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Petrocultures in the making: Oil in 1920s Scandinavian newspapers

Résumé

Partant de l'hypothèse que la presse périodique a joué un rôle crucial dans la synchronisation du monde et la préparation de la transition énergétique mondiale au début du XXe siècle, l'article propose une historiographie du pétrole qui reconnaît la capacité excédentaire des journaux en tant que matériel de recherche et tire parti des approches analytiques développées dans le cadre des études sur la culture de l'imprimé. Empiriquement, l'article apporte de nouvelles connaissances sur la manière dont la pétroculture américaine a été négociée en Scandinavie dans l'entre-deux-guerres, en utilisant comme point de départ la réception critique par la presse du roman d'Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* en Suède et en Norvège. Des archives de journaux de plus en plus accessibles montrent que le pétrole a dominé la culture écrite des années 1920 à un point tel que les hypothèses de base des études contemporaines sur la pétroculture concernant l'invisibilité du pétrole doivent être réexaminées.

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INTRODUCTION

- 1 In the essay “How to Know about Oil” Imre Szeman demonstrates the benefits of studying oil along different paths – historically, aesthetically, and politically – to advance critical thinking on energy transition. By juxtaposing academic texts, art-exhibits and political debates Szeman encourages humanities scholars to explore various representations of oil in multiple cultural contexts so that we can fully understand what a modern society might become without oil.¹ In a similar vein Stephanie LeMenager analyses petroleum across different genres and media, tracking the energy source and its infrastructures as they are depicted and materialised in novels, films, museums, marketing campaigns, and landscape architecture. While Szeman’s epistemic approach to oil is of great importance for petroculture studies as it allows for triangulation of perspectives and scholarly conversations across disciplines, LeMenager’s method in *Living Oil* is particularly productive due to the “thickness” she adds to the picture. Weaving together diachrony and synchrony, narrative and aesthetics, LeMenager lets oil media come to life in several dimensions. One example of such a multi-layered portrait is her critical reflections on Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* (1927) analysed along with urban planning reports and pro-oil propaganda booklets from the 1920s as well as Paul Thomas Anderson’s film adaptation *There Will Be Blood* from 2007. LeMenager describes her narrative-critical method as a variant of “commodity regionalism”, arguing that “regions are vital intellectual frameworks for thinking about energy”.² In the case of *Oil!* the regional context is California, first and foremost.
- 2 The regional approach to oil and petromedia has inspired my own research on Norwegian

contemporary petroculture as well.³ However, the relationship between region, nation, and world is a complex one when it comes to energy regimes. As I suspect Upton Sinclair’s novel to reflect that complexity in ways not yet exhausted in research, especially not regarding how *Oil!* resonated internationally in the late 1920s, I want to explore that path further, looking for ways of knowing oil that can handle multiple spatial and temporal scales. In terms of setting, Sinclair’s novel is both regional and transnational, given that the story depicts the political awakening of the young protagonist Bunny Ross whose father is a mighty oil tycoon in Southern California in the years before, under, and after World War I. The closing plot is partly set in Europe in the early 1920s while oil itself is portrayed as “intimately American”, indeed the “quintessence of Americanness”, as Peter Hitchcock puts it.⁴ Frederick Buell relates the novel’s energetic style and exuberant portrayal of oil drilling to modernity and the era of “American exceptionalism”.⁵ Over the last couple of decades *Oil!* has been revisited on several occasions to illustrate how the previous century – often labelled as the American century – came to be associated with petromodernity. Sinclair’s novel has also been analysed in tandem with Saudi Arabian Abdelrahman Munif’s petro-quintet *Cities of Salt* (1984–1989) as an early example of petrofiction.⁶ The genre concept “petrofiction” was coined in 1992 by Indian writer Amitav Ghosh in a book essay on Munif’s work.⁷

³ Sissel Furuseth, “Bilen som økokritisk utfordring: Carl Frode Tiller og Henrik Nor-Hansen diagnostiserer norsk petroleumskultur”, *Edda*, vol. 108, n° 2, 2021, 128–141; Sissel Furuseth et al., “Climate Change in Literature, Television and Film from Norway”, *Ecozon@*, vol. 11, n° 2, 2020, 8–16.

⁴ Peter Hitchcock, “Oil in an American Imaginary”, *New Formations*, n° 69, 2010, 89.

⁵ Frederick Buell, “A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance”, *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 46, n° 2, 2012, 286.

⁶ Hitchcock, “Oil in an American Imaginary”, 89–91 (cf. note 4); Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 87; Graeme Macdonald, “Oil and World Literature”, *American Book Review*, vol. 33, n° 3, 2012, 7.

⁷ Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction”, *New Republic*, 2 March 1992, 29–34.

¹ Imre Szeman, “How to Know about Oil: Energy Epistemologies and Political Futures”, *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d’études canadiennes*, vol. 47, n° 3, 2013, 163.

² Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10.

3 The Scandinavian reception of *Oil!* has not yet been explored, but in the heyday of international socialism Upton Sinclair was a global phenomenon and translations of *Oil!* were published in Scandinavia shortly after – and even parallel to – the American original: *Olja* in Stockholm 1926, *Olie* in Copenhagen 1928, and *Oljen* in Oslo 1928–1929, translated by Eugen Albán, Elise Koppel, and Gunnar Larsen, respectively. This transatlantic transfer of petrofiction has so far been overlooked in petroculture studies as well as in studies of the history of the book and its reception, although *Oil!* is briefly mentioned by Carl L. Anderson in his general study of the reception of American books in Sweden.⁸ I will not provide an analysis of the translations as such but rather a “thick reception study”, which means that book reviews of *Oil!* serve as an entry to explore more general attitudes to oil in 1920s Scandinavia. For reasons of space, I will be focusing on the critical reception of *Oil!* in Sweden and Norway in the years 1926–1929. At that time, Sweden was about to develop a proud car industry, whereas Norway’s economy was largely based on fisheries and shipping. Both countries had long traditions of forestry, and the wood-processing and pulp and paper industries were growing in the two nations, which were until 1905 joined under a common monarch and foreign policy. Due to the spirit of international brotherhood in the 1920s socialist press it is hard to draw a distinct line between Swedish and Norwegian newspapers and print cultures, even from the point of view of the young patriotic nation state Norway. At the beginning of the 20th C., rich access to hydropower speeded up industry developments in both Sweden and Norway. Whaling and oil from sperm whale had been a lucrative business for the westerly seafaring nation for some time, but it was not until the 1970s that Norway got its own extractive petroleum industry in the North Sea. Facing east, the Swedish entrepreneurs Robert and Ludvig Nobel had invested in oil wells in Baku as early as the 1870s – a business the Nobel family withdrew from after the Russian revolution and the subsequent nationalisation

⁸ Carl L. Anderson, *The Swedish Acceptance of American Literature* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1957), 67.

of oil industry.⁹ It is with this context in mind I find it worthwhile inquiring into how Sinclair’s *Oil!* resonated in Swedish and Norwegian readers a century ago and how petroleum – and energy in general – surfaced in the newspapers.

This article adds new knowledge to the cultural historiography of oil, following three interrelated lines of reasoning: firstly, on a theoretical level it offers meta-reflections on the sources and methodologies used in petroculture studies, arguing that newspapers have excess capacity as research material. My major argument is that the interwar era’s print culture and petroculture should be analysed as two sides of the same story. Since newspapers are themselves artefacts of high-energy culture, being composed of paper and ink, printed in large circulations, and often transported over long distances, they cannot be approached as mere containers of information. Material, form, and content inform each other. Secondly, on the empirical level the article provides new knowledge about the critical reception of *Oil!* in Scandinavia, including the energy discourses surrounding the press mediated book reviews of the late 1920s. The synchronic cross-section of a particular historical moment makes it possible to give a deeper understanding of oil’s everyday presence in a region that at this point in history played a relatively modest role in the global energy war. Finally, based on the theoretical and empirical lines of my argument, the article contests a common claim among petroculture scholars: that oil is culturally invisible. Imre Szeman has argued that we are only at the beginning of knowing the real social impact of oil and that until recently oil has “never been named, and its conceptual, as well as social and historical, significance never explained”.¹⁰ However, as I will show in this article there was a widespread feeling in the 1920s that oil was everywhere and that the omnipresence of oil implicated a new cultural order.

⁹ Cf. *The Branobel History Website*, CBHS. Url: <https://www.branobelhistory.com/> (accessed 11/03/2023); Brita Åsbrink, *Ludvig Nobel: “Petroleum har en lysande framtid!»: En historia om eldfängd olja och revolution i Baku* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 2001).

¹⁰ Szeman, “How to Know about Oil”, 162 (cf. note 1).

INTO THE ARCHIVES

- 5 The assumption that oil has been almost culturally invisible has been the starting point for many publications in contemporary petroculture studies. Oil is something most people “take for granted”, Alan Stoekl writes in the foreword to *Oil Culture*.¹¹ At the same time he suggests that the most effective way to grant oil the visibility it deserves without simply “turning the current situation on its head and seeing oil as the be-all and end-all of culture in general” is to write oil’s history.¹² My article is a contribution to such a history. For this purpose, I have found digitised newspaper archives particularly useful. A quick search for “Upton Sinclair” in the Chronicling America database, narrowed down to 1927, retrieves among other things a newspaper column on the global fuel situation written by H. G. Wells: “Evidently people want ideas about oil”, the British science fiction writer notes.¹³ Wells has observed that many people on both sides of the Atlantic are engrossed by Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!*, taking it as a sign of how coal and oil have become more than incidental commodities: “We may now be on the road to very profound changes in our dealings with oil and coal”, he continues. In 1927 Wells envisions a situation of commodity scarcity, and for Great Britain’s part he predicts retrocession from world leadership unless his country subsidises and nationalises its coal supply. War had accelerated energy transition. In that situation *Oil!* was a symptom, a sign of the era, according to Wells. He believes that people read the novel to make sense of the insistent global commodity.
- 6 I embarked on this project curious about to what extent non-anglophone readers were engrossed by *Oil!* Was the novel known to Scandinavian readers and critics in the 1920s? This question was quickly answered and confirmed by archive

searches at the national libraries of Sweden and Norway. What was initially meant to be targeted search for a closed set of book reviews soon became the base and the focal point for a broader search strategy. Mapping the use of *olja** (“oil” and its inflections) and *petroleum** in Swedish and Norwegian newspaper archives I have become attentive to the strong presence and visibility of oil in 1920s media. Although I am aware of that the digitised newspaper archives at the national libraries of Sweden and Norway are not fully complete, and therefore potentially biased, it is important to acknowledge that the era we are dealing with is a peak-press era as well as a peak-oil era. The mere quantity of newspapers is to some extent making up for the omissions in the archive. On the other hand, the following argument is not based or dependent on a quantitative study of distribution and frequencies of ‘oil’ as concept, but rather a discourse analysis of how oil is represented, framed, and interpreted in a typical selection of newspaper texts: book reviews, news reports, and advertisements. My approach is inspired by print culture studies, reception theory, new historicism, modern periodical studies, and the nodal principle of comparative literary historiography.¹⁴ The article explores how literary and non-literary representations of oil can serve as – to use Stephen Greenblatt’s words – “each other’s thick description”.¹⁵ The ideal of writing thick histories has been central for print culture studies the last couple of decades.¹⁶ Regarding the concept of print culture, I follow Laurel Brake’s inclusive nomenclature to “maximise links and overlaps among the periodical, newspaper and book”.¹⁷ Conjoining different press mediated narratives, moving in and out of *Oil!*,

¹¹ Allan Stoekl, “Foreword”, in Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (eds.), *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xi.

¹² *Ibid.*, xii.

¹³ H. G. [Herbert George] Wells, “Fuel Getting is Serious Problem of World Today”, *The Sunday Star*, Part 2, 30 October 1927, 1.

¹⁴ Cf. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, and Mario J. Valdés, “Comparative Literary History, Theory and Practice: John Neubauer’s Contribution”, *Arcadia*, vol. 38, n° 2, 2003, 394–398.

¹⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, “The Touch of the Real”, *Representations*, vol. 59, n° 1, 1997, 22.

¹⁶ Cf. Ann Ardis, Patrick Collier, “Introduction”, in Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (eds.), *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880–1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 7.

¹⁷ Laurel Brake, “On Print Culture: The State We’re In”, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 6, n° 1, 2001, 135.

is a method to come closer to the ideas and practices of oil in the 1920s. Symptomatically, the press is vital even for the plot development in the novel.

PRINT CULTURE AND PETROMEDIA

- 7 In Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* media frenzy is explicitly thematised and a topic for satire throughout the novel. The dynamics of the press seems to be particularly attractive for the narrator as it fuels the plot at crucial moments, as when the young university student Bunny Ross and his fellow comrades are launching the radical newspaper "The Investigator" to reveal the truth about US continued activities in Russia after World War I: "At last it was printed; there lay the sheets, fresh from the press, soft and damp, like locusts newly emerged from the chrysalis".¹⁸ The reader senses the oil-heir's fascination for the material and literally aesthetic aspects of news production. The irony is that "The Investigator", this idealist organ for socialist thoughts, becomes an object for speculation immediately after the Dean has confiscated the unsold copies.

[...] enough had been distributed to set the campus ablaze. "Have you read it?" "Have you got a copy?" – that was all anybody heard that day. The price of "The Investigator" leaped to one dollar, and before night-fall some had sold for two or three times that price.

One reason was that a copy had reached the Angel City "Evening Booster," most popular of newspapers, printed in green, five editions per day.¹⁹

- 8 The domino effect is a fact, and a row of newspapers with generic titles such as "Evening Roarer" and "Evening Howler" follow up to uncover the "Bolshevik propaganda" at the Southern Pacific University. The scoop of the day is that "Son of Oil Magnate Backs Soviets!".²⁰ This is just one example of how the press dynamics interfere

with the plot in *Oil!*, in this case initiated by the protagonist himself. More often in the novel, newspapers are depicted as channels of information bringing the rest of the world to the US. The news crossing the big oceans, interrupting the Californian idyll, are basically reports from the geopolitical drama that is both affecting and affected by American oil business.

Upton Sinclair's story of how big oil bought politicians who could best serve their capitalist interests was to a great extent based on reports and material revealed through the press. Crucial for the plot development in *Oil!* is not only how president Wilson in 1917 proclaimed American entrance into World War I; Sinclair's critique of a society driven by oil logic is first of all fuelled by the so-called Teapot Dome scandal in which members of Harding's government, as Peter Hitchcock summarises, "were bribed to lease, without competitive bidding, oil-rich land in Wyoming and California to oil entrepreneurs like Edward L. Doheny (a model for Ross) and Harry F. Sinclair (no relation to Upton)".²¹ The American edition of *Oil!* starts with a disclaimer, where readers are warned – or assured – that "the cards have been shuffled", which means that names, places, episodes, and details of character should not be identified with real names, events, etc., except that the last three presidents of the United States appear as recognisable personalities in the novel. There is no secret that the politics of Woodrow Wilson (president 1913–1921), Warren G. Harding (1921–1923), and Calvin Coolidge (1923–1929) affect the story in different ways.

In the Norwegian version of *Oil!* the preface has become a postface; the disclaimer is moved from front to back, placed as an afterword ending the second part of the novel. This means that Scandinavian readers were shorn of crucial context when they started reading *Oljen*. Note that there was a six-months delay between the launching of the first and the second part. However, the Teapot Dome scandal was well

¹⁸ Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 280.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 281–282.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 282.

²¹ Hitchcock, "Oil in an American Imaginary", 93 (cf. note 4).

covered even in Scandinavian newspapers, and the Norwegian readers were prepared for Upton Sinclair's political satire also in other ways. In 1925 the Norwegian historian and geographer Anton Mohr had published *Kampen om oljen*, a book launched in English in 1926 as *The Oil War*, in which the history and geopolitical impact of oil were discussed at length. Mohr's book, which includes individual chapters on Standard Oil, Royal Dutch Shell, and different national oil operations before and during World War I, was published by Aschehoug, the same publishing house that three years later launched Sinclair's *Oil!* in Norwegian. Aschehoug was also responsible for the influential journal *Samtiden*, in which several thought-provoking articles on oil were published in the 1920s. In one of these, historian and politician Jakob Friis stated that there is hardly a word more frequently used in the newspapers nowadays than "olje" ('oil').²² That a new type of fuel appears as more salient than previously dominant energy forms is probably characteristic for any kind of energy transition, and Friis was not alone feeling that oil was everywhere at the time. Among his references are Francis Delaisi's *Le Pétrole* (1921) and Louis Fischer's *Oil Imperialism* (1927) in addition to Anton Mohr's book.

11 Important to consider when studying pervasive petrocultures is how *Oil!* was first published serially in the newspaper the *Daily Worker* – from June 1st to September 4th, 1926 – before being published as a book on March 25th, 1927.²³ Even translations of *Oil!* appeared in serialised form before they were launched as books, which explains why the first part of the Swedish translation was available as early as December 1926. Quickly, *Oil!* ran to three editions.²⁴ Scandinavian newspapers had for several years published serialised and translated versions of works by Sinclair, such as *The Jungle* (orig. 1906) and *King*

Coal (1917), but also non-fiction, such as *Letters to Judd, an American Workingman* (1925), was particularly popular in the socialist press. Some newspapers were deeply devoted and printed Sinclair quotes almost daily, often without any comments, as a word for the day. Regarding the book version of *Oil!*, both the Swedish and the Norwegian translation were published in two parts, thus preserving some of the original seriality. But the fact that the Swedish version was launched with two separate titles – *Olja* (1926) and *Bunny Ross* (1927) – confused some of the reviewers, as we soon will see.

In general, it is fair to say that publishing and dissemination of literature through newspapers was made possible by fossil fuels. As Vaclav Smil points out, fossil-fuelled societies have, from their very conception, "produced, stored, distributed, and used incomparably larger amounts of information than their predecessors".²⁵ Already in the mid-nineteenth century, the first steam-driven rotary presses were put to use. Newspapers kept their footing as the true mass-media of early 20th C. even after regular radio broadcasts started in the 1920s. In Scandinavia, the numbers of newspapers peaked in the 1920s and 1930s. The inter-war period was a golden age for the press in both Sweden and Norway.²⁶ Every single town had at least three papers representing different political parties and organisations. This meant that the need of printer's ink increased as well. In 1927 the journal of the Norwegian typographer's trade, *Typografiske meddelelser*, informed their readers of the high quality of petroleum-based American soot-colour which was preferable to the German pit coal-based soot-colour.²⁷ The shift of energy regimes affected the very chemistry of printing technology.

²² Jakob Friis, "Oljekrigen: et blad av dagens internasjonale politikk", *Samtiden*, vol. 39, 1928, 210. The article is dated December 1927.

²³ Rabindra Nath Mookerjee, *Art for Social Justice: The Major Novels of Upton Sinclair* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 77.

²⁴ Anderson, *The Swedish Acceptance of American Literature*, 67 (cf. note 8).

²⁵ Vaclav Smil, *Energy and Civilization: A History* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2018), 333.

²⁶ Rune Ottosen (ed.), *Norsk presses historie 1660–2010*, vol. 2, *Presse, parti og publikum 1880–1945* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2010), 26–28; Einar Østgaard (ed.), *Pressen i Norden: en bok om pressen i de nordiske land, dens historie og dens oppgaver i dag* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1978), 19; Karl Erik Gustafsson, Per Rydén, *A History of the Press in Sweden* (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2010), 177.

²⁷ "Fra trykkfarvenes fremstilling", *Typografiske meddelelser*, vol. 52, n° 42, 1927, 344.

OIL IN THE NEWSPAPERS

- 13 If we look at the content and the visual appearance of a random newspaper from the 1920s diverse proofs of an emerging petroculture unfold. On the front page, the name of the paper might be encircled by advertisements for petrol, cars, tyres, or maybe a local garage. Further down on the page there would be a news piece reporting on the tense energy situation in the world or corruption scandals in the US oil industry. There might be letters to the editor inveighing against reckless driving along the local country road. In the 1920s newspapers reported frequently on fatal car and motorbike accidents, sometimes with kids involved. Aeroplane accidents were also in the headlines.
- 14 On the other hand, newspapers reported enthusiastically on new air routes that finally made it possible to bring post from Oslo to Berlin within one day. Oil was thematised both directly, as an energy source potentially replacing coal, and indirectly, as when new technical inventions and ways of traveling were the focus of attention. Aviation progressed in these years. In May 1927 Charles Lindberg made his historic transatlantic flight from New York City to Paris. Less successful were the polar explorers who disappeared in the Arctic in their quest to be the first to reach the North Pole by plane. Several news items from November and December 1928 reported on a four-days car race from Milan to Oslo via Malmö, organised by a Milan automobile club to honour the polar hero Roald Amundsen who died on a rescue mission in the Arctic earlier the same year when seeking missing members from Umberto Nobile's crew.²⁸ Newspapers followed these events from day to day.
- 15 Despite efforts to normalise driving in the late 1920s, cars were still a contested means of transport. Newspapers reported about cyclists forced off the road and horses scared to death by roaring cars. Muscle power was still in the game. Horsepower was often highlighted to

describe the historical moment of energy transition. For example, on the 2nd of January 1926, the Stockholm paper *Dagens Nyheter* published an illustrated article about how automobiles had taken over Stockholm at the expense of horses. Whereas in 1905 there were one car per 14 horses there were now one horse per 11 cars.²⁹ Driving cars was obviously not only for the elites anymore, but neither was it a necessity for everyone.

It was in August 1926 that newspapers begun reporting about 'the Swedish car' ("Svenska bilen") as the recently established Volvo company in Gothenburg had declared its intention to produce a thousand cars to be ready for the coming spring-season.³⁰ In the following months, Scandinavian newspapers wrote frequently about the progressing production and the possibilities for getting a car at a fair price. In 1927 advertisements for "Den Svenska bilen Volvo 1927" (the Swedish car Volvo 1927) – an open model on exhibition – could be seen in a number of Swedish newspapers. The ad as such is quite modest, with a simple drawing of the front grill of the car as the only visual element, but the verbal designation 'the Swedish car' conveys a powerful message, signalling both national pride and an admission that up till then the large-scale car industry had been anything but Swedish. Cars were mostly American, French, Italian, German, and British. Now the situation was about to change. In 1926 cars and driving were hot topics in the Swedish newspapers, more than in the Norwegian press, and sometimes car references seeped into the book reviews.

FROM THE SCANDINAVIAN CRITICAL RECEPTION OF OIL!

When book reviewers draw analogies between literary practice and industrial car production it is not necessarily in praise of the author. Yet the parallel may underline the value of effectivity – both aesthetically and in terms of work

²⁸ "Billøp fra Milano til Oslo", *Kongsvinger Arbeiderblad*, 29 November 1928, 1.

²⁹ "Hästens svåra kamp mot automobilismen inom huvudstaden", *Dagens Nyheter*, 2 January 1926, 9.

³⁰ "Svenska bilen ferdig i vår", *Dagens Nyheter*, 24 August 1926, 1.

ethic. When the Swedish translation of *Oil!* was launched right before Christmas in 1926 the reviewer in the Stockholm paper *Arbetaren* put it this way: ‘I would not be surprised if Upton Sinclair writes his books as regularly as Henry Ford makes his cars’.³¹ The reviewer’s initial scepticism towards American culture in general, perceived as shallow and detached from reality, evaporates as he must admit that Sinclair’s *Oil!* is simply captivating (“betagande”). The reviewer is particularly impressed by Sinclair’s skills in describing the pace of work. The reader can see and hear it all: the American working speed and the competition that never lets people rest or reflect over their conditions.

18 The reviewer in *Aftonbladet* is focusing on the self-made man who has worked hard to become an oil-king, and he is fascinated by how all the stages and aspects of oil production are described in Sinclair’s novel, convinced that the writer has done thorough research.³² The reviewer seems to be unaware that the novel has a second part yet to be published and asks for a more distinct plot with a marked culmination. In *Olja* it is as if Ariadne’s thread is leading the reader back to where it started. *Aftonbladet*’s reviewer is also a little puzzled by Sinclair’s portrayal of the oil magnate, as he sees him as a sympathetic and nice guy, and wonders if even the “red” writer Upton Sinclair might have been infected by the patriotic feelings that swept over the USA at the time when the country entered the war.

19 In the Good Templar Society paper *Reformatorn*, the reviewer states from the very beginning that the witches’ dance around oil – the modern world’s most important product – has inspired Upton Sinclair to write this extraordinary portrayal of the American society.³³ At this time, July 1927, the second part of *Oil!* was rendered in Swedish with the title *Bunny Ross*, which underlines the shift of focus from the oil tycoon

J. Arnold Ross Sr. to his socialist minded son Bunny, but *Reformatorn*’s reviewer thinks the publisher should have used the same title given the fact that *Olja* and *Bunny Ross* are two parts of the same novel. Contrary to the reviewer in *Aftonbladet*, the critic in *Reformatorn* underlines that Sinclair sympathises with “the red ones” (“de röda”) in the social struggle, but even here the reviewer is struck by how the books seem to express an unmistakable admiration for the power and initiative of the oil magnates. *Reformatorn*’s reviewer points out how the scandal described in the latter part of *Bunny Ross* is a real scandal thoroughly covered by Swedish newspapers a few years ago. Although not specifying any name, the reviewer is most likely hinting at the 1924 reports of the Teapot Dome scandal in which the Harding administration was involved.

One of the questions I hoped to find answers to by looking into the newspaper archives was to what extent Scandinavian reviewers in the 1920s were interested in oil as substance and energy source, or if Sinclair’s supposedly political message overshadowed this material aspect. True, both conservative and socialist critics made sure to remind their readers of Sinclair’s political stance, but many of them also focused on the materiality and agency of oil itself. The anonymous reviewer in *Lister*, a local newspaper from the south coast of Norway, took notice of the powerful connection between form and content in Sinclair’s novel: it felt as if the calm surface was about to burst any time, in the same way as oil would blast the most secure towers, gush forward, ignite, and destroy everything. It was as if the agency of the substance (“stoffets handkraft”) had provided Sinclair with his artistic means.³⁴ 20

In Norway, Upton Sinclair’s *Oljen* seemed to be a positive surprise for many conservative critics who had been sceptical towards Sinclair to begin with. One example of such a reluctant acceptance of Sinclair’s talent can be found in

³¹ R. C., “En ny bok av Sinclair”, *Arbetaren*, 23 December 1926, 4.

³² Markus, “En roman om olja”, *Aftonbladet*, 5 January 1927, 8.

³³ E. J-n., “Från bokhyllan”, *Reformatorn*, 16 July 1927, 7.

³⁴ Anonymous, “Upton Sinclair: ‘Oljen’”, *Lister*, 21 November 1928, 2.

Norges Handels og Sjøfartstidene (*The Norwegian Journal of Commerce and Shipping*) on the 23rd of November 1928. The reviewer sets off in an ironical and slightly patronising tone, suggesting that there is something hypocritical about a socialist writer living like a millionaire in Pasadena, California. The reviewer finds Sinclair's societal critique too harsh but appreciates his latest novel as a fascinating portrait of the world's greatest industry nation. The oil industry itself – the ambitious tycoon, the many aspects of drilling, and even destruction of idyllic nature – is 'brilliantly painted' ("glimrende malt").³⁵

22 The strongest emphasis on oil as protagonist could be read in the conservative Oslo newspaper *Aftenposten* on the 12th of December 1928. The reviewer appreciates that Sinclair is less of an agitator in *Oil!* than he was in *The Jungle*, and he admits (somewhat ironically) that while reading he almost forgot that the goal of the book is social revolution, which (from his conservative position) is in the novel's favour. The main character in Sinclair's 'monstrous opus' ("uhyre opus") is no mortal individual, the reviewer explains, 'but a precious industry product and a source of income for millions of Yankees – the oil, American oil. We are offered an in-depth course on the nature of oil, its birthplace and dominion, its whims and achievements, from cradle to grave, so to speak'.³⁶ Grouped around this 'omnipotent agent' – oil, that is – are the minor characters: the human beings.

23 This lack of interest in people is something that other reviewers find problematic about the novel, but learned scholarly critics, such as *Dagbladets* reviewer Dr. A. H. Winsnes, can explain to his readers that Sinclair's novel is typical for the US revival of the great social novel in the naturalist style of Emile Zola, and in this tradition portrayal of character is less important than the social and economic macrostructures shaping human life. The novel is broad and compact, he admits, but still full of speed and stinging satire giving life

to the story. Even Winsnes is impressed by the dimensions of Sinclair's enterprise: the whole saga of oil brought to life through the story about a single deposit, its discovery, extraction, and its impact on individual lives as well as on society and geopolitics.³⁷

In *Kongsvinger Arbeiderblad*, half the front page of the November 29th issue is covered by a rich book review of *Oljen* written by the editor Johannes Stubberud himself, who is particularly concerned about the unfair and dangerous working conditions for the oil workers as described in the novel.³⁸ Aesthetically, Stubberud is a bit worried that Sinclair's political message might have been overshadowed by the ironic idyll in the first part of *Oil!*, but he can assure his fellow partisans that Sinclair returns to his former self in the second part. The editor knows well what is coming as he has read the Swedish translation already. Making the effort to explain the differences between the Norwegian and the Swedish editions as well as comparing them with the English original, Stubberud comes forward as a true expert on Sinclair's writings. That a local Labour Party paper, produced in a small Norwegian town close to the Swedish border, spent considerable space comparing different editions of an American novel might appear exotic from today's point of view, but it says a lot of Sinclair's international standing in the interwar era.

25 My overall impression is that the book reviewers in the late 1920s Scandinavia were fascinated by Upton Sinclair's ambitious novel. Socialist newspapers were quite panegyric in their evaluations; the conservatives commended the novel more reluctantly. Both Swedish and Norwegian reviewers emphasised the value of being enlightened by the book and the way *Oil!* gave them a deeper understanding of the workings of oil. While some critics expressed fascination about oil as substance and economic force, others

³⁵ T., "Nye bøker", *Norges Handels og Sjøfartstidende*, 23 November 1928, 6.

³⁶ Ejlert Bjerke, "Oljen", *Aftenposten*, 12 December 1928, 8.

³⁷ A. H. [Andreas Hofgaard] Winsnes, "Upton Sinclairs 'Oljen'", *Dagbladet*, 24 November 1928, 7.

³⁸ J. S. [Johannes Stubberud], "Upton Sinclair: Oljen", *Kongsvinger Arbeiderblad*, 29 November 1928, 1.

were worried about the risks oil workers were exposed to, but no one was particularly concerned about oil's environmental harm. First and foremost, in 1926–1929 petroleum oil seemed to signify hope in a global economy threatened by crisis. The news articles surrounding the book reviews testify to this interpretation.

OIL AS WORLD LITERATURE

26 In the wake of World War I, there was a lot of concern regarding secure energy supplies and the price of fuel. In 1920 a group of men from shipping and finance in Norway started the limited liability company Norsk Brændselolje A/S (lit. Norwegian furnace oil corporation) to make sure that petroleum oil was effectively distributed to industry and consumers across the country at a reasonable price. Anglo-Persian Oil Co. became the largest shareholder, with a fifty percent block of shares, and committed to deliver oil to the Norwegian distribution company.³⁹ As Gudbrand Askvig, the managing director of the newly established Norsk Brændselolje A/S, stated to an equally newly established journal for oil-heating technology, *Oljefyring* (1920), the oil issue is as much a question about transport as it is about production.⁴⁰ As long as the price of coal was as high as it was after the war, the Norwegian shipowners envisioned a future where oil-fuelled ships would be more profitable than coal-fuelled ships, especially for neutral states. Within a few years, Norsk Brændselolje A/S built distribution sites for fuel oil, diesel, and petrol along the coast of Norway. Historians of economics and trade have highlighted the Norwegian company Norsk Brændselolje A/S as one example of how countries and business stood up against cartels in the interwar era.⁴¹ Thus, the geopolitical events described in *Oil!*

³⁹ Eivind Thon, *Oljens eventyr: En historikk for Norsk Brændselolje A/S* (Oslo: Emil Moestue, 1950), 114.

⁴⁰ "Oljefyringen og oljesituationen. En uttalelse av Norsk Brændselolje A/S i 'Tidsskrift for Oljefyringsteknik'", *Norges Handels og Sjøfartstidende*, 15 October 1920, 6.

⁴¹ Pål Thonstad Sandvik, Espen Storli, "The quest for a non-competitive market: Standard oil, the international oil industry and the Scandinavian states, 1890–1939", *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, vol. 68, n° 3, 2020.

resonate well with events in Scandinavia in the early 1920s. The region's involvement in international affairs and global trade was – and still is – largely defined by its critical position between East and West.

In the 1920s corporate oil industry was established and oil imperialism beginning to spread. In a critical comment to Amitav Ghosh's essay on petrofiction, Graeme Macdonald emphasises that oil literature, like oil itself, "has significant global transportation routes, value changes, and multiple and uniform forms".⁴² He is accordingly sceptical about the notion of the Great American Oil Novel, or other national oil literatures, for that matter.

Oil literature is simultaneously global and domestic. As a world resource, however unevenly distributed, oil, like world literature, has an unequal movement and an uneven development because of the hierarchy of nation-states in the world system that consume and produce it in varying levels. This conflict inserts itself into petroliterature, whose world provenance presents a geocultural challenge for anyone interested in tracking and connecting the wide range of the oil imaginary. Its multinational structures, routes, and determinations ensure petrofiction's contemporary identification as a subgenre of literature more productive under the rubric of "world literature" than it is under that of any national literary corpus.⁴³

28 After reading the close of *Oil!* – where actors in the emergent US oil dynasties of the early 20th C. consider the need to expand their business internationally – Macdonald has become aware of a transnational line of petrofictions spanning the last hundred years. In many ways my analysis of the critical reception of *Oil!* in Scandinavia supports Macdonald's observations.

29 In 1929 Johan Falkberget – himself a socialist writer known for his historical novels set in the copper mining community at Røros in eastern

⁴² Macdonald, "Oil and World Literature", 7 (cf. note 6).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31 (cf. note 6).

Norway – envisioned how future generations might blow off the dust of Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* because he senses that the novel is ahead of its time. In the future socially engaged, naturalist, and so-called tendentious literature would no longer be disdained, Falkberget believed. The next century would probably have quality standards making it easier to approve of literature working in the service of life (“i livets tjeneste”).⁴⁴ *Oil!* is the kind of novel not written in vain because Sinclair’s ‘operating knife’ – Falkberget’s metaphor for efficient words making a real difference in the world – will make society healthy in the long-run. In a similar vein Johannes Stubberud stated that due to their loyalty towards reality *Oljen* and *Bunny Ross* (cf. the Swedish forking of the novel) must be described as pearls of world literature (“perler i verdenslitteraturen”).⁴⁵

- 30 Unlike Falkberget, Johannes Stubberud takes for granted that Upton Sinclair is canonised already, and to some extent he was, at least in socialist circles of print culture. At that time there were continuous speculations in the press about whether Sinclair would receive the Nobel prize in literature or not. In 1932 a substantial group of authors and scientists from more than fifty countries, among them Bernhard Shaw and Albert Einstein, campaigned for Sinclair to be rewarded the Nobel prize. The syndicalist paper *Alarm* expressed some scepticism on that matter, not because Sinclair did not deserve the prize – quite the contrary; with a large number of books translated to 34 different languages worldwide he should have received the prize long time ago – but because they did not find it likely that a bourgeois minded Swedish Academy would dare to reward a rebel and social writer like Upton Sinclair the Nobel prize of the year.⁴⁶
- 31 Sure enough, Sinclair was never rewarded the Nobel prize, and in the second half of the 20th C. few critics showed much interest in Upton Sinclair’s literary output. Christopher Taylor has

tried to explain why Sinclair’s novels have been almost disappearing from academic discourse despite the writer’s enormous influence during his lifetime.⁴⁷ One important reason is that many theoretically learned critics found his novels too didactic and lacking the kind of ambiguity often emphasised when quality and canon are at issue, but as Taylor rhetorically asks: why should a popular didactic tradition deriving from ancient exempla be excluded from the academy?⁴⁸ Regarding *Oil!*, Taylor finds the novel much more complex than some critics tend to think.

REAPPROPRIATING THE PAST

In the history of literature there are several examples of how new developments in taste and literary form can reopen access to forgotten literature. However, as noted by German literary historian Hans Robert Jauss, such “renaissances” will not return automatically; “a literary past can return only when a new reception draws it back into the present, whether an altered aesthetic attitude willfully reaches back to reappropriate the past, or an unexpected light falls back on forgotten literature from the new moment of literary evolution, allowing something to be found that one previously could not have sought in it”.⁴⁹ Although *Oil!* from the very beginning was embraced by readers worldwide, and is far from a difficult read in the way Jauss’ examples from the romantic and modernistic eras are difficult, I argue that the historical dynamics described above very well apply to *Oil!* For many readers in the 1920s Upton Sinclair was contaminated by communist ideas, but for intellectuals today this is not necessarily a problem. Much research in the field of petroculture studies is characterised by a revival of critical theory based on Marxist ideas. But more important for the revival of *Oil!* today is probably the lifelike realism that makes it possible to extract different messages from

⁴⁴ Johan Falkberget, “‘Oljen.’ Et mektig verk – og en glimrende oversettelse”, *1ste Mai*, 26 February 1929, 6.

⁴⁵ J. S., “Upton Sinclair: Oljen”, 1 (cf. note 38).

⁴⁶ Carl O. Tangen, “Får Upton Sinclair Nobelprisen”, *Alarm*, 6 February 1932, 3.

⁴⁷ Christopher Taylor, “‘Inescapably Propaganda’: Re-Classifying Upton Sinclair outside the Naturalist Tradition”, *Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 2, n° 2, 2007, 166.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁹ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 35.

the novel. The very naturalism of *Oil!* and its loyalty to historical facts make it easy to connect the novel with perspectives in today's energy humanities and petroculture studies. The materialist turn in the humanities may have made us more attentive to oil as substance, and the tense geopolitical situation of today makes the novel's "war of oil" painfully current again.

33 In *Living Oil* Stephanie LeMenager pointed out that Sinclair's novel is "a type of peak oil fiction, since it was written as a warning against global petromodernity from around the moment of peak oil *discovery* in the United States", and she remarked that the novel "strives to imagine curtailing petromodern development in a manner complementary to the fictional post-petrol futures offered by twenty-first-century peak oilers".⁵⁰ The striking parallel between the 1920s and the 2000s is expressed by the nostalgia for oil typical for peak oil discourse both then and now. Loosely based on Sinclair's novel, Paul Thomas Anderson's 2007 film adaptation *There Will Be Blood* might have contributed to this aesthetics of petronostalgia today. Anderson's film seems to have inspired the Norwegian TV series *Lykkeland* (*State of Happiness*) as well (first season screened by NRK 2018), which means that Sinclair's work has become relevant for a Scandinavian audience indirectly by the way of contemporary screen cultures. For instance, in the first season of *Lykkeland*, the viewers are exposed to the same fascination for oil-soaked men as highlighted in Anderson's film. As LeMenager has demonstrated, this kind of image was already a crucial ingredient in promotion material issued by Edward L. Doheny's Pan American Petroleum and Transport Company: the booklet *Mexican Petroleum* (1922).⁵¹ The gusher and the platform worker covered in oil in the Norwegian TV series *Lykkeland* is similarly an image of promise and future wealth.⁵² However, in none of these examples – *Mexican Petroleum*, *Oil!*, *There Will Be Blood*, or *Lykkeland* – does the

environmental costs of oil seem to be an issue. In Norwegian journalist Simen Sætre's travelogue *Petromania*, Bunny Ross is briefly referred to as a moral voice warning oil-wealthy nations like Norway about the temptation of grandeur.⁵³ The concept of petro-guilt has even in 21st C. studies on Norwegian petromedia been synonymous with wealth-guilt.⁵⁴ Only recently have humanities scholars in Scandinavia started taking the environmental aspects of petromedia seriously.

The influence from North American petroculture 34 studies has been crucial for this environmental turn, and particularly eye-opening is LeMenager's attentiveness to how modern production of books, newspapers, and other media are physically and chemically dependent on oil. Reflecting on the petro-aesthetics of Upton Sinclair's novel she writes: "A mixture of petroleum-based resins and oils make up the ink that creates the words on the page of my edition of *Oil!*, words that direct my imagination and activate my senses. I literally enter an immersive, virtual environment through petroleum language."⁵⁵ As I have tried to show in this article, the petroleum language that many readers take for granted today was highly perceptible in the booming 1920s print culture. Over the last hundred years we have sensed and perceived the world through petroleum media. LeMenager describes oil itself as "a medium that fundamentally supports all modern media forms concerned with what counts as culture – from film to recorded music, novels, magazines, photographs, sports, and the wikis, blogs, and videography of the Internet".⁵⁶ The last point is important to acknowledge in a study making extensive use of digitised newspaper archives.

In this article I have considered the material- 35 ity of the historical sources because – as Maria DiCenzo has emphasised for modern periodical

⁵⁰ LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 70 (cf. note 2).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 95–96 (cf. note 2).

⁵² Petter Næss, Pål Jackman, *Lykkeland*, Season 1, Ep. 2, 2018, 43:12.

⁵³ Simen Sætre, *Petromania: En reise gjennom verdens rikeste oljeland for å finne ut hva pengene gjør med oss* (Oslo: J.M. Stenersens forlag, 2009), 20.

⁵⁴ Ellen Rees, "Privilege, Innocence, and 'Petro-Guilt' in Maria Sødahl's *Limbo*", *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 88, n° 1, 2016, 44–59.

⁵⁵ LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 70–71 (cf. note 2).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6 (cf. note 2).

studies in general – the “remediation of print artifacts in digitized form has underscored the need to understand the production, circulation, and uses of material forms, including paper itself as well as print media as objects”.⁵⁷ Or as Carolyn Elerding puts it: “Computational culture shares oil’s black-boxed ontology”.⁵⁸ Referring to Raymond Williams’ notion of “structure of feeling”, Elerding makes the point that petroculture and the digital “are linked by a vast and robust structure of feeling rooted in techno-science and related progressive narratives, as well as by a close material relationship based on the world of code’s reliance upon electricity commonly derived from carbon combustion”.⁵⁹ In Norway and Sweden servers and datacentres are basically driven by hydropower, but this fact does not eliminate the dilemmas related to energy demand for research infrastructure. In January 2023 the National Library of Norway warned their users that public grants would no longer cover energy costs and other expenses, which meant that the library might be forced to remove 100 000 books from the digital bookshelf.

CONCLUSION

36 In the generous digitised archives oil and energy appear in many forms. Trying to understand the emerging petroculture in 1920s Scandinavia I have quarried newspaper-mediated critical reception of Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* in Sweden and Norway from the years 1926–1929 paying attention to both book reviews and their broader press context. Print culture in general plays a crucial role in synchronising the world in the early 20th C. My analyses of the Swedish and Norwegian critical reception of Sinclair’s *Oil!* in the late 1920s has been based on a hypothesis that studying this instance of unmistakable petrofiction travelling from the pioneer US petroculture to a less explicit, less known, and late-blooming

Scandinavian petroculture might add valuable knowledge about the cultural negotiations taking place when an old energy regime is challenged by a new one. By combining a goal-oriented search for book reviews that necessarily are about oil in one way or another with analyses of news texts in close proximity to the reviews it has been possible to come closer to Scandinavian readers in their specific 1920s energy contexts. On the one hand, my method has ensured explicit reflections on oil as energy source and world commodity, for example that *Oil!* seems to have been a welcome opportunity for Scandinavian reviewers in the late 1920s to deal with the strangeness of oil and getting accustomed to the coming of a pervasive American petroculture. On the other hand, the method has been flexible enough to allow for surprises on the way and to direct the attention to various local manifestations of oil.

Energy historians have long been well informed 37 of how World War I became a catalyst for energy transition in the 1920s. Still petroculture scholars refer to the invisibility of oil as a historic fact. I suspect that the notion of invisibility can be explained by a tendency to abstraction in certain academic traditions. What open digitised newspaper archives can offer is to transport the 21st C. readers back in time so that we can come closer to the energy transition taking place in the interwar era. My main motivation for including fiction as source text together with nonfiction accounts is that literature may let us, as Heidi Scott puts it, “arrive at an emotionally and philosophically more robust synthesis of energy history than the social and natural sciences, relying upon objective accounts and statistics, are able to provide”.⁶⁰ However, it does not stop at that. When Graeme Macdonald in “Oil and World Literature” emphasises that questions of oil’s visibility and configuration in national literary histories need to be reconceptualised both geographically and generically, I read this as an invitation to include even newspapers in the genre mix. Note that Upton Sinclair was himself a writer and an investigative journalist who

⁵⁷ Maria DiCenzo, “Remediating the Past: Doing ‘Periodical Studies’ in the Digital Era”, *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 41, n° 1, 2015, 27.

⁵⁸ Carolyn Elerding, “The Materiality of the Digital: Petro-Enlightenment and the Aesthetics of Invisibility”, *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 26, n° 2, 2016.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Heidi C. M. Scott, *Fuel: An Ecocritical History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 23.

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combined imagination with detachment and narrative with data. As a muckraker his ambition was “to weave the scattered strands of empirical reality which tickle the eyes and ears and nose into coherent and comprehensible causal stories

that touch the farther regions of intellect and will”.⁶¹ A century later the petroculture scholar’s experiment in letting literary and non-literary representations of oil serve as each other’s thick description is motivated by a similar ambition.

61 Jason Maloy, “Political Realism as Anti-Scholastic Practice: Methodological Lessons from Muckraking Journalism”, *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 73, n° 1, 2020, 32.

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