

The sinister aspects of reindeer as representatives of the mythical northern wilderness

By Kati Aakkonen

This year [Sámi activists in Norway](#) have been protesting the parliament's inaction concerning a wind farm in Fosen district: the Supreme court declared it illegal in 2021 but [the turbines have remained in place](#). The district was important reindeer [winter grazing area](#) but now it's unusable. Plans for even bigger farm have been on the makes in [Rastigaissa fell area](#). Many Sámi organisations, locals and environmental groups [have condemned](#) the park as detrimental to reindeer herding, local wildlife and Sámi traditions.

These kind of projects with other land claims have for decades been devastating to the northern areas of Nordic countries, yet still the North is often depicted as untouched wilderness. This is one of the justifications for building the Rastigaissa farm: the place is considered [empty](#).

The North can seem uninhabited when gazed from outside and this myth has a long history in Finland. First European travelers and artists got interested in northern landscapes and in the 19th century their work circulated back to the area that is now Finland. Southern Finnish artists and writers saw the distant and rugged landscapes with new eyes, and some travelled north to experience the place themselves. (Ridanpää 2019, 128; Saarinen 2011, 112.) To visitors the North became either a pure, mystical, comical or grotesque place in its wildness, and this tendency can also be seen in Finnish films, such as [The White Reindeer](#) (1952) and [Lapland Odyssey](#) (2010) ([Hiltunen 2019](#), 89; 99).

The Finnish wildlife film [Tale of the Sleeping Giants](#) (2021, *Tunturin tarina*) – on which I am working on a research article for my dissertation in University of Jyväskylä – utilises this tradition. The film, directed by Marko Röhr who co-wrote it with Antti Tuuri, is part of a nature film trilogy with [Tale of a Forest](#) (2012) and [Tale of a Lake](#) (2016). In *Sleeping Giants*, the narrator journeys North to learn the stories of fells. In the film we see animals, but most of all, the magnificent landscapes of the North, without a trace of human presence, as is the convention in wildlife films (Chris 2006).

Human presence is also erased from the lives of reindeer, which are the most prominent animals in the film. Reindeer are semi-domesticated animals, and in northern Finland participate in reindeer herding or tourism. In fictional films reindeer are often depicted as wild, like in the French-Finnish production [Ailo: The Amazing Odyssey of a Newborn Reindeer](#) (2019), and the animation [Niko: The Flight Before Christmas](#) (2008). Most reindeer spend their lives in proximity with humans *and* live by themselves in forests and fells, so categorising them either wild or domesticated ignores their experiences ([Sara 2009](#)).

Sleeping Giants follows the western tradition in art where people have craved for and imagined places that are untouched by humans and can serve as an antidote to complexities of society and culture (Garrard 2012, 66; Mitman 2009, 11; 25). This has a violent history with ties to colonialism and racism (Chris 2006), also in Finland where the indigenous people Sámi have often been excluded from northern landscapes and decision making (Ahvenjärvi 2019, 113; Tervaniemi & Magga 2019, 88). The North in *Sleeping Giants* is vast, far away from people and without traces of industry and environmental devastation or the influence of culture and livelihoods of the local people.

Continual projection of the ideal of untouched wilderness on the North makes it a reality, and so images contrasting that conception, for example photos of effects of goldmining, are not legible. The reindeer in *Sleeping Giants* become representatives of wilderness and give a chance to see northern Fennoscandia – “the last wilderness of Europe” – as a nonproblematic and carefree place, without the history of colonialism, environmental problems, warming climate’s drastic effects on the Arctic and today’s green colonialism.

Placing reindeer in faraway location undisturbed by people, frees us from the responsibility of imagining co-existence in a way that considers nonhuman animals’ welfare and the people who live and share a culture with these creatures. Wildlife films have a history of preferring to sympathize with nonhuman animals and ignoring or even vilifying people who live in the same places (Chris 2006, 7; Marks 2002, 26; 27). So, erasing the local people from the North and depicting reindeer as wild animals is used to create a version of a place that glosses over complexities and could be used as a justification for big projects like the Rastigaisa wind farm.

We can’t afford to imagine separate existence for some species, since that is no longer possible on this planet. For example, the fragmentation and diminishment of habitats in the North make the ideal of wild reindeer impossible anyway. But in addition, imagining saving reindeer by removing all human contact thwarts the relationship reindeer have had with humans, especially with the Sámi, for a long time.

Imagining mythical and simplistically wild places is not in itself wrong. My critique of the film stems from considering colonial practices, historical ones but also the ones that are happening today (Kuokkanen 2007, 146; [Rossi 2009](#), 352–353; Svalastog 2015, 24). From that point of view the empty, timeless wilderness of *Sleeping Giants* can appear sinister. Not a documentary, though it is often labeled as such, the film with the rest of the trilogy won [FASEJ](#)’s Science Communications Award in 2022, which gives *Sleeping Giants* a credibility as factual information and downplays the film’s subjectivity and fictional aspects. Circulating the many assumptions about the North that have become kind of truth of the place can be artistically satisfying and profitable for a filmmaker, but it also keeps alive a fantasy of a place that has no history, especially not a problematic one, nor an uncertain future.

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