löfflmann 2013, 283) and by extension in maintaining a positive image of the American military in the public - if we consider the theoretical work done by the aforementioned writers and philosophers to be true.

Löfflmann also presents the process of the US defence involvement in Hollywood to great detail:

The production generally begins with a film team approaching the branch of the Armed Forces it wishes to obtain support from [...] After a script has been submitted, an initial assessment occurs and if accepted, a recommendation for support is prepared for the Pentagon, with suggested script changes included, if deemed necessary [...] Once a script has been approved, a project officer is assigned to assist the production. The rough cut of any film must be reviewed before public release and early enough to make changes, should the pentagon demand them. (Löfflmann 2013, 283)

The official criteria for which projects get approved are, according to Löfflmann, ‘accuracy’ and ‘realism’. (Löfflmann 2013, 283) However, as Löfflmann’s case studies seem to prove, these criteria are not about the accuracy or realism of the depiction of real, complex situations the US Army finds itself in, but are rather about the accuracy of the films’ ideological viewpoints and if these are in line with the official narrative the US Army wants to present

itself with. Löfflmann describes how fantastical science-fiction films have a higher chance of getting full support from the Pentagon than more accurate and realistic portrayals of real-life interventions by the US Armed Forces (Löfflmann 2013, 286)

3.2. Norwegian disaster film

As mentioned earlier, Norwegian disaster film is a relatively new genre first gaining steam with the release of *The Wave* in 2015. It has been therefore challenging finding existing theoretical work on this genre. The most extensive overview is provided by Christer B. Andresen in his book *Norwegian Nightmares: The Horror Cinema of a Nordic Country*, where he dedicates the final chapter to the disaster wave.

How did horror, and by extension disaster films, get so popular in Norway? Andresen's book alludes to the reason being in the genres' funding. As he notes, "production [in Norway] has been largely dependent on public funding, these days organised through the programmes of the Norwegian Film Institute (NFI), and thus on government policies." (Andresen 2022, 22) He further explains that throughout film history, there has been a debate in Norway on whether films should be funded on artistic merit or their mainstream appeal. (22) In the 2000s, public funding "was split along two tracks", either on the basis of artistic ambitions or by commercial appeal. (23) Crucially, the latter got supported by a '50/50 mechanism', a system where the state funded half the budget if the other half got secured privately. (24) This opened up for commercially viable genre filmmaking, leading to the 2000s wave of horror film Andresen explores. However, due to rising popularity of Norwegian film, NFI now requires a potential for at least 200,000 tickets sold - which makes horror, though relatively popular, unviable to compete for these funds. Instead, production companies like Fantefilm redirected their efforts into the more popular genre of disaster film. (Andresen 2022, 152)

Fantefilm has a central role in the development of Norwegian genre film. They were the producers behind the *Cold Prey* films, which are considered to have started the Norwegian horror wave. (Andresen 2022, 120) Later, due to the changing incentives, they diverted into disaster films, starting with the previously mentioned *The Wave* (which was in fact directed by the same filmmaker as *Cold Prey*, Roar Uthaug). (Andresen 2022, 147) Again, this film started a new wave of disaster cinema, "creating a blueprint for that Fantefilm (and conceivably other producers in the genre) could use for future films." (Andresen 2022, 147)

Here, Andresen also notes that this blueprint was heavily inspired by Hollywood aesthetics, more so than Fantefilm's earlier horror era. The aesthetics are not the only thing Fantefilm appropriated from American studios, however. According to a master thesis developed by Vidar Tevasvold Aune, "Fantefilm consciously looked to American cinema for models on how to shape and apply marketing campaigns." (Andresen 2022, 151) Andresen argues that this commercial drive found in Fantefilm is representative for the current producer culture in Norway: "It does not really matter much who wrote or directed the North Sea, it is clearly a Martin Sundland-produced Norwegian disaster movie. The brand has been successfully established." (Andresen 2022, 152)

However, the genre is not as simplistic as only a cash-grabbing commercial product. Andresen presents the Norwegian disaster (and horror) film through two lenses - the ideological context surrounding them and the role Norwegian nature plays in these productions. The former Andresen grounds in the dichotomy between the social-democratic image the Nordic countries have and the current real-life political situation in these countries. He argues that as the countries have rising inequality and pass (neo)liberal policy, the social-democratic utopia has ceased to exist - "a dystopian darkness hidden beneath the utopian surface." (Andresen 2022, 143) Similarly, "the previously regenerative and romantic nature and wilderness so symbolic of Norway [gets imbued] with sinister secrets of death and destruction." (143)

Norwegian culture has had a complex relationship with nature throughout history. According to Andresen, Norwegian nature served nation-building efforts in the early 20th century, when the relationship between Norwegians and the Norwegian natural landscape was put in contrast with "Sweden's urban aristocracy". Therefore, Norwegian national romanticism presents the Norwegian landscape as beautiful and sublime. (Andresen 2022, 4) This is however "at odds with national folklore": according to Andresen, "the positive and regenerative qualities with which national romanticism imbues the Norwegian countryside, the fetishizing of nature and wilderness, seems to ignore the much scarier roots of woods, mountains and waters. [...] Getting lost in the woods is dangerous, nature is a force far stronger than humans, and this folkloric vision of Norway is certainly much closer to the post-2000 horror film treatments than the national romanticism of the 1800 and 1900s." (Andresen 2022, 5) Throughout his work, Andresen brings up the important role nature plays

in Norwegian horror and disaster, most prominently water: “The deepest source of horror in Norwegian cinema is the gothic motif of dark and deadly water.” (26)

4. Analysis

4.1. The Burning Sea

The Burning Sea (Nordsjøen) (Andersen 2021) is a Norwegian disaster film produced by Fantefilm and directed by John Andreas Andersen. The film performed well, coming in third place of the most popular cinema releases in Norway in 2021, with 221 452 visitors. (Petterson 2022, 12) The film was quite well received by critics as well, mostly landing between 3 and 5 on the standard 1-6 rating in Norway. (“Blandet mottakelse for «Nordsjøen» – fra treere til «en oppvisning»” 2021)

The film opens with a documentary-style narration about the origins of oil exploration, presented by one of the main characters in the film, the oil executive William Lie, who explains to the audience how improvised the early years in the industry were due to the lack of local know-how. He further explains the high risks the industry took in order to reap the high rewards.

The film then cuts to the main character Sofia, waking up to observe the sea before saying goodbye to her boyfriend Stian, an oil platform worker, and his son. Sofia then drives to her workplace, the underwater robotics developer Eelume (a real life company), where she and her co-worker Arthur get called up by the fossil company Saga to explore a sunken oil platform for survivors with their robot. The intervention goes wrong, and Sofia gets injured in a subsequent gas explosion. Afterwards, Sofia and Arthur discover a massive rift and report their findings to Saga, where Lie decides to start a full-scale evacuation of the North sea.

Following this initial set-up, the rest of the film is an intense thriller sequence with two main timelines. As the avalanche sets off, Stian gets caught on one of the platforms as the evacuation helicopter had to take off to avoid getting crushed. Arthur and Sofia travel to the platform to rescue him. On land, William and his team at Saga attempt to get control over the situation, which worsens due to a massive oil spill as a result of the avalanche. The oil and

energy minister gives them a go-ahead to bomb the spill in order to burn the oil before it gets to land. Right after, he receives a call from Sofia, Stian and Arthur, who hope to get picked up. However, this is not possible due to the smoke and fire. The three attempt to evacuate by filling up a lifeboat with water to submerge under the flames, but Arthur has to take the sacrifice of manually releasing the lifeboat. After almost drowning in the lifeboat, Sofia and Stian finally get rescued and reunite with Stian's son on land.

The film ends with similar documentary footage of oil exploration as in the beginning, explaining the aftermath of the disaster. Over a beautiful landscape shot of the Norwegian coast, William Lie ends the film with the line "We thought we were an oil nation - but we are actually a sea nation". (Andersen 2021, 01:37:45-01:37:53)

4.2. The narrative

For a film set in the oil industry in 2021, *The Burning Sea* is peculiarly empty of any reference to the ongoing climate crisis. In fact, the word 'climate' is mentioned in the film only once. This happens right before the evacuation in the film starts happening, when the Saga officials have their first meeting with the Oil and Energy minister. Here, the following dialogue takes place:

minister: "Why is this happening now?"

geologist: "We don't know. Could be a lot of factors. Climate change or other factors."

(Andersen 2021, 00:37:52-00:37:58)

After this brief mention the prevailing theory the geologist proposes is that the activity in the Northern Sea has caused so many holes in the ground it reactivated an 8000 years old avalanche - something completely unrelated to climate change. But even here, the geologist explaining the scientific grounds and the possible man-made reason for the catastrophe, he gets interrupted by a Saga executive:

Saga executive: "Let's consider the situation we're facing."

minister: "We'd love to. What do you suggest we do?"

(Andersen 2021, 00:38:16-00:38:22)

After this, the film or its characters never return to exploring the reason for the disaster happening; the film focuses on the rescue mission(s). The film never condemns the characters for this decision, but rather makes it seem like the only obvious choice to do. In fact, the film makes sure to never put any responsibility, actions out of conflict of interest or personal or economic interest on any of the characters, even when that would make the plot more engaging to the audience.

In fact, the film noticeably avoids framing a character or an entity as an antagonist. All the characters are constantly acting in a morally correct way, according to the information and resources that they have at their disposal. While Sofia, Stian and Arthur clearly are the heroes embarking on a heroic rescue mission, so are the team at Saga. William Lie, the oil and energy minister and all other workers are constantly trying to make the best out of the situation, save as many lives as possible, and prioritising a safe and environmentally friendly solution to the crisis at hand.

This lack of an antagonist is not only atypical of the genre, it also makes the plot and dramaturgy of the film weaker. With no antagonist, there is no clear conflict in the story either. The film sets up for a conflict between Sofia and the leadership at Saga, making her fly out to the platform secretly; however, the rest of the film does not have a real conflict situation. While the action scenes are thrilling in their own right, the lack of an antagonist makes the plot too simple for the film to reach its potential.

The choice to not include an antagonist among the cast of characters is even more peculiar due to there being two characters who are clearly set up to become antagonists by genre conventions. These are William Lie and the oil and energy minister. Lie has a scene early on in the film with Sofia which is actually eerie and sets up the expectation of him becoming a villain in the story. This is when Sofia meets him over lunch at Saga headquarters to warn him of the dangerous rift forming in the seabed. At this point, William confiscates her hard drive and says the company will take care of it. As a member of the audience, I expected William would fail to do so out of economic interests of the company, which would cause the disaster Sofia would have to approach. The 'evil boss' in the office would also give more purpose to a set of side characters at the Saga headquarters, who could team up to prevent him from doing even more damage. These side characters are Ronny, Berit and Jasin, who are

perfectly set up to team up and overthrow the villain. In the released cut of the film, however, they just hang around with no apparent purpose and could be easily replaced with unnamed extras.

The oil and energy minister could perform the same role, only a level higher in the hierarchy (in that case, it wouldn't be corporate greed performing the role of the villain, but the "evil" state bureaucracy against a "good" private company).

This dramaturgical shortcoming becomes even more apparent when we compare the film to another contemporary Norwegian disaster film, the Netflix monster production *Troll* (Uthaug 2022). The film has almost the same third act setup - a high-up officer (in *Troll's* case, a particularly non-charismatic minister of defence) at the base of operations wishes to fire a missile into the approaching danger (in this case the troll, and in *The Burning Sea's* case, the oil spill). With this, he endangers the characters on the ground. The difference between the films is that in *Troll*, this character is portrayed as the villain, and it is up to his subordinates to team up and stop him. In *The Burning Sea*, the (dramaturgically) same character is portrayed as one of the protagonists, and his subordinates lack a clear goal. This clear comparison should be considered as proof to the possibility an earlier draft of the screenplay might have included a clear villain that got scrapped from the latter stages of the production, leaving characters which might have had a purpose earlier without a clear goal.

The lack of a clear antagonist in *The Burning Sea* has also been written about by Christer B. Andresen in *Norwegian Nightmares*. He independently makes the same identification of a possible villain as I did, writing that "Andersen and Fantefilm are strikingly careful not to depict anyone in the oil industry as a villain. Institutional greed or personal ambitions are not factors in the present disaster. Floberg's character, emergency manager William Lie, is in fact set up as the perfect antagonist on the inside of the system, somewhat reminiscent of Vice President Becker (Kenneth Walsh) in *The Day After Tomorrow*. In *The Burning Sea*, however, Lie ultimately makes all the right calls in a job that is both technically and ethically demanding." (Andresen 2022, 150) He connects this to possible other interests involved in the production:

Paradoxically, in The Burning Sea this means sacrificing the generic tension they strive to create: criticism of Norway's oil industry and national fossil fuel politics is

kept to a bare minimum and is even voiced by industry insider William Lie himself, effectively giving Norwegian oil and gas a conscientious voice within the film and providing a sufficiently green sheen for industry and filmmakers alike. (Andresen 2022, 150)

The film defiantly avoids the topic of climate change to the point it has to be a conscious choice on the filmmakers' side. The lack of climate discourse in the film has been noticed both by critics and by audiences, however most of those do not attribute that to a conscious effort of greenwashing, but to a slip-up in a creative process. In fact, reading through both professional and personal reviews of the film gives the impression most audiences believe the goal of the filmmakers was to make a climate-conscious film. Birger Vestmo writes in his review that "the film would probably have been even better if the story's environmental problems had taken up more space, and not just been the setting for the tension." (Vestmo 2021) Kine Hult in *Stavanger Aftenblad* even goes as far as to say "it is not unlikely that it can work well to liven up the atmosphere at the next MDG annual meeting." (Hult 2021)

Most directly critical is Andresen in *Norwegian Nightmares*, writing that "[climate catastrophe] is a real catastrophe in which Norwegian oil and gas production inevitably bears significant responsibility, but this national conundrum is an aspect that Andersen and his screenwriters sadly avoid addressing properly, even when it would have strengthened the genre intentions of their film." Andersen then very directly states what I am trying to prove with this thesis: "Certainly, in order to gain the desired access and cooperation, both in terms of plot mechanics and commercial product placement, Fantefilm have to stay on the good side of any corporate or government entity they rely on." (Andresen 2022, 150) The access Andresen is referring to here, is access to actual real-life oil platforms in the Northern Sea to shoot at. With a budget of 60 million NOK, the production did not have the funds to recreate an oil platform in the studio. Rather, they got permission to shoot at an operational platform. "The oil industry truly let us in," John Andreas Andersen confirmed in an article for *Bergens Tidene*. (Johnsen and Breivik 2021)

4.3. Saga - Equinor?

The fictitious fossil fuel company in the film, Saga, plays the role of Equinor in the film; and while the film never explicitly states that Saga is a state-owned entity, the context presented

in the film leads to this conclusion. The company is presented to be the main player in the fossil fuel extraction business in the north sea, holding a monopoly position over all extraction platforms in the evacuation zone. Even more, the extensive state-controlled resources (including ambulance helicopters and rescue ships) and the fact that the rescue and shut-down operation is led from the offices of this company strengthen the claim that Saga is the fictional representation not only of the Norwegian fossil fuel industry at large, but also specifically of Equinor.

4.4. Fossil Ties

While Equinor is not directly credited in the film, another fossil fuel company is. OKEA, a Trondheim-based company who describes itself as “a leading mid-to-late-life operator on the Norwegian continental shelf,” (“This is OKEA - OKEA” 2023) is credited with a “special thanks to” credit. The company was founded by former oil and energy minister (and current minister of higher education) Ola Borten Moe, (Solli 2021) who also has a special thank you credit along with Olav Bjarne Roksvaag.

Other “thank you” credits in the film include Scandinavian Oil and Gas, the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate and Odfjell Drilling; in other words, both public and private actors in the oil industry. Of course, counselling from actors in the field was something to be expected and does not necessarily mean any sort of direct involvement by those actors in the narrative or thematic work on the film. However, the thank you section of the credits prove that these contacts exist and that those actors could have had a direct or indirect influence.

Additionally, John Andreas Andersen, the director of *Nordsjøen*, is associated with Einar film og Fortellinger, an Oslo-based production company, for which he has directed a range of advertisement campaigns. Einar film og Fortellinger is also the production company behind the Equinor promotional docu-series *Den største testen*, which had a wide promotional release in sponsored web advertisement, printed media, billboards, television and even had a full trailer play in cinemas.

Moreover, Marius Holst, Andersen’s colleague in Fantefilm but also the director of Equinor’s advertisement video *Tikk Takk* (2022), is credited under “the director wishes to thank.” This

advertisement video is worth a closer look due to its apparent narrative and visual similarities to the work done at Nordsjøen.

4.5. Tikk Takk

About a year after *Nordsjøen* opened the Bergen international film festival, Equinor released the promotional campaign *Tikk Takk*, celebrating its 50-year anniversary. This campaign was massive, spanning printed and digital media, billboards and a cinema-release of the centrepiece of the campaign: a short, extremely well-produced video, directed by Marius Holst - and co-produced by none other than Fantefilm. (Fredø 2022)

The video is aesthetically - and in some ways also narratively - extremely close to *The Northern Sea*. The video is shot in a 4:3 format highly reminiscent of the format used in the documentary-style intro and outro sequences of *The Northern Sea*. Additionally, the quick-paced editing, the use of voice-over and the use of archival documentary footage of early oil exploration and extraction creates a direct link to the intro sequence of *The Burning Sea*, which uses these same stylistic tools - the documentary footage looks like it was taken from the same archive. (For a visual comparison, I recommend watching the advertisement and the first two minutes of *The Burning Sea*). We can also find many narrative elements reminiscent of *The Burning Sea* - a young boy playing in a sea-side living room (waiting for his father to come home), Eelume operators and the robots themselves, and a female helicopter pilot getting ready for take-off. All of these narrative bits have their comparisons in the film; respectively Stian's son, Arthur and Sofia, and Stian's sister.



Figure 1. To the left: Tikk takk - Takk til de første femti. To the right: Nordsjøen

What do these similarities tell us? Firstly, the fact Fantefilm is producing an ad campaign video for Equinor a year after they premiered a feature film at a climate-related film festival, is telling of what Andresen describes as a “cynical production practice” at Fantefilm, where “commercial dominance in the marketplace is one of Fantefilm’s main objectives.” (Andresen 2022, 151-152) It shows that Fantefilm does not feel any moral obligation to refrain from producing advertisements for the biggest fossil company in Norway, . Secondly, the visual similarities show how interconnected productions at Fantefilm are, and lead to the conclusion

the teams were in contact and had input on each other's work. Thirdly, use of the same stylistic and narrative tools in both the film and the advertisement video could mean that those tools were deemed to have a positive effect on the reception of the oil industry among viewers. And lastly, it is safe to assume that Equinor would not want to portray themselves with an aesthetic connected to an effective anti-fossil film or by anti-fossil filmmakers. Instead, Equinor appropriated the aesthetics of a film that presented itself to be progressive about climate issues by premiering at a climate festival, to message to viewers of the advertisement that the company is equally sustainable.

Andresen notes:

“this cynical production practice is all the more questionable in the case of *The Burning Sea*, since the industry and national politics at the plot's base are the real-life sources for the existential threat of Norwegian, and indeed global, apocalypse in our age of catastrophic climate change. *The Burning Sea* could have been the ultimate Norwegian disaster film, the entertainment blockbuster with a conscience that embraced a current global catastrophe.”

5. Discussion

What do these analytical results mean when seen in light of aforementioned existing theory?

Firstly, narrative traits of the film - including the lack of mention of climate change and the lack of a real antagonist - seem like deliberate choices, since the expected and conventional solution would be to both explore the theme and include a protagonist. This is apparent both from the critical reception of the film, which criticised the lack of climate discourse, and from a comparison to other disaster films (specifically *Troll*) which feature clear villains. In fact, some of the characters in *The Burning Sea* seem like they are dramaturgically set up to fill either the hero or villain roles, but fail to do so. These findings are supported by Andresen's findings in *Norwegian Nightmares*, as well by a symptomatic reading of the film as developed by Althusser.

Secondly, the multiple connections the film crew has to the oil industry strengthen the suspicion some of these contacts might have had a direct or indirect influence on the story

and themes of the film. As theorised by Andresen and confirmed by the director, the crew behind *Nordsjøen* got access, support and positive financial outcomes due to the goodwill of oil industry entities. These can be directly compared to the benefits Löffmann describes in productions supported by the US Armed Forces. Seen through the work done by Herman and Chomsky on the modern propaganda model and the narrative traits described above it becomes apparent there is a possibility oil industry insiders had a say in the themes and narratives of *The Burning Sea*, in exchange for infrastructural, technical and economic support. This thesis gets strengthened even more when we take into consideration the fact Fantefilm got the contract to produce an advertisement video for Equinor, which raises the suspicion of a *quid-pro-quo* arrangement.

Thirdly, the narrative and stylistic traits used in the above mentioned advertisement video confirm that the teams on both works worked closely, re-using tools developed in *The Burning Sea*. Additionally, this confirms that the visuals used in the film are useful in order to create economic gain for Equinor, as well as that the team behind the film does not have any problems appropriating the visuals in service of Equinor's propaganda. Combined with the commercial nature of Fantefilm, I believe a conscious greenwashing effort in exchange for economic and production value might have taken place.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, I believe I have found ample evidence to support the thesis that the film *The Burning Sea* might be implicated in the practice of greenwashing the Norwegian oil industry. These findings get an even stronger foundation when compared to the texts I presented in the theoretical part of this bachelor thesis. Of course, the arguments presented do not confirm this to be fact, and further research is needed to confirm any claims of conscious greenwashing.

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