

Articles

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‘Call the Norwegian embassy!’

‘Call the Norwegian embassy!’ The Alta conflict,

Indigenous narrative and political change in the activist

films *The Taking of Sámiland* and *Let the River Live*

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Abstract

In the 1970s, Norway had not officially acknowledged their Indigenous population, the Sámi. In the following decade, two activist films, *Let the River Live* (Greve 1980) and *The Taking of Sámiland* (Eriksen and Tannvik 1984), focused on the Alta conflict – protests against the construction of a power plant in Sámi territory – Indigenous rights and colonial processes. Inspired by discussions concerning documentary, activism and

decolonialism, this article investigates how the films frame Sámi interests and challenge perceptions of the Norwegian state. Because both films are collaborations across ethnic boundaries, they also challenge the supposed insider/outsider perspective of Sámi and Indigenous film, offering decolonial narratives by centring on Indigenous voices and experiences, confronting the idea of Norway as homogenous and representing the state as a colonial suppressor. They represent a political turning point that has changed politics, film production and collective memory.

Keywords: Alta conflict, documentary, Sámi film, Indigenous film, activist filmmaking, Arctic cinema, decolonialism, Indigenous rights

At a film screening in Los Angeles in 1984, the actor Jack Nicholson exclaimed, '[w]hat can we do?' after watching *Mo Sámi valdet/Slik tar de Sameland (The Taking of Sámiland)* (Eriksen and Tannvik 1984), a documentary that frames the Norwegian state as an intruder on Indigenous Sámi land. 'Call the Norwegian embassy!', the director Kåre Tannvik replied (Enger 1984: 51). The film is one of two political, activist films from the early 1980s that focus on the Alta conflict, Indigenous rights and colonial processes in the north of Norway. The Alta conflict or Alta controversy refers to a series of protests against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in the Alta River in Finnmark, northern Norway. Nation states, including Norway, have used documentaries to claim land and engage in geopolitical manoeuvring (Kaganovsky et al. 2019: 3). In the 1970s, Norway had not acknowledged their Indigenous population or their ownership of land. This article examines these two films, *La elva leve! (Let the River Live)* (Greve 1980), which is a mix of fiction and documentary, and the documentary short *The Taking of*

Sámiland, asking how they frame Sámi interests and challenge perceptions of the Norwegian state.

Because the Alta conflict had a profound impact on the law, politics and the development of Sámi society, it is important to explore the way these two films take part in narrating and constructing images of this historical event. The films can be understood as contributions to debates concerning Sámi and Norwegian society and Sámi rights. *Let the River Live* and *The Taking of Sámiland* challenged the dominant perception of Norway as homogenous and criticized the state's ownership of Indigenous land. In doing so, the film productions challenge the so-called insider/outsider perspective on Indigenous representations. They mark a turning point in what would become a major shift in both politics and film production that addresses Sámi issues and consequently constitute an important part of Sámi and Norwegian film history. I analyse both films with an emphasis on their arguments, that is, how they promote certain perceptions of the world portrayed. The analysis is inspired by Bill Nichols's *modes of documentary* (2017), Kate Nash and John Corner's discussions of documentary activism and social change (2016) and various perspectives on decolonization. Secondary sources contribute additional context and information about the films, especially regarding how they were received, revealing important topics and discussions that were raised during the Alta conflict. I have read press coverage and literature, listened to and viewed programmes, documentaries, podcasts and seminars about the Alta conflict over a fifteen-year period.

The Alta conflict: A political turning point

From 1968 and onwards, Norwegian politicians started to plan the building of a hydropower plant near a famous salmon river and in a Sámi reindeer herding area. As a

result, there were protests from environmental groups, people with fishing interests and people from Sámi communities that included civil disobedience and hunger strikes. The struggle went on for many years, from 1968 to the Labour Party government's final decision in 1981 to proceed with the project.

International media picked up the protests when Sámi activists, in front of the Norwegian Parliament, claimed that building the dam would be an intervention on Sámi Indigenous land. The hunger strike drew significant media attention and the Norwegian state's treatment of the Sámi people suddenly was on the agenda. Norwegianization, including assimilation policies as part of the education of Sámi children, was something the Norwegian public was not aware of, and the Alta conflict was seen as part of a continuous process of the state's colonization of the Indigenous Sámi people, encroaching on their lands and utilizing their resources. In recent times, no other incident has probably caused more controversy in Norway than the Alta conflict. Among the local population of Alta, the conflict resulted in strong polarization that, according to newspapers reports, divided families (Andersen and Midttun 1985: 319; Heitmann 1984: viii). The conflict actuated discussions concerning Indigenous rights both nationally and internationally.

Documentaries, activism and decolonization

Each documentary has its own voice and way of seeing the world, and as Nichols notes, documentaries have played an important part in constructing images of national identity and representing other cultures (2017: 161–67). According to Nash and Corner, documentary's ability to catalyse social change has long been claimed, but seldom measured or demonstrated (2016: 227). Several terms have been used to describe the

ways documentaries can encourage social change, including strategic impact documentary, social issue documentary, committed documentary and campaign documentary. In this article, I am especially concerned about commitment and collaboration, ‘creating film with and for those engaged in social movements’ (Nash and Corner 2016: 234), and activism, meaning how documentaries purposely aim to achieve social change. Activist filmmaking evolved in the 1970s in response to major political events such as the Vietnam war, the Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia and the murder of Martin Luther King (Sørenssen 2007: 247–48). The Academy Award-winning American documentary *Harlan County, USA* (Kopple 1976) is often mentioned as an example of political, activist documentary filmmaking, where the director stayed with coal miners’ families and documented their strike against the coal company.

Committed documentary, collaboration and activism present opportunities for Indigenous voices to be heard. In recent years, the availability of inexpensive equipment has resulted in an explosion in Arctic Indigenous media, and several documentaries explore the relationship between Indigenous and settler cultures (Kaganovsky et al. 2019: 7). In an Indigenous context, questions concerning whose story it is, how it is told and by whom are crucial. For instance, the International Sámi Film Institute (ISFI) in Guovdageidnu, Northern Norway, has made ‘[p]athfinder-guidelines for responsible filmmaking with the Sámi people and culture’ (ISFI 2021: n.pag.), a practical guide for culturally responsible and sensitive filmmaking. To tell their own stories and change existing narratives have become important not only in a Sámi context, but in relation to Indigenous filmmaking in general (see McCue 2018: n.pag.). Indigenous storytelling can

be described as a response to previous colonial power processes, including racist and stereotyped representations of Indigenous peoples (see Smith 1999; Finbog 2020).

I will briefly introduce the films *Let the River Live* and *The Taking of Sámiland* before analysing how they are examples of decolonial, political activist films that challenged perceptions of the Norwegian state.

Let the River Live

Director Bredo Greve is known for his anarchistic sympathies and was part of a Norwegian documentary tradition that established a clear link between radical political activism and environmental and ecological concerns (Sørensen 2001: 51). In a documentary about him (Serigstad 2014), Jan Erik Holst, former head of Det norske filminstitutt (the Norwegian Film Institute), noted that Greve was one of the first directors who made protest films about nature and the environment, a tradition that was picked up by documentarists such as Michael Moore and Stefan Jarl. ‘Let the River Live’ was a slogan during the Alta conflict and was written on the barricade blocking the road to the construction site. At the beginning of the film, a title card reads:

This fiction film is partly based on documentary recordings from the Detsika camp, the police razzia against demonstrators in Stilla and the Sámi hunger strike in front of the Norwegian Parliament. The interviews in the film are with authentic persons, but the story is fiction, made as close to reality as possible.

The film was strongly criticized for its mix of fiction and authenticity. People became, in the words of Holst, confused about what genre it represented (Serigstad 2014). *Let the River Live* involves elements of the observational mode of documentary filmmaking; it captures what happens spontaneously, as if the filmmaker were an invisible ‘fly on the wall’. As Nichols points out, the observational mode is direct because the filmmaker is

there, giving us a sense of the duration of actual events (2017: 135). In *Let the River Live*, we see the actual events and interviews with authentic persons. However, the interviews also represent a contrast to the observational mode; instead, the filmmaker interacts with the subjects, often confronting them via the interviewer. The filmmaker is no longer a fly on the wall; we become aware of the presence of the camera and the filmmaker's perception of events.

The Sámi actor Nils Utsi plays Ole Raino, the main character in the film, a Sámi teacher and leader of a Sámi organization. Raino, who opposes the building of the power plant, functions as a cultural translator and teacher about Sámi perspectives, talking and explaining to the Norwegian activist Majken Moe (Sissel Kleven). The antagonist is Arve Krafft Andersen (*krafft* means 'power') (Christian Vennerød), a journalist from the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). He supports the Labour Party government and works actively to get the interviewees to speak positively about the necessity of the power plant. In the 1970s and 1980s, NRK was criticized for supporting the Labour Party government and for being Labour Party friendly in their news coverage (Dahl 2015: n.pag.). Raino is a facilitator for Andersen, but their different perceptions of the conflict lead to continuous discussions. The film ends with protests in the capital, Oslo, before the government's final decision was made.

The Taking of Sámiland

In 2010, 30 years after *Let the River Live* premiered, the Sámi publisher ČálliidLágáduš put out a jubilee release of that film and the 1984 documentary *The Taking of Sámiland* that included a short booklet introducing the Alta conflict. Its author, John Trygve Solbakk, had produced and provided the voice-over, including its script, for *The Taking*

of Sámiland, directed by Kåre Tannvik and Skule Eriksen. The documentary offers historical representations of the Norwegianization, assimilation and discrimination of the Sámi people, arguing that Sámi lands have been invaded and exploited. The film was screened at more than 30 film festivals and won several prizes, including the Grand Prize at one of the world's oldest short film festivals, the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen in Germany. It was broadcast on the public service broadcaster NRK in 1984, after some discussion. The newspaper *Aftenposten* reported that NRK first refused to broadcast the film because it was not objective but reversed the decision after it received international recognition (Enger 1984: 51). Criticism nevertheless followed that *The Taking of Sámiland* did not meet NRK's stated goal of impartiality and objectivity. At the time, Tannvik said to *Aftenposten*, 'we have never claimed to be objective! It is only NRK that tries to do that' (Enger 1984: 51).

Using historical, black-and white-archive recordings, the film shows peaceful, traditional reindeer herding husbandry and life on the tundra, contrasted to Norwegian intervention in Sámi sovereignty, including the policy that Sámi children learn only Norwegian at school, the introduction of excavators, road construction in Sámi territory and factory smoke, but also to the Nazi invasion of Sámi areas during World War II. The film's climax is the Alta conflict. More recent footage, including of the conflict, is in colour. In addition to a Sámi narrator, the film uses Sámi poems by Kirsti Paltto, Sámi music and *joik*, a traditional Sámi form of song, performed by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, a famous Sámi artist.

The Taking of Sámiland is an expository documentary, speaking to its audience using Sámi voice-over, problematizing the Norwegian state and contesting images of a

national Norwegian identity. It is a compilation film composed exclusively of archival footage. The narrator plays an important role, speaking with authority on behalf of ‘us’, meaning the Sámi people. According to Nichols, the expository mode is often persuasive; the voice proposes a perspective that gives the impression of objectivity and serves to organize and make sense of the images (2017: 123). However, although the voice-over in *The Taking of Sámiland* explains the images, it is far from objective. On the contrary, the voice is calm, but insistent and persuasive, far from the ‘neutral’ voice-over we hear, for instance, in many journalistic documentaries. Elements of the poetic mode are also present, including Sámi poems, presented by the voice-over, repetitive images of landscape and people, and the pursuit of a specific argument and world-view. As the film begins, we see Sámi people wearing traditional clothing sitting in a *lavvo* (‘Sámi tent’). They are eating, while the voice-over says, ‘[o]nce, we were alone in the north, near the Arctic Sea. Nature was generous; it gave us what we needed’. The film is an example of what Carl R. Plantinga describes as epistemic authority in non-fiction film (1997: 107); it poses a clear question – ‘[w]hat happened when outsiders came to Sámi areas?’ – and answers with a high degree of narrational authority: ‘It had a destructive and negative impact on Sámi society, culture and land areas’.

Hybridity and collaboration: Challenging the outsider and insider perspective

Greve developed the script of *Let the River Live* together with the Sámi actor Nils Utsi, who was an activist during the conflict. The film is a result of interaction and collaboration between filmmaker and subject, which Nichols describes as characteristic of the participatory mode of documentary storytelling (2017: 138).

According to Greve, they had not decided whether the film would be fictional or documentary when they went to Alta to make it. He had a script as a starting point, but shot the film based on what happened along the way (see Serigstad 2012). Authentic recordings constitute a large part of the film, in which people who were ‘real’ activists participated, such as members of Folkeaskjonen mot utbygging av Alta-Kautokeinovassdraget (People’s Action against the Development of the Alta-Kautokeino Water System), who simultaneously had roles as actors in the film. The director’s emphasis on the activists, letting them present themselves both as ‘authentic’ and as actors, is an example of collaboration and giving the activists a voice, but it is also an example of documentary storytelling that is shaped by the film’s impact goal, to change policy and present a decolonial narrative. This strategy challenges the traditional notion of documentary as artistic statement or journalistic investigation (Nash and Corner 2016: 233).

Collaboration between the director and the Sámi is also expressed in a comic scene where the pro-development journalist Arve pays Amund Buljo (played by Tore Bongo, a Sámi activist who was one of the leading figures in the Peoples’ Action) to say that the power plant will not affect his reindeer. However, the two other journalists who work together with Arve are against the power plant and say that there is no film in the camera. While Arve chases Amund because he wants his money back, the journalists let Ole Raino speak directly to the camera. Raino gives a speech to us, the audience, proclaiming that ‘this is Sámi soil, our land’ and continues, with great pathos, ‘you invade us with bulldozers and fat tourists in cars’. Speaking directly to the camera, pointing with his finger, he urges us to actively take a stand. This scene clearly shows the

films' point of view. As Nash and Corner argue, the documentary's ability to engage the audience's emotions is a precondition for impact and social change (2016: 235).

The Taking of Sámiland also clearly involves elements of collaboration. Editor at the Sámi publisher ČálliidLágádus, John Trygve Solbakk, is the producer, wrote the script and provides the voice-over, which plays a significant role in the film. According to Solbakk, it was important to screen the film worldwide because the Sámi cannot fight suppression alone (Lystad 1984: 34). The statement underlines the political aspect of the film and how the filmmakers reach out to the public to achieve social change. Solbakk is a veteran member of ČSV, a Sámi political movement that developed in the 1970s. It was a cultural and political uprising where young Sámi reclaimed what they had lost, including land rights, language and self-determination (Bjørklund 2000: 28–29). The three Sámi letters in the ČSV acronym have several meanings, including Čájjet Sámi Vuoiŋŋa (Show Sámi Spirit) and Čohkke Sámiid Vuitui (Unite the Sámi for Victory). It has become a concept that represents a positive, proud Sámi self-image. ČSV appears in both *Let the River Live* and *The Taking of Sámiland*, where we can see authentic footage of Tore Bongo making the victory sign while shouting 'ČSV! ČSV!' to the camera. As director Tannvik explains and the title implies, they wanted to direct attention to the colonization of Sámi areas and suppression of the Sámi throughout history (Enger 1984: 51).

Both films challenge perceptions of the so-called insider/outsider perspective in Sámi and Indigenous films, a distinction, I would argue, that can be too narrow, suggesting that films are either made from an Indigenous, insider perspective or from an outsider, majority perspective, the latter often associated with stereotypical, racist and

exotic representations. It is not always a fruitful distinction because it emphasizes ethnic boundaries instead of increasing awareness, understanding and the mutual exchange of knowledge. The films are a result of interactions and can be described as collaborative and hybrid, offering decolonial narratives of Sámi history and societies. The first examples of Sámi and Norwegian collaboration were the TV series and film *Ante* (Skauge 1975, 1977), about a young Sámi boy from a reindeer herder family, which involved Sámi consultants and the use of Sámi language and actors (Mecsei 2018: 86).

The Sámi turn: Challenging the narrative of a homogenous Norway

Before the Alta conflict, the perception of the Sámi as Indigenous, not to speak of the acknowledgment of Norway's colonial history, was rare. Recognition of the Sámi as Indigenous was introduced by the Secretary of State, Thorvald Stoltenberg, after he participated in a UN conference against racism in 1978 (Minde 2008: 66). Stoltenberg would later play a prominent role during the Alta conflict as minister of defence. Henry Minde notes that the conflict became a matter of Sámi political interest once it was defined as an Indigenous people's matter (2003: 87–89). What accelerated the conflict as a matter of Sámi rights was when the Samisk aksjonsgruppe (Sámi Action Group), which consisted of Sámi political activists who protested against the power plant, promoting Sámi interests, established a *lavvo* camp outside the Norwegian Parliament in Oslo and began a hunger strike. The strike turned the conflict into a national and international media event that was impossible to ignore. This new turn, described as a 'Sámi joker' (Hjorthol 2006: 46), came as a surprise for the government, who had not considered whether the proposed dam was an intervention on Sámi areas and Sámi rights. Authentic

footage from the strike is included in both *The Taking of Sámiland* and *Let the River Live*.

The symbolism is overt; the scenes in Oslo reflect dichotomies and power structures between the Sámi and the Norwegian state: the *lavvo* versus the Norwegian parliament, the *gákti* ('Sámi dress') versus police in uniforms, the activist Niillas Somby (wearing *gákti*) with a raised fist versus the Norwegian lion, a symbol of the Norwegian state. Somby exclaims, '[w]e will win this fight against the government!'

The protest scenes represent a decolonial narrative, contesting and destabilizing images of a peaceful, egalitarian and homogenous Norway. An important question is whether the population in a society shares the same memories. If memories of the past are divergent, the population cannot fully share experiences, perceptions and understandings (Connerton 1989: 3). From the 1960s and onwards, a Sámi movement was developing that included Sámi nation-building, which reconnected Sápmi with the Sámi people (Stordahl 1996: 89). Recognition of these processes necessarily requires that existing memories and understandings of Norway and its Indigenous population must be challenged and reinterpreted. Media play a central role with regard to both individual and collective memory because media construct and circulate knowledge and versions of a common past (Erlil 2011: 113). Indigenous scholars have noted that non-Indigenous peoples have told stories of the colonized through their own lenses (see Finbog 2020; Smith 1999). However, although the directors of *Let the River Live* and *The Taking of Sámiland* are Norwegian, they aim to challenge the audience, to open their eyes to a different understanding of Norway and Norwegian history. A decolonial narrative challenges existing representations through activism, by centring on Indigenous voices and experiences.

The documentary's presentation of historical reality is connected with collective memory; our understanding of the present is linked to knowledge and perceptions of the past (Connerton 1989: 2). The extent to which films challenge existing experiences and understandings, such as stereotypes and exotic images of Indigenous peoples, can be connected to Benedict Anderson and his concept 'imagined communities' (1991) and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's perception that media representations shape our common understandings of the nation's history (1994). Furthermore, as I argue in this article, films and film production processes can be contact zones, 'where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power' (Pratt 1991: 34), contributing to knowledge exchange and new representations and interpretations of 'our' past. Film productions can be a space where collaboration and interactions between majority and minority take place.

In one scene in *Let the River Live*, Raino talks about historical events demonstrating that Norway has stolen Indigenous land and treated the Sámi people badly. Majken asks, '[a]nd now they want to build the dam and take even more from you?' He replies, '[w]e'll see about that', indicating that the fight is not over yet. *The Taking of Sámiland* also highlights Sámi activism during the Alta conflict, although in a more discouraging way since we see that despite the protests, the Sámi must give in to superior forces. The voice-over says, '[i]t was in 1979. Then we woke up. The bravest of us went to the Norwegians' capital. But they didn't listen to us'. An important difference between the films is that *The Taking of Sámiland* was completed after the government decided to build the power plant, while *Let the River Live* was made before the final decision.

Framing the colonial Norwegian state: A story of victim and suppressor

Both films aim to tell a story about suppression: that the Norwegian state is, and has been, a suppressor and colonizer of the Sámi. The historical lens is most significant in *The Taking of Sámiland*, where the images are accompanied by the Sámi voice-over telling the story of how ‘they’ have treated ‘us’. He explains how the strangers came, destroying the Sámi community, creating borders, introducing alcohol. This story of devastation is contrasted to harmonious images of traditional Sámi life, for instance a scene showing happy Sámi children playing with reindeer antlers and throwing a lasso. Norwegianization is visualized by showing Sámi children learning Norwegian at school. The Norwegians are described as *herrefolket* (‘the master race’) and the Nazis as the new master race, burning Sámi land. The reconstruction period after the war is displayed as a contrast between old and new: reindeer running on the tundra versus machines, industry and smoke. ‘Old Sápmi never recovered from the ashes’, intones the voice-over. The Alta conflict plays a significant part in the documentary. By including archive footages from the demonstrations and hunger strikes, the film emphasizes that although the Sámi tried to fight back, they were not heard. The voice-over explains that ‘they’ have a hunger for ‘our’ nature; they want electricity and therefore they dam the river. The dichotomies between us and them, good and bad, nature and destruction, Sámi and Norwegian contribute to establishing a difference between minority and majority and a construction of victim and suppressor.

In *Let the River Live*, several scenes function almost like history lessons; the topic is how Norway has suppressed the Sámi people throughout history. These scenes

establish a context for the authentic recordings that we see; the filmmaker wants us to interpret the demonstrations and protests in a certain way. The authentic recordings do not imply the director's political view; it is the context in which they appear that conveys this perspective. The fictional dialogue provides arguments against the building of the power plant and works as building blocks for the authentic recordings. The character Ole Raino is our 'guide' and the character Majken Moe is a Norwegian activist who receives the history lessons on behalf of the audience. This 'teaching' from an Indigenous perspective contributes to persuading the Norwegian audience and challenging existing images of Norwegian society.

The films are examples of how cultural practices can challenge and confront national policies and raise awareness in the public sphere. In 2000, the Sámi scholar Rauna Kuokkanen argued that contemporary Sámi autonomy still suffered from assimilation, a statement that underlines the long history and after-effects of these processes. Ongoing processes of reconciliation are a result of settlements and negotiations of our common past, in which both films have taken part. For us to think that the past is meaningful, the present understandable and the future predictable, it is crucial that we are able to create a sense of connection between the various experiences and relationships that our life story consists of. According to Maurice Halbwachs, an event can bring the past into the present and thus have an impact on the collective memory (1992: 51). The Alta conflict can be seen both as a concrete event and as a symbol of the Sámi struggle for rights that is important for today's perception of the Sámi.

[The ecological Sámi versus Norwegian nature vandalism](#)

Today, most people associate the Alta conflict with Sámi rights. For instance, one of the Sámi activists, Jorunn Eikjok, has said,

I didn't care about the river, but it became a symbol of the fight for Sámi rights. It was a much greater cause than the river [...]. I thought that this is the most important thing I'll do in my life and that I am part of changing history.

(Vuolab 2010: n.pag.)

However, the People's Action was established because they were concerned about how the construction would affect the environment, in particular the salmon (Nilsen 2019: 178). The group consisted of people with varying priorities, including those who joined because of environmental interests and fishing interests, since the Alta River was one of the world's best salmon rivers, but also people who wanted to protect Sámi rights more generally. The People's Action organized camps outside the construction site and civil disobedience, chaining themselves together and blocking the road to the site.

Fishing and environmental issues are not the focus in the two films, although both contrast development, roads and bulldozers with what they represent as a Sámi way of life. We see nature as something untouched, in balance and at peace, and the Sámi as living in a symbiotic and harmonious relationship with nature. 'Our ancestors were wise – they didn't exploit nature', says the voice-over in *The Taking of Sámi land*. This statement tells us that the Sámi protect nature, while the invaders exploit and destroy it. The narrative contrast between the ugly and the beautiful, between the evil Norwegian state and the ecologically aware and innocent Sámi, is enhanced visually. According to Lilya Kaganovsky, Scott MacKenzie and Anna W. Stenport, one common on-screen image of the North is of the raw, undisturbed natural world, while another representation often displays people living in 'old, traditional ways' now lost to 'civilized' viewers in

the South (2019: 4). *The Taking of Sámiland* does not challenge these images of the Arctic and the Indigenous Sámi people. Several scenes in both films consist of cross-cutting that contrasts pristine nature with encroachment and destruction. This juxtaposition also represents a break from images of the Norwegian nature meme, age-old perceptions and ideas of the Norwegians as strongly connected to nature (see Witoszek 1998). For instance, early films on polar exploration were part of the nation-building process, and nature was presented as a central feature of Norwegianness (Kaganovsky et al. 2019: 19). Both *Let the River Live* and *The Taking of Sámiland* challenge this idea by highlighting a Sámi nature meme.

At the beginning of *Let the River Live*, Ole Raino is asked how the road can damage reindeer husbandry and he explains that it will affect important calving areas. From the very start, the film emphasizes Sámi interests, especially those of reindeer herders. The road in question is to the construction site. The Norwegian state is framed as the enemy of Sámi interests, and the argument in favour of the power plant, the need for more electricity and further development in Finnmark, is presented as devastating for Sámi areas. Originally, the plan was to dam a much greater portion of the Alta-Guovdageidnu water system, which would have submerged Máze, a Sámi village. The people of Máze protested and politicians changed the plans. However, this change was due to environmental factors, not because the plans infringed on Sámi rights (Heitmann 1984: 173).

In *Let the River Live*, we meet several interviewees, authentic residents of the area, interviewed by the actor Christian Vennerød, playing the pro-development journalist Arve Krafft Andersen. The journalist wants a fisherman to say that more

electricity is needed, which he confirms, but at the end of the interview it becomes clear that although the fisherman is a member of the Labour Party, he is against encroachment on nature. The interview tells us that not even the Labour Party representative supports the government's plans, and the subtext is therefore that the plan must be stopped. Perhaps the most confrontational interview is when the journalist visits the reindeer husbandry area affected by the construction plans. The journalist describes the area as unexploited, while the reindeer herder corrects him, explaining that these areas are grazing lands for the reindeer. The scene reveals ignorance and lack of insight on the part of majority culture. The reindeer herder says that they do not need the extra electricity; they can continue their work and way of life quite well without it. Implicitly, the scene reveals what *The Taking of Sámiland* says more explicitly: it is the *Norwegians* who need electricity, factories and technology, while the Sámi manage to live and thrive without them and without exploiting and destroying pristine nature. Both films could nevertheless be criticized for presenting a romantic, over-simplified view of Sámi society, not acknowledging that Sámi culture is varied and dynamic or that some may welcome changes and new technology.

The interviews reveal the many interests that were involved and include arguments in favour of the power plant, but the pro arguments are not convincing. The protests against the damming culminated in January 1981 when 600 police officers, the largest number ever assembled in peacetime, came to Alta to stop the protesters, who had built a barricade of snow and ice across the road and chained themselves together to stop construction work. The 1000 protesters were nevertheless unable to stop the police, who managed to remove the chains and the barricade. The power plant was built in 1987, but

the protests led to recognition of Sámi demands for increased influence. The government held meetings with a Sámi delegation in 1980 and 1981, leading to the creation of Samerettsutvalget (the Sámi Rights Committee), whose task was to examine the cultural and legal situation of the Sámi. Sameloven (the Sámi Act) of 1987 eventually led to the establishment of the first Sámi Parliament in Norway in 1989, followed a few years later by the Sámi Parliament in Sweden (1993) and in Finland (1997) (see Josefsen and Skogerbø 2021). The Alta conflict undoubtedly drew attention to Sámi rights and influenced the development of Sámi societies.

Conclusion

As activist films with a decolonial mission, *Let the River Live* and *The Taking of Sámiland* contest existing, taken-for-granted images of the Norwegian state and Norwegianness. They represent an important political turning point that resulted in major shifts in policies and official attitudes towards the Sámi people. Jack Nicholson's exclamation, '[w]hat can we do?' almost 40 years ago shows how documentaries can work outside the official political public sphere to achieve political awareness and goals. To quantify changes in public opinion is difficult, but the Alta conflict without question acquired symbolic significance for the Sámi peoples' struggle for Indigenous rights. Both *Let the River Live* and *The Taking of Sámiland* actively engage with perceptions of Norwegianness and our common history and were part of a new decolonial discourse about the Arctic and Indigenous matters, including film production that increasingly involves Indigenous voices. The films challenge the understanding of Norway as homogenous and point a finger at a shameful history that at the time had not been part of a national conversation because it was not a story most people were aware of. The idea of

the Norwegian nature meme is contested; instead, the films argue in favour of a Sámi nature meme where the Sámi people are represented as caretakers of the environment. As Paul Connerton notes, our knowledge and perceptions of the past play a role regarding how we understand our present situation (1989: 2). The films offer a critical view of Norwegian society and its treatment of the Sámi, a topic that until recently had not received much attention in academic research.³ As such, they also constitute an important part of Sámi and Norwegian film history.

Both films also show that the so-called insider/outsider perspective of Sámi and Indigenous films can be questioned because it does not take into consideration that this distinction can be too narrow. Films produced in collaboration between majority and minority can offer decolonial narratives. *The Taking of Sámiland* has a Sámi producer, John Trygve Solbakk from Davvi Media, who also wrote the script. His voice-over plays an important part in the film narrative and the film emphasizes that it is told from a Sámi perspective. The script of *Let the River Live* is the result of collaboration between the Sámi actor Nils Utsi and Norwegian director Bredo Greve.

The films do not try to be objective or neutral; on the contrary, they both represent Sámi interests and use contrasts and dichotomies to display the Norwegian state as an intruder and suppressor of Sámi culture, society and nature. Although both films triggered debate and criticism due to their political and activist approach, they address an important event as well as histories of abuse, which at the time were blind spots in the Norwegian historical narrative. Today, more than 40 years after the protests started and the first film premiered, the Alta conflict is once again in focus in an upcoming new feature film, also titled *Let the River Live*, produced by the Norwegian production

company Mer Film and directed by Ole Giæver. The film is now in post-production and is slated to be released in 2023.

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Notes

1. Detsika is the area where the People's Action held their camp in the summer of 1979. It was a cultural and political event with 6000 visitors. Stilla is the area where the protesters blocked the road up to the construction site.

2. All translations from Norwegian are by the author.

3. See Hernes (2008), Bjørklund (2011) and Broderstad et al. (2020) on the development of Indigenous rights and the Sámi people's fight for political influence, including legal and political rights established in the ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and tribal peoples and the establishment of the Sámi parliament in Norway. Stine Agnete Sand has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.