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Journal

California Italian Studies, 14(1)

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Publication Date

2025-10-21

DOI

10.5070/C3.40985

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Petro-Modernity and the Racialized Politics of Extraction: ENI and the Making of the African Anthropocene

Emiliano Guaraldo¹

At the Italy-Africa Summit in Rome in January 2024, the Italian government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of the far-right Fratelli d'Italia party unveiled its “Enrico Mattei Plan for Africa” (Simonelli, Fantappiè, and Goretti 2024). The plan pledges a “non-predatory” approach to international cooperation with selected African countries in areas like energy, agriculture, and infrastructure, with the secondary, long-term aim of curbing “irregular” migration from Africa to Italy (ISPI 2023).²

The Mattei Plan,³ shrouded in mystery and speculation for a considerable time,⁴ is fundamentally driven by geopolitical and energy concerns, as the initiative emerged partly as a response to energy supply challenges following the Ukraine conflict, with the Italian government seeking to reduce its reliance on Russian natural gas imports. As part of this plan, Italy intends to consolidate energy partnerships with several African countries, including the Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Egypt, and Algeria, with the latter having become Italy’s primary gas supplier since 2022 (Zeric 2022). The Mattei Plan represents a long-term geopolitical strategy based on energy production and distribution, as Meloni’s government imagines Italy becoming a strategic energy transit point connecting Africa and Europe: a scheme that incorporates a range of projects already underway by the Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI, or the Italian National Hydrocarbon Corporation) and its subsidiaries.⁵ These projects encompass, for example, the development of a hydrogen transport corridor from North Africa to central Europe via Italy (the SouthH2 corridor, a project that involves ENI’s former subsidiary SNAM),⁶ as well as a biofuel supply chain project in Kenya that aims to engage 400,000 farmers by 2027. However, recent investigative reporting has found significant implementation gaps in this biofuel initiative. On-the-ground interviews with farmers and stakeholders in Kenya and the Republic of the Congo show that the company is significantly

¹ I wish to thank the editors for the kind opportunity to contribute to this special issue, as well as Enrico Cesaretti, Samuel Amago, Giulia Scotto, Luca Peretti, Federico Luisetti, Serenella Iovino, Jordi Mari, Emil’ Keme, Santi Girón, Alessia Martini, and Elena Past for the many insightful conversations that helped give form to this text. I also extend my thanks to the NICHE center at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice and its director Francesca Tarocco, as well as to Pietro Daniel Omodeo, the Waterscapes group, and the International Association for the Study of the Commons for hosting presentations of early drafts of this essay.

² In her opening speech at the Italy-Africa summit, Giorgia Meloni declared: “L’immigrazione illegale di massa non sarà mai fermata, i trafficanti di vite umane non saranno mai sconfitti, se non si affrontano a monte le cause che spingono una persona ad abbandonare la propria casa. È esattamente quello che intendiamo fare, da una parte dichiarando guerra agli schiavisti del Terzo millennio e dall’altra lavorando per offrire ai popoli africani un’alternativa fatta di opportunità, lavoro, formazione e percorsi di migrazione legale” (“Mass illegal immigration will never be stopped, human traffickers will never be defeated, if we don’t address at the source the causes that drive a person to abandon their home. This is exactly what we intend to do, on one hand by declaring war on the slavers of the third millennium and on the other hand by working to offer African peoples an alternative made of opportunities, work, training, and legal migration paths” Meloni 2024).

³ The plan relies on a €5.5 billion financial framework, structured through a combination of loans, direct aid, and guarantees. The funding draws from two main sources: €3 billion from the Italian Climate Fund and €2.5 billion from the Development Cooperation Fund (Fattibene & Manservigi 2024, 1).

⁴ See De Luca 2023; Redazione 2023; Zaurrini 2023.

⁵ The plan has already drawn critical media attention for what commentators perceive as neocolonial dynamics and historical amnesia. Media coverage has expressed concerns about the initiative’s failure to address Italy’s colonial past (Zanotelli 2024; Perduca 2024), its prioritization of Italian energy interests over genuine partnership (Ruggieri 2024), and its extension of migration containment policies under a developmental guise (Negri 2024).

⁶ See <https://www.south2corridor.net/south2>.

underproducing, with ENI failing to reach even a quarter of its 2023 production targets in Kenya, while its projects in the Republic of the Congo have been stalled at the pilot stage for over eighteen months (Transport and Environment 2024).⁷

The fact that the main policy device for governing future energy and economic development relations between Italy and a portion of the African continent takes its name from Enrico Mattei, the seminal figure behind ENI, is telling of the political and ideological workings that sustain it. First of all, it shows the influence that energy politics and the strategic objectives and methods of ENI have on Italian diplomacy, a remnant of ENI's shadow governments that continues today.⁸ It also demonstrates the enduring allure and the ideological use of the figure of Enrico Mattei in public discourse and across ideological divides, as his name is evoked, often in hagiographic tones, at once as a champion of third worldism; a symbol of industrial development; a protector of Italian national interests and (diplomatic, energy, cultural) sovereignty; a visionary with entrepreneurial vision beyond his time; the quintessential socially-oriented capitalist; and a partisan and a folk hero whose death marked a significant turning point in Italian history (and consequently left us with a series of *what ifs*).

Enrico Mattei's leadership of ENI from 1953 until his death in 1962 shaped Italy's relationship with postcolonial Africa. Having emerged from the anti-Fascist resistance to head the newly created state hydrocarbon agency, Mattei launched in 1957 what became known as ENI's "grande disegno africano" (grand African project),⁹ an ambitious continental expansion program that, despite Italy's colonial past in Eritrea, Somalia, Tunisia, and Libya, positioned the company as a seemingly neutral actor through his strategic vision of developmentalism (Scotto 2021, 84).¹⁰ By defining colonialism primarily as an economic condition, he positioned ENI against traditional imperialism: "Colonialism is not only political; it is first and foremost economic; the colonial condition is given when the infrastructure to transform raw materials is missing and when the demand and supply of a fundamental resource are defined by a hegemonic power" (Mattei, cited in Scotto 2021, 89). This anticolonial rhetoric served a dual function: as realpolitik strategy against the rival Seven Sisters oil companies,¹¹ and as the foundation for his vision of economic development, one centered on state-to-state partnerships aimed at building host nations' industrial infrastructure and technical expertise. By offering terms designed to grant African countries a greater share of resource access and control compared to the established Seven Sisters model, Mattei positioned ENI as a vehicle for achieving the economic sovereignty central to the era's developmentalist aspirations. Despite its anticolonial rhetoric, though, this vision necessarily produced racialized subjects marked

⁷ The investigation found that "while Eni's biofuels strategy is struggling, it continues to invest in oil and gas in the region. It has earmarked €25bn to explore and develop new oil and gas projects globally, as well as to maintain existing fields. The company has set aside less than €3.4bn for biofuels" (Transport and Environment 2024, 3). The Mattei Plan framework also includes infrastructure projects, such as renewable-powered water distribution systems in the Democratic Republic of Congo and water sanitation developments in Ethiopia (Guala 2024).

⁸ Scholarship and investigative reports document ENI's historical function as a kind of parallel state, deeply involved in Italian politics and foreign policy, and connected to major twentieth-century controversies. This dynamic arguably persists today, evidenced by confidential agreements embedding ENI personnel within government ministries to align diplomatic action with corporate interests. See Greco and Oddo 2016; Antoniani and Oddo 2022; Runci and Tricarico 2021.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

¹⁰ While often associated with specific mid-twentieth-century economic strategies like state-led industrialization aimed at national sovereignty (Bresser-Pereira and Oreiro 2024, 5), Arif Dirlik defines developmentalism more fundamentally as an "ideological orientation characterized by the fetishization of development." Viewing it in this way, we can understand how development becomes an unquestioned, almost naturalized goal, obscuring the historical and political forces shaping it and legitimizing specific, often extractive, models of modernization (Dirlik 2014, 30–31).

¹¹ The Seven Sisters were Exxon, Mobil, Standard Oil of California (Socal), Gulf Oil, Texaco, Royal Dutch Shell, and British Petroleum.

for extraction and territories designated as sacrifice zones as constitutive features of petro-modernity and racial capitalism.

Six decades after his death, Mattei's legacy is being strategically mobilized within Italy's current political landscape. The quest for "energy sovereignty" seems to be an important aspect of Meloni's particular brand of rightwing neoliberalism, known as *sovranoismo* (sovereignism).¹² In the context of intensifying geopolitical competition and the escalating climate crisis, this agenda arguably seeks less to fundamentally transform Italy's energy paradigm and more to maintain or adapt for the twenty-first century the nation's established energy-geopolitical apparatuses, the foundations of what Timothy Mitchell famously called "carbon democracy," namely the political order shaped by the specific ways fossil fuels, particularly oil, are extracted, distributed, and are complicit with finance and state power (Mitchell 2009).¹³ Meloni's *sovranoismo* professes to reassert Italy's geopolitical and economic interests on the global stage, often through a rhetoric of Italian exceptionalism, nostalgic appeals to Cold War *realpolitik*, and opportunistic appropriations and rightwing interpretations of the lexicon of decoloniality and anti-globalization struggles. The Mattei Plan, with its emphasis on securing Italian energy interests through strategic partnerships and infrastructure projects in Africa under the umbrella of twenty-first-century energy-transition developmentalism, along with fossil and green extractivism, can be read as an extension of this sovereignist agenda. Quoting directly from Meloni's address:

Una cooperazione da pari a pari, lontana da qualsiasi tentazione predatoria, ma anche da quell'impostazione "caritatevole" nell'approccio con l'Africa che mal si concilia con le sue straordinarie potenzialità di sviluppo. Questo nuovo approccio, del quale la nostra Nazione vuole farsi portatrice, si rispecchia anche nel titolo di questo Vertice: "Italia-Africa, un ponte per crescere insieme." Perché è la naturale vocazione dell'Italia: un ponte tra l'Africa e l'Europa. Un ponte che noi italiani abbiamo il vantaggio di poter costruire non partendo da zero, ma dalle solide fondamenta che, molto tempo fa, un grande italiano come Enrico Mattei, fondatore di ENI, ha avuto la lungimiranza di saper immaginare.

(Cooperation as equals, far from any predatory temptations, but also from that "charitable" approach to Africa which is so ill-suited to its extraordinary potential for development. This new approach, for which our nation wants to be the standard-bearer, is also reflected in the name of this summit: "Italy-Africa: A Bridge for Common Growth," because this is Italy's natural vocation: a bridge between Africa and Europe. As Italians, we have the advantage of being able to build that bridge not starting from scratch but rather based on the solid foundations that the great Italian Enrico Mattei, founder of ENI, had the foresight to envisage all those years ago.) (Meloni 2024)

The Mattei Plan's rhetorical construction evidences how contemporary rightwing sovereignty politics mobilize and reframe historical narratives of Italy-Africa relations. Meloni's definition of Italy as a "natural bridge" between Africa and Europe builds upon ENI's

¹² El Taki (2024) discusses *sovranoismo* as the Italian term reflecting a broader European "sovereignism" focused on reasserting national sovereignty against perceived encroachments from supranational institutions (like the EU) and globalization, often characterized by a desire to "take back control." This impulse frequently extends to diverse policy domains, with rightwing politicians invoking often unspecified national interests in opposition to energy transitions and climate policy.

¹³ See also Szeman and Wellum 2023.

longstanding self-positioning as a benevolent, mediating force between Western capital and postcolonial development, between the Global North's petro-modern states and the Global South's extractive potential. Yet this rhetoric of connection and mediation exists alongside Meloni's systematic criminalization of Mediterranean refugee rescue operations and calls for restrictive migration policies. The contradiction extends to how ENI's actions have historically materialized these extractive relations as sacrifice zones¹⁴ of petro-chemical violence in Africa, with particular intensity in the Niger Delta

The apparent short-circuit between ENI's self-presentation as an agent of decolonial development in the 1950s and 1960s and its active role throughout the rest of twentieth and twenty-first centuries in extending extractive frontiers and inflicting socio-ecological violence on African communities finds its most sophisticated expression in the company's vast cultural production apparatus. Through its cinema unit and cultural section,¹⁵ ENI developed what we might call an infrastructural-developmental political aesthetics, or a visual and narrative style linking infrastructure to developmentalist ideology. This effort promoted ENI's projects and vision, educated Italian audiences about energy sciences and the company's technological innovations, and naturalized its presence in Africa and worldwide. The company's material and infrastructural transformations of African territories through pipelines, refineries, and extraction sites were accompanied by audiovisual artifacts that worked to legitimate these interventions and to connect them to larger questions of development, well-being, and peaceful cooperation.¹⁶ ENI's documentary films functioned as visual technologies for producing a specific image of modernization, one that positioned the company as the necessary agent of progress, especially in relation to African countries.¹⁷ This visual regime linked Italian petro-modernity to Italy's ascension to first-world status and to civilizational, racialized discourses that, even at their "anticolonial best," continued the construction of African subjects and landscapes as *terrae nullius*: territories for the taking to be developed and made extractable for petro-modernity's broader civilizational project. While development and resource extraction were largely unchallenged pillars of postwar modernization at the time these films were made, encountering them today makes contemporary audiences realize how deeply these premises are embedded in the current world-system, offering an archive of the aesthetic and ideological foundations of ongoing extractive relations.

This essay examines two documentary films produced by ENI's cultural apparatus: *Oduroh* (1964) and *Uomini del petrolio* (1965, *Oilmen*), both by French-Swiss filmmaker Gilbert Bovay. As these films are products of corporate-industrial cinema emerging directly from and serving industrial organization, they offer images and insights that are difficult to discern in other cultural artifacts or historical documents.¹⁸ With remarkable transparency these films show us two fundamental dynamics through which the company operated as a transformative agent in the making of what has been termed as "the African Anthropocene"

¹⁴ For a genealogy and definition through several case studies of sacrifice zones, see Lerner 2012; de Souza 2021; and Juskus 2023.

¹⁵ There is a rich bibliography on ENI's cultural production: see Mattana 2019; Peretti 2019, 2023; Bonifazio 2014; Latini 2011; Frescani 2014; Cesaretti 2020.

¹⁶ Some ENI film productions set in Africa include, among others, *Petrolio nelle dune* (1967, *Petroleum in the Dunes*); *Loango: campo petrolifero a largo delle coste congolesi* (1977, *Loango: An Oilfield along the Congolese Coast*); *Oro nero sul Mar Rosso* (1962, *Black Gold on the Red Sea*); *Viaggio nell'Africa delle grandi realizzazioni tecniche* (1967, *A Journey through the Africa of Great Technical Achievements*).

¹⁷ Building on architectural historian Tom Avermaete's concept of the "aesthetic regime of modernism," Giulia Scotto argues that ENI, through its projects in Africa, should be considered one of the main actors responsible for the globalization of a modernist aesthetic regime (Scotto 2021, 105).

¹⁸ For studies on the global dimension of industrial and corporate cinema see Hediger and Vonderau 2009; Hediger et al. 2023). For studies on petro-cinema in different national contexts see, among others, Damluji 2013, 2025; and Dahlquist & Vonderau 2021.

(Hecht 2018). In particular, through its staging of a young Ghanaian man's journey through ENI's technical education program in Milan, *Oduroh* portrays how the company imagined the transformation of passive African subjects into active agents of extraction, while *Uomini del petrolio* documents the material manifestation of this vision, i.e., the ways in which ENI's technological apparatus participated in the grand reshaping of African landscapes into extractive zones. These films document the dual processes of cultural and material transformation of African territories. Beyond executing Mattei's strategic vision, ENI's simultaneous construction of extractive infrastructure and developmentalist narratives exemplifies a condition in which the geophysical remaking of landscapes through resource extraction required and produced new ways of imagining Africa's territories and futures. This coproduction of material and cultural infrastructure continues to influence Italy's relationship with Africa, as is evident in the Meloni government's Mattei Plan.

ENI's Cinema: Petro-Modernity and the African Anthropocene

Following Gabrielle Hecht's definitions, the documentary films produced by ENI's cultural apparatus in the 1960s can serve as "interscalar" witnesses, connecting stories and scales usually kept apart, ranging from the local transformations of African territories to the expansion of planetary petrochemical flows in geological, human, and more-than-human times. As these films are no longer possible to experience at their promotional face value, they take on a new significance in our current moment, since anthropogenic planetary transformations force us to reconsider historical evidence of how extraction "has powered the large-scale rearrangement of substances that materially constitutes the Anthropocene" (Hecht 2018, 135). Produced when extractivism and Western-led developmentalism were unquestioned dogmas of modernity, ENI's corporate cinema performed scalar work that staged (hi)stories of development while serving larger projects of resource extraction and planetary transformation. The films exemplify the material and ideological work of making extraction possible, connecting scales in ways that were "emergent, relational, and performative" (Hecht 2018, 114).

Jordanna Matlon has recently proposed ten theses for understanding how racial capitalism works. Among other things, she identifies a dual operation existing on both material and ideological levels: "On the material level, racialization involves strategies of accumulation to extract labor, land, resources, credit, debt, or any other value-deriving thing, from racially othered populations...On the ideological level, racial difference naturalizes and rationalizes this gain and loss, privilege and scarcity" (Matlon 2024, 1152). The dual operation that Matlon identifies is also crucial for understanding how racial capitalism has been involved in producing the Anthropocene both as a material, geological reality and as a conceptual framework for planetary transformation. At this point in the debates surrounding the origin stories and the political dimensions of the Anthropocene, contributions from decolonial scholars and political ecologists have clearly established the racial, colonial contours of the planetary transformations that are collectively shaping this geologic epoch (Armiero 2021; Ferdinand 2019; Gosselin and Bartoli 2022; Yusoff 2018). The Anthropocene paradigm is, in this context, "inescapably racial: it is both marked by the impacts of racial categorization and at the same time is an emerging part of the production of race as an ongoing structure of our lives" (Baldwin and Erickson 2020, 4). As such, it forms both the historical condition and ongoing horizon through which racial capitalism unfolds on a planetary scale. The racial signature that Baldwin and Erickson identify in the Anthropocene—"the global colour line inscribed into planetary history recalibrated as geology" (Baldwin and Erickson 2020, 4)—becomes visible in some of ENI's corporate films. While these productions present themselves through narratives of benevolent development (ENI helping African nations progress and modernize), petro-modernity's universalizing and civilizing claims required constant maintenance of what Chipato and

Chandler identify as the “violence of antiblackness that patrols the border of the human” (Chipato and Chandler 2023, 167). For modernity to present itself as universal progress through technical mastery over nature, it needed to establish and police boundaries between those who count as fully “human” and those who do not. The films often demonstrate this boundary-making as an ongoing “tool of ontological stability” (Chipato and Chandler 2023, 167): by positioning African subjects as needing to be developed into modern technical subjects, they help maintain the fiction that Western technical knowledge represents a form universal human progress and actualization, rather than a specific violent form of organizing the world and accumulating resources.

Development and resource extraction were largely unchallenged pillars of postwar modernization at the time these films were made. Viewing them today brings into focus the colonial logics embedded in the project of making territories and bodies extractable, as well as how in turn such an operation still has material-discursive influences on the contemporary metabolic foundations of racial capitalism and the relations between the Global North and the South. This becomes particularly visible through Mattei’s vision of development, which explicitly positioned itself against what he termed economic colonialism. In a 1960 speech in Tunis, Mattei proposed that decolonization required both infrastructure and technical expertise: “I offer parity, co-management, the education of a technological elite that will make you the economic subject, rather than the object or passive receiver of a foreign initiative” (Mattei, cited in Scotto 2021, 89). Within a decade, ENI had established what Scotto describes as an incremental network of “more and less visible lines and nodes through which oil was extracted, transported, refined, and commercialized” across twenty-five newly independent African nations (Scotto 2021, 84). This expansion was justified through Mattei’s vision of offering an alternative to Anglo-American oil imperialism, while remaining fundamentally rooted in Western constructions of developmentalism.¹⁹

This is not intended as an anachronistic criticism: the political and economic culture of postwar developmentalism was indeed a dogma of its time, one that shaped how even ostensibly anticolonial (at least on paper) projects conceived of progress and modernization. As petro-culture theorist Stephanie LeMenager argues, petro-modernity itself created overlapping “media environments” sustained by petroleum infrastructure that made oil-dependent institutions and infrastructures seem natural and inevitable rather than historically contingent (LeMenager 2012, 65). ENI’s cultural apparatus worked in this sense to naturalize both the physical transformation of African territories and the remaking of African subjects as necessary steps toward a European-centered (both broadly and narrowly defined) “progress.” While scholarship on petro-media often emphasizes oil’s paradoxical cultural presence,²⁰ simultaneously everywhere and nowhere and visible mainly through its infrastructural footprints, ENI’s corporate films offer a different perspective. Unlike mainstream cinema in which oil appears obliquely through highways, gas stations, corporate design, and plastic commodities,²¹ as seen in Italian cinema during the 1950s–1960s economic miracle, which

¹⁹ For Giulia Scotto, “ENI’s parallel diplomacy understood the decolonization of Africa as a moment of possibility in which global power relations and alliances could be redefined, but also as the right moment for Italy to regain access to Africa’s wealth and emancipate itself from the international oil lobby. Italy’s access point to Africa’s postcolonial politics was the notion of ‘development,’ a Western-forged notion that, since the late colonial era, became the primary aspiration of independent African states. The importance of fossil fuels to activate—both literally and metaphorically—the engine of development was clear to both African leaders and to ENI” (Scotto 2021, 88).

²⁰ Oil “has a tendency to vanish into the background, invisible to narrative and so, too, to critique” (Szeman 2017, 283). See also Åberg, Ekberg, and Lidström 2023.

²¹ See Jury 2022; Boetzkes 2017; and Past 2020. See also Jacobson 2024, who provides an encompassing framework for a “cinema of extractions,” arguing for a return to formal analysis that is informed by the material and infrastructural conditions of a film’s creation. His method of tracing the reflexive links between a film’s

registered petro-modernity through social and spatial transformations, ENI's corporate films place extraction at their aesthetic and narrative center. Oil's infrastructural-material reality directly shapes their cinematography, montage, and mise-en-scène: it is a cinema of oil made by oil. The films were themselves part of the corporation's continental presence, produced on location alongside ENI's expanding African projects, and components of a cultural apparatus that worked in tandem with its physical networks of extraction, refinement, and distribution.

If petro-modernity refers to both a way of life structured around oil-dependent political institutions and a cultural-aesthetic experience that profoundly shapes modern imagination, ENI's project of petro-modernity through pipelines, refineries, and gas stations materially transformed African territories and necessarily generated its own cultural forms through films, advertising, and corporate imagery. Infrastructure and culture were inseparable not through strategic design but as an emergent quality of how petro-modernity unfolds. The company's documentary films and promotional materials thus naturalized the physical remaking of African landscapes, the ideological construction of the African subject as underdeveloped (or civilized *in potentia*), and the cultural narratives that made such transformations seem inevitable rather than historically defined.²²

***Oduroh* (1964) and the Equations of the Western World**

The relationship between ENI and filmmaker Gilbert Bovay began in 1962. The French director had been commissioned by the Swiss broadcaster Télévision Suisse Romande (TSR) to make a reportage-style documentary film on Enrico Mattei following his death in October of that year, and Bovay got in contact with ENI to access footage and documentation. The result was the documentary film *Mort d'un Condottiere* (*Death of a Condottiere*).²³

Following this experience, Bovay proposed to ENI and TSR to partner up for the production of another documentary to be broadcasted by TSR in Switzerland and to enter in competition for the UNESCO Kalinga Film Prize (Latini 2011, 93–94). As the remit of the Kalinga Prize emphasized international cooperation, particularly in the context of third-world countries, Bovay selected Ghana as the ideal location for his following film, with the intention, as he writes to ENI, “to highlight certain aspects of international cooperation and to underline, through the person of a young Ghanaian, and in the experience of your Institution, the problems posed by assistance to the Third World. So this is not a propaganda film, but a human and social reportage” (Latini 2011, 94). From 1964 to 1968, Gilbert Bovay produced in total four films for ENI: *Oduroh* (1964), *La Valle delle balene* (1965, *The Valley of the Whales*), *Uomini del petrolio*, and *Africa, nascita di un continente* (1968, *Africa, Birth of a Continent*). Bovay was a relatively successful TV-documentary director, technically proficient, and lacked the

substance of content (e.g., extracted materials as subject) and its substance of expression (the materials required for its production) can be particularly relevant to the analysis of corporate industrial media, a category that includes the ENI films studied here.

²² It's important to note that not all histories of petroleum infrastructure in Africa necessarily bear the same ideological connotations. Scotto reminds us why it is important to problematize this assertion as well: “we need to take the agencies and ‘emancipatory intentions’ of local actors seriously and judge their historical decision in their own terms and not as projects destined to recreate dependencies and colonial power structure imbalances. Only in this way can we recognize the serious efforts made during the post-independence era to envision a decolonial and pan-African future. Though this envisioned future never materialized, its intentions and aspirations—however idealistic and naïve they may have been—deserve to be explored and acknowledged” (Scotto 2024, 15).

²³ The film appeared on the program *Continents sans visa* (*Continents without a Visa*). Launched on November 6, 1959, the monthly tv news magazine *Continents without a Visa* became the flagship show of TSR in the 1960s. These major reports, shot in Switzerland and around the world, focus on political and social issues. The film can be accessed here: <https://www.rts.ch/archives/tv/information/continents-sans-visa/5060575-mort-dun-condottiere.html>.

authorial ambitions that had soured ENI's relationship with the famed Belgian industrial filmmaker Joris Ivens during the post-production of the documentary *L'Italia non è un paese povero* (1960, *Italy is not a Poor Country*).²⁴

Oduroh follows a young Ghanaian man's journey from his village to study at ENI's school (named after Mattei) in Metanopoli.²⁵ The film is structured in three main sections: Oduroh's arrival and initial bewilderment at Italian urban modernity; his technical education at ENI's facility where he learns alongside other students from Africa and Asia; and his return to Ghana where he begins working at the GHAIP refinery in the port city of Tema. The film ties his personal trajectory with broader political events, including references to Kwame Nkrumah²⁶ and scenes of Malcolm X speaking at the University of Accra, as well as sequences showing traditional Ashanti ceremonies. The film's colonial gaze expressed through the voiceover is self-evident throughout: among other things, it consistently exoticizes and infantilizes its titular character ("catapultato dalla savana agli aeroporti lisci e geometrici" [thrown from the savannah into smooth and geometrical airports]); presents African bodies as out of place in the spaces of Western modernity ("Milano è questa gente, queste donne. Diverse, inaccessibili. Veloci. Tanto meno grasse di quelle che si incontrano ad Accra. Ad Accra da lui non camminano con tanta sicurezza" [Milan is these people, these women. Different, inaccessible. Fast. So much less fat than the women one encounters in Accra. In Accra, they don't walk with such confidence]); imagines African societies as primitive and deprived ("nient'altro da fare che grattare la terra arida" [nothing else to do but scratch the arid earth]); and frames Africa itself as existing in a pre-modern temporality ("ricorda l'infanzia dell'Occidente" [reminds us of the childhood of Western civilization]). Even when attempting to celebrate Ghanaian traditional culture, the narration relies on tropes of colonial discourse, describing Africa as simultaneously "multiforme, esplosiva e sonnolenta, sotto alimentata, tribale e socialista. Appollaiata sul soprannaturale" (multiform, explosive and sleepy, undernourished, tribal and socialist. Perched on the supernatural). Ashanti spirituality and cosmologies are described with paternalistic contempt. Most tellingly, the film presents ENI's technical education as the only path from this supposed primitive state to modernity. In *Oduroh*, the body and subjectivity of the African individual are conceived as a raw material upon which to intervene in order to produce a fully realized citizen of modernity. By imagining and portraying an African subject's encounter with Italian industrial modernity,²⁷ *Oduroh* simultaneously celebrates Italy's own postwar transformation through hydrocarbon-powered development while establishing a racialized hierarchy of progress. The film's structure revolves around juxtapositions between "traditional" Ghanaian society and the vitality of consumer capitalism, with its protagonist's education at Metanopoli marking the transition between these states. The transformed Oduroh who returns to Ghana armed with technical knowledge becomes an embodiment of ENI's developmentalist vision, in which African self-determination is achieved through the adoption of extractive logic.²⁸

Through its construction of an African first encounter with European modernity, embodied here by the city of Milan, *Oduroh* exemplifies what Arturo Escobar identifies as "developmentalism as a discursive field," which, as such, produces concrete practices of thinking and acting through which the third world and its subjects are constructed as objects of

²⁴ See Peretti 2019.

²⁵ Metanopoli was a town built in 1952 by ENI: see Guidarini 2003.

²⁶ For a study of the development strategies pursued in Ghana from the mid-1940s under British colonial rule to the early independence period of the 1960s, see Jackson 2022.

²⁷ Ermanno Olmi's *Il posto* (1961, *The Job*) employs similar visual strategies: see Daniele 2014.

²⁸ Daggett (2019) historicizes the concept of "energy" itself, arguing that it was constructed in the nineteenth century as a political logic that functioned as an instrument of imperial governance. This framework established a global hierarchy of civilizational advancement, newly defined through the efficient management of fuel and labor, which in turn naturalized a specific Western epistemology of work.

intervention (Escobar 1995, 11). The film stages this construction through its protagonist's journey to study at ENI's Metanopoli facility, where he must learn what the screenplay describes as "regole precise per questo mondo preciso" (precise rules for this precise world) and the "equazioni dell'Occidente" (equations of the Western world). This technical education is presented as a form of corporate training and as a crucial "means of mental production": part of capitalism's "software" for transforming webs of life into profit-making opportunities (Moore 2023, 65).²⁹

The education program promoted in *Oduroh* served ENI's strategic purposes on multiple levels: it helped the company compete against its rivals of the global oil industry by creating relationships with future leaders in resource-rich nations, while simultaneously producing subjects who would view extractivism as the natural path to national development. The screenplay's cataloging of its protagonist's supposed incomprehension of the basic urban features of Milan³⁰ works to establish the technological gap that ENI's civilizing mission promises to bridge. At Metanopoli, for which only fifty-five students were selected each year from across the Global South, this transformation is portrayed as simultaneously intellectual and corporeal. Students took courses in technical,³¹ economic, and administrative subjects,³² along with courses of general knowledge (Camatini 1963).³³

At Metanopoli, the students from the third world begin to free themselves "dall'arretratezza per mezzo di definizioni" (from their backwardness through definitions) undergoing what the film presents as both technical and epistemological transformation. But this transformation is, of course, entirely imagined through ENI's petro-colonial framework, within which "backward" African subjects must be remade to serve extractive capitalist projects. Moving away from Milan, the script constructs Africa, specifically Ghana, through more primitivist tropes: a place where "il *juju*, la magia, domina l'anima nera che concepisce senza sforzo come un uomo possa trasformarsi in leone, leopardo, serpente, persino coccodrillo" (*Juju*, magic, dominates the black soul that conceives without effort how a man can transform himself into a lion, leopard, snake, even crocodile); a space of "rachitici sotto alimentati" (hunger-stricken, rickety) villages that can only be saved through entrance into petro-modernity. The reductive representation of spiritual practices and subjugated epistemologies as obstacles to be overcome through technical education betrays a developmental ideology that could only comprehend non-Western ways of knowing and being as hurdles to progress. By framing complex indigenous onto-epistemologies as symptoms of underdevelopment rather than as valid forms of world-making, the film makes it impossible, as Escobar notes in talking about development discourse, to "conceptualize social reality in other terms" than those that require ENI's intervention (Escobar 1995, 5).

Perhaps the film's most surprising sequences focus on the supposed "completion" of ENI's civilizing mission through *Oduroh*'s return to Ghana and his work at the Tema refinery. Here,

²⁹ The contemporary Mattei Plan continues to feature education as a central component. The government's June 2025 report details the creation of new managerial training centers in Africa, as well as a residential "Institute of Advanced Science for Agriculture" in Ferrara, Italy. See Governo Italiano 2025.

³⁰ "Il traffico delle piccole vetture, la passerella a rotelle, il ventre delle autobotti...Milano, che si attraversa mettendosi in fila come le anatre, su delle righe bianche. E questa mattina ha visto dei colombe che si chiamano con un cenno della mano e che nessuno mangia qui. A casa sua si mangerebbero" (The traffic of small cars, the mechanical stairs, the belly of the gas tankers...Milan, a city that is navigated by queuing up like ducks on white stripes. Today he has seen some pigeons being called with a hand gesture but nobody eats them here, back home they would be gladly eaten).

³¹ For example, geophysical prospecting, field exploitation, oil and gas transport and distribution, scientific and technical problems of other traditional energy sources and nuclear power.

³² Some courses included, for instance, economics and economic policy of oil and gas and other energy sources, company organization and policy, business management, production and control techniques, and organization.

³³ General knowledge courses included history and methodology of science, cybernetics, automation, industrial sociology, Italian and comparative petroleum and energy law, and industrial health problems.

the screenplay attempts to reconcile two seemingly contradictory imperatives: the preservation of African “authenticity” and sovereignty, on the one hand, and the necessity of technical and petro-capitalist modernization on the other:

Oduroh però non lo dimentica. Le sue radici sono qui. È un Ashanti...Egli sa che la sua piccola porzione di universo è qui. Non gli piacciono quelli che partono e dimenticano da dove sono venuti. Perché imitare gli europei? La mia pelle è nera e mi distingue come il mio accento. Perché non devo sviluppare la mia personalità di Africano? ...Questo villaggio assomiglierà un giorno ai villaggi che ho visto in Italia.

(Oduroh doesn't forget that his roots are here. He is an Ashanti....He knows his small portion of the universe is here. He dislikes people that leave and forget the place they came from. Why imitate the Europeans? My skin is black and it's distinctive, just like my accent. Why should I not develop my African personality? ...One day, this village will resemble the towns that I have seen in Italy.)

The film suggests that true African self-determination can emerge through, rather than against, ENI's presence. This resolution is materialized in the Tema refinery sequences, where “il Ghana raffina oggi tutto il petrolio di cui ha bisogno...Un giorno gli uomini del Ghana rimpiazzeranno del tutto gli uomini bianchi, dei quali sono divenuti amici” (Ghana today refines all the oil it needs...One day the Ghanaian people will completely replace the white men with whom they became friends in the meantime). The promise of future independence remains eternally deferred, always requiring more technical assistance, more infrastructure, more expertise.

The final section of *Oduroh* crystallizes a defining feature of ENI's petro-politics of the 1950s and 60s: the strategic mobilization of third-world nationalism and anticolonial rhetoric in its competition against Western oil giants like Esso, Shell, and British Petroleum. This approach, which Mattei himself termed the “politicization of oil,” had achieved its most significant success in the creation of the Italian-Iranian Oil Consortium in the 1950s.³⁴ By presenting more favorable terms to developing nations, ENI sought to position itself as an ally in anticolonial struggles while simultaneously expanding its extractive reach. In *Oduroh*, ENI's self-positioning as an ally for African liberation reaches its rhetorical climax in the appearance of Malcolm X:

Tutti questi applausi all'università di Accra sono indirizzati al loro capo, Malcom X. Quanto accade qui può far capire il movimento profondo che scuote oggi il continente nero e tutti gli uomini di colore...L'Africa ascolta attentamente tutto quanto le giunge dall'Alabama, da Città del Capo o

³⁴ This deal is thus celebrated in the film *Uomini del petrolio*: “L'ingresso dell'Agip in Iran, uno dei maggiori paesi petroliferi del mondo, segnò una svolta importantissima. L'Italia è entrata per ultima nella corsa al petrolio, offriva ad un paese produttore una formula nuova che lo associava su un piano di parità e di dignità nello sfruttamento delle risorse del sottosuolo. Nasceva così la società mista italo iraniana. Una collaborazione che si è sviluppata di recente. Sono stati assegnati alla ricerca nuove e importantissime aree nel Golfo Persico, le quali hanno portato l'Italia in una delle prime posizioni nella febbrile gara per il petrolio” (Agip's entry into Iran, one of the world's largest oil countries, marked a very important turning point. Italy was the last to enter the oil race, it offered a producing country a new formula that did associate it on an equal and dignified basis in exploiting the resources of the subsoil. Thus, the Italian Iranian joint company was born. A collaboration that has recently developed. New and very important areas have been assigned to research in the Persian Gulf, which have brought Italy to one of the top positions in the feverish race for oil).

dall'Angola. Sono cose che la riguardano e lei vuol sapere tutto. Sente come una sorta di onda che ha attraversato l'Atlantico. Sente il rancore, l'odio degli umiliati. Egli dice loro che non si sente straniero ad Accra. Malcom X evoca ad ascoltatori attenti la sua lunga assenza, il suo lungo viaggio iniziato dalle coste di Elmina, che essi conoscono e che si visitano con delle guide la domenica... Malcom X racconta la sua vita in America. Vuole creare nuovi legami tra la gente di colore. Bisogna che ad Accra si capisca questo, poiché il jet permette agli uomini di muoversi. Ormai l'Africa è attiva, aperta al mondo, percorsa da idee e correnti nuove.

(All these cheers at the University of Accra are directed at their leader, Malcolm X. What is happening here can help explain the profound movement currently shaking the black continent and all men of color...Africa is listening intently to everything that reaches it from Alabama, Cape Town, or Angola. These are things that concern it, and it wants to know everything. It feels a sort of wave that has crossed the Atlantic. It feels the resentment, the hatred of the humiliated. He tells them that he does not feel like a stranger in Accra. Malcolm X evokes his long absence, his long journey that began from the coasts of Elmina, which they know and which they visit with guides on Sundays, to his attentive listeners...Malcolm X recounts his life in America. He wants to forge new bonds among people of color. This must be understood in Accra, as jet planes allow people to move. Now Africa is active, open to the world, crossed by new ideas and currents.)

The film's juxtaposition of Malcolm X's revolutionary politics with ENI's development projects makes evident how the company's cultural apparatus saw a new kind of African subject whose Blackness would be compatible with, rather than resistant to, extractive modernization, and as such, collaborative with Italian capital. Malcolm X's critique of American racism is brought into dialogue with African resource nationalism, so that the film can suggest that Black revolutionary consciousness emerges through, rather than against, petroleum-led development: Pan-African politics and oil infrastructure become inseparable elements of a single liberatory vision. This call for an "extractivist blackness" produces unsolvable contradictions, as it can only imagine Black liberation through Western industrial capitalism, terraforming, and resourcism. The film presents its protagonist as exemplary of this new African subjectivity: fluent in both "traditional" community life and technical expertise, a mediator between village spirituality and petroleum infrastructure. The final image of its protagonist as "a un tempo forte e fragile. Solo, solo come l'Africa, con un mondo da rifare" (at once strong and fragile. Alone, alone like Africa, with a world to rebuild) captures the fundamental instability of ENI's attempt to reconcile Black radical consciousness with extractive modernization. This tension, to paraphrase extractivism scholar Alberto Acosta, becomes visible today from the fact that "extractivism has been a constant in the economic, social and political life of many countries in the global South", as the "dependency on the metropolitan centres via the extraction and export of raw materials has remained practically unaltered to this day...The extractivist mode of accumulation seems to be at the heart of the production policies of both neoliberal and progressive governments" (Acosta 2013, 63).³⁵ Through cultural productions like *Oduroh*, ENI anticipated this contradiction of neo-

³⁵ See also Svampa 2019; Watts 2004.

extractivism, opportunistically presenting resource extraction as the privileged path for actualizing modern Black political consciousness.³⁶

***Uomini del Petrolio* (1965): The Extractive View.**

*Uomini del petrolio*³⁷ presents the daily life of ENI's workforce, laborers and technicians, across extraction sites in Italy, Nigeria, Iran, Egypt, and Libya. The documentary characterizes oil work as an adventurous calling, stating, among other things: "Non tutti possono fare questo mestiere. Occorre unire all'amore dell'avventura una solida preparazione tecnica, uno spirito di sacrificio non comune e un fisico eccezionale" (Not everyone can do this job. You need to combine love of adventure with solid technical preparation, an uncommon spirit of sacrifice and an exceptional physique). The oil workers are portrayed as cosmopolitan "petroleum hermits" maneuvering technologically sophisticated machinery in what the film frames as dangerous frontier locations: offshore ocean drilling platforms, the Sahara Desert, the Zagros Mountains of Iran, and the Nigerian rainforest. Through this framing, the film offers a vision of international collaboration under Italian technical supervision, positioning ENI as a global high-tech corporation, as essential to Italy's modernization as it is for the economic development for the countries in which it carries on its extractive projects.

The film's technical execution reinforces this frontier narrative. Departing from conventional industrial cinema, Bovay enlisted cinematographer Massimo Dallamano, known for his work on Westerns like Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and Mario Costa's *Buffalo Bill* (1965) (Latini 2011, 110). This choice ensures the oil workers' lives appear as adventure narratives familiar to mainstream cinema audiences.³⁸ Differently from commercial cinema that might obscure or mediate extractive processes, *Uomini del petrolio*'s position as a corporate-industrial film allows it to display directly how ENI's technological apparatus participated in transforming African landscapes into extractive zones. The film documents this transformation primarily through its aerial helicopter shots, which perform the crucial first phases of extraction: mapping, surveying, and prospecting.³⁹

The voiceover explicitly links helicopter shots to the search of oil: "Da quando si è deciso di perforare la terra per cavarne energia, una piattaforma come questa è lo strumento necessario e perfetto per cercare il petrolio. L'elicottero che va e viene dall'isola alla terraferma fa parte ormai del piccolo grande mondo del petrolio. È indispensabile come la sonda, il trapano, il casco" (Since the decision was made to drill the earth to extract energy, a platform like this is the necessary and perfect instrument for searching for petroleum. The helicopter that comes and goes from the island to the mainland has become part of the small great world of petroleum. It is indispensable like the probe, the drill, the hardhat). Focusing on Egypt, the narration proceeds:

Qui tutto è tranquillo, patriarcale. Al tecnico non interessa il paesaggio, lo conosce molto bene. Cerca invece, con un'esplorazione di superficie, qualche indizio sulla natura del sottosuolo. È per questo il motore gira, la schiuma

³⁶ Meloni's Mattei Plan displays continuities with this approach, blending paternalistic framings of African potential with the rhetoric of "non-predatory" cooperation, thus reflecting an adaptation to current geopolitical realities, while positioning Italy distinctly from other global actors whose extractive histories are more openly contested.

³⁷ The film was awarded the three top awards at the Sixth National Industrial Film Festival (Latini 2011, 111).

³⁸ A notable cinematographic device used by Bovay and Dallamano in this film is the usage of freeze frames within the editing (Latini 2011, 110).

³⁹ For other examples of ENI films on prospection, see Peretti 2023.

ribolle, lo sguardo si spinge a cercare altre cose, altre cose che possono stare sotto la terra. Terra screpolata. Siamo nella zona del Mar Rosso. Arriva una carovana e una squadra sismica che sta per iniziare il lavoro. Quando si alza una piccola gru si scava la terra battuta...Questo è un sistema di prospezione che utilizza un insieme di procedimenti che consentono di conoscere la disposizione degli strati della crosta terrestre. Se ne ricaveranno dati essenziali per stabilire il punto preciso. Dove poi si farà la perforazione per la ricerca del petrolio.

(Here everything is quiet, patriarchal. The technician is not interested in the landscape, he knows it very well. Instead, he looks, with a surface exploration, for some clue on the nature of the subsoil. He's there for this reason. The engine runs, the foam seethes, the gaze reaches out to look for other things that may lie under the earth. Cracked earth. We are by the Red Sea. A caravan arrives and a seismic team is about to start working. A small crane rises. The earth is excavated. This is an exploration system that uses a set of procedures that make it possible to know the arrangement of the layers of the earth's crust. Essential data will be obtained to establish the precise point. Where the drilling will be done for oil exploration.)

As a work of corporate-industrial cinema emerging directly from and serving industrial organization, *Uomini del petrolio* presents the aesthetic apparatus of extractivism with aerial shots that materialize what spatial researcher Samia Henni identifies as the persistent “ideas that deserts are empty, absent of life,” serving “industrialized subjectivities and exploitative authorities...constantly searching for and in need of so-called empty places to be filled through occupation, extraction, mining, production and accumulation” (Henni 2022, 11). For instance, in a section of the film the voiceover states: “Siamo in Libia, l'antico paese africano osserva senza ben comprendere cosa facciano i tecnici armati di treppiede che misurano il vuoto e guardano la sabbia fin dove essa si confonde con l'orizzonte” (We are in Libya: the ancient African country observes without really understanding what the technicians do, armed with tripods that measure the void and look at the sand until it merges with the horizon). Aerial perspectives also very explicitly immerse the film audience in a first person experience of the extractive view that “sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking” (Gómez-Barris 2017, 5). The aerial gaze performs a dual function: it configures territory as abstract, mappable space while simultaneously marking it as available for exploitation. This visual strategy performs a methodological scalar collapse: the technician's individual survey becomes the institutional gaze of the corporation, which remaps a continental territory to serve a national economy, ultimately inscribing a planetary, geological change. This visualization strategy “facilitates the reorganization of territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractable data and natural resources for material and immaterial accumulation” (Gómez-Barris 2017, 5). The film thus on one hand demonstrates the centrality of “visual technics” (Moore 2023, 66) to extractive capitalism's operations, particularly “mapping, surveying, and photographing planetary spaces in ways that would reveal profitable natures while cleansing the environmental imaginary of contentious struggles between landlord and peasant, colonizers and colonized” (Moore 2023, 66). But on the other hand, the competence itself of this demonstration, enabled by corporate-industrial cinema's direct relationship to extraction, makes visible the violence inherent to this visual regime. Unlike other types of cinema that might mediate or obscure these extractive logics, corporate-industrial film is happy to reveal with particular clarity how the helicopter-mounted camera performs the survey-prospecting gaze of extraction itself, putting the Italian spectator in a vertical position of mastery over a

landscape that is not “their own” but is instead a landscape that exists in lands far away in space and development-time.

The aerial prospecting gaze becomes tangible as actual territorial transformation when the film moves to Nigeria. The voiceover introduces this new geography to the audience:

Antichissimi canti ritmati. Un paesaggio che scorre lentamente. Ecco la Nigeria, il paese del fiume Niger, l’Africa delle cartoline illustrate. Tutto qui assomiglia all’idea più convenzionale del continente nero. Capanne di paglia a perdita d’occhio, costruite con una certa grazia per una lunga vita tribale...In Nigeria più di 50 milioni di uomini vivono immersi in un clima umido. Lagune, insenature risuonano di strani gridi. Per i tecnici del petrolio, il programma stabilito negli uffici con l’aria condizionata comincia qui. Sono qui per esplorare un angolo di terra ostile agli esseri umani.

(Very ancient rhythmic chants. A landscape that flows slowly. Here is Nigeria, the country of the Niger River, the illustrated Africa of postcards. Everything here resembles the most conventional idea of the dark continent. Straw huts as far as the eye can see, built with a certain grace for tribal life. In Nigeria more than 50 million people live immersed in a humid climate. Lagoons, inlets, they resonate with strange cries. For oil technicians, the program set up in air-conditioned offices starts here. They are here to explore a corner of land hostile to human beings.)

The voiceover’s description of the Niger Delta characterizes these spaces as “land hostile to human beings” and, while acknowledging that 50 million people live there, the film enacts its violent bias: the denial of humanity to those who inhabit potential extraction sites. This verticality-induced erasure of existing communities and their forms of life becomes a precondition for representing these territories as empty, valuable only for their extractable resources and their potential contribution to Italy’s own modernization project.

What is concealed in the depths of the ancient forest is the potential of infrastructure, a future road. “La terra comincia a rivelare la sua natura...La foresta geme, resiste, ma cederà all’assalto dei mezzi cingolati. Un giorno non lontano, in questi luoghi, dove a malapena filtra un po’ di luce, passerà una strada” (The earth begins to reveal its nature...The forest groans, resists, but will yield to the assault of the tracked vehicles. One day soon, in these places where barely a little light filters through, a road will pass). The sequence unfolds under the watchful eye of what the film calls the “libellula gialla dei petrolieri” (the oilmen’s yellow dragonfly): the helicopter that moments before had surveyed the land from above now oversees its terraforming. The film’s language is, once again, striking in its directness:

La Nigeria, condizionata geograficamente e storicamente dal grande fiume, vede qui trasformarsi il suo aspetto ancestrale. Ci si rende conto delle difficoltà che separano il segno di matita tracciato su una carta dalla trasformazione di quel segno in realtà. Tutto qui è stato fatto dagli uomini del petrolio. La sonda, saldamente ancorata alla Terra, è un piccolo triangolo di metallo circondato da una foresta, derubata del suo silenzio.

(Nigeria, conditioned geographically and historically by the great river, sees its ancestral aspect transformed here. One realizes the difficulties that separate the pencil mark traced on a map from the transformation of that mark into reality. Everything here has been done by the oilmen. The drilling rig, firmly anchored

to the earth, is a small triangle of metal surrounded by a forest robbed of its silence.)

This rhetoric of achievement and transformation through technological force embodies the developmentalist fallacy (Gómez-Barris 2017, xviii) *par excellence*, the equation of environmental destruction with civilization itself. The camera lingers on the heavy machinery cutting through the forest, celebrating rather than concealing the violence of this territorial reorganization.⁴⁰ Here again, the industrial nature of the film allows it to present without mediation what today's ENI might feel compelled to soften, justify, or conceal, namely the crude mechanics of how extractive capitalism clears and claims territory.

As Gómez-Barris notes, extractivism first had to render territories and peoples extractible through “a matrix of symbolic, physical, and representational violence” (Gómez-Barris 2017, 6). What makes *Uomini del petrolio* remarkable is how openly it displays this matrix, as the symbolic violence of the survey-prospecting gaze and the physical violence of deforestation are presented as complementary phases of a single civilizing mission. The cleared forest gives way to the construction of extractive infrastructure. Roads, pipelines, and drilling equipment emerge from the newly “emptied” territory, with the film presenting this transformation through a rhythm of destruction and construction that accompanies the inevitable triumph of progress. Infrastructure materializes as both the goal and justification of terraforming.

Contrasting ENI's triumphant vision of territorial transformation with the present reality of the Niger Delta (with particular focus in the state of Bayelsa) exposes the devastating consequences of the oilmen's civilizing mission. According to the Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission's findings,⁴¹ Bayelsa state alone has experienced the equivalent of an Exxon Valdez-size spill every year for the past fifty years, with many communities exposed to highly toxic oil-related contaminants like chromium, which is present in groundwater at over one thousand times the World Health Organization limit. In some areas, concentrations of noxious chemicals exceed safe levels by a factor of one million (The Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission 2023). The film's territorial transformation through aerial prospecting and physical clearing has materialized in the loss of forty percent of the region's mangrove forests, while gas flaring and other polluting activities have elevated particulate matter to over ten times the allowable limits. The violence of this transformation is particularly evident in ENI's modus operandi: between 2014 and 2017, its ninety-two-kilometer Tebidaba-Brass pipeline alone experienced 262 spills, with regulators warning the company 162 times to improve surveillance before any action was taken. Indeed, ENI and Shell together account for seventy-five percent of all spill incidents in the Niger Delta between 2006 and 2020. *Uomini del petrolio* thus captures a crucial moment in ENI's role as a terraforming agent in the African Anthropocene, documenting with unnerving directness how the company's technological apparatus helped to transform these territories into sacrifice zones of petro-chemical capitalism. Such transformations, however, are inseparable from the production of specific political realities. As Michael Watts (2004) has shown for the Niger Delta, the creation of oil enclaves violently reconfigures state-society relations around the control of resources, with devastating consequences for human and environmental wellbeing.

⁴⁰ A famous example of this rhetoric can be found in the opening sequences of *Il pianeta acciaio* (dir. Emilio Marsili, 1962, *The Steel Planet*).

⁴¹ The Bayelsa State Commission calls the socioecological damage inflicted by oil corporations (mostly Shell and ENI) “an environmental genocide,” and denounces the extreme degradation produced in fifty years of extraction operations in the area: “Bayelsa, in the Niger Delta, in Southern Nigeria, is in the grip of a human and environmental catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. At one time, the area was home to one of the largest mangrove forests on the planet; an area of unrivalled ecological value. Today, it is one of the most polluted places on Earth. Oil extraction and its impact is the overwhelmingly evident cause of this disaster” (The Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission 2023).

Conclusion

Studying these corporate films allows us to assess ENI's historical role in Africa and to expose the foundational processes through which extractive capitalism enacted its material and ideological logic, even within apparently anticolonial geopolitical maneuvers. Drawing from energy humanities theorist Brent Ryan Bellamy's work, such cultural representations exemplify "the aesthetic textuality of oil," mediating "both oil's impact on cultural production and the development of particularly oil-bound social formations and habits" (Bellamy 2020, 64). Moreover, their interscalar propensity connecting subjects, territorial transformations, and planetary flows of extraction offers a unique glimpse into how petro-modernity operated across multiple registers simultaneously in a foundational moment of petro-capitalism.

A function that is specific to ENI's African films is that they serve as visual archives of newly produced contact zones where bodies and territories, technical expertise and indigenous knowledge, European and African epistemologies, and multiple scales collide together, revealing how the construction of Blackness as underdevelopment itself was inseparable from the production of extractable landscapes. As Mary Louise Pratt theorized, "contact zones" are spaces where "peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 1992, 8). As Marisol De la Cadena and Arturo Escobar note in their recent proposal of pluriversal contact zones as spaces of onto-epistemological excess, these zones produce not simply a third hybrid formation but rather a dynamic in which each world "became self-different from what it had been, while continuing to be itself and also with the other" (De la Cadena and Escobar 2023, 31). ENI's films document this process of epistemic and territorial co-constitution, showing, from the perspective of the prospecting helicopter, how Western developmentalism informed and assisted the transformation of territories into sacrifice zones of extractive violence. Perhaps this is a way to address Amitav Ghosh's foundational question about the oil encounter: "So why...has this encounter proved so imaginatively sterile?" (Ghosh 1992). The answer may very well be that the cultural traces of such an encounter had to be searched for where it made more sense, in the cinema of the contact zones, which had been hiding in plain sight in the archives of oil corporations for decades.

The return of Mattei's specter in Italian geopolitics is a strong indicator of the enduring power of the extractive logic of developmentalism, now reformulated for twenty-first-century neoliberal praxis through green transition narratives⁴² and antimigratory discourse.⁴³ Corporate films seen through environmental humanities interpretative frameworks allow us to trace how infrastructure, processes of racialization, and the production of sacrifice zones worked together historically, as well as how the visual apparatus of petro-modernity continues to shape Italy's relationship with Africa through new configurations of the same extractive logic.

To conclude where we started, Meloni's Piano Mattei reveals that the project of rendering African subjects and territories extractible through a dual action of body-territorial

⁴² The first draft of this article was completed in early 2024. Developments since then align with the historical and discursive continuities this article traces. The Italian government's June 2025 implementation report features the "Lobito Corridor" as a key project for transporting "critical minerals" crucial for green and digital transitions (Governo Italiano 2025). This corridor serves as an additional contemporary example of the dynamics analyzed herein. While promoted by G7 nations (including Italy) as a "game-changer" for local value addition, early critical assessments highlight the risk of it becoming a conduit for "modern plundering" by simplifying the export of unprocessed raw materials (Wala Chabala and Hofmeyr 2024). This dynamic of pitting a rhetoric of development against a logic of extraction directly mirrors the function of ENI's historical cinema. Furthermore, concerns over human rights violations and environmental degradation along the corridor underscore the ongoing production of sacrifice zones inherent in such large-scale infrastructure projects.

⁴³ For recent analysis connecting historical ENI infrastructure projects (specifically the TAZAMA pipeline) to the contemporary context of the Mattei Plan, see Scotto 2024b.

terraformation, at once cultural and material, never really stopped. Meloni reminds us why, according to her own vision, Africa is not “a poor continent at all”:

Mattei amava dire che “l’ingegno è vedere possibilità dove gli altri non ne vedono.” Dove altri vedevano difficoltà, Mattei vedeva un’opportunità. E ci ha insegnato che era possibile coniugare l’esigenza italiana di rendere sostenibile la sua crescita con quella delle Nazioni partner di conoscere una stagione di libertà, di sviluppo, di progresso. Noi oggi vogliamo ripartire da quella intuizione e scrivere insieme una nuova pagina di questo racconto.

A monte occorre smontare alcune narrazioni distorte, come quella che vorrebbe l’Africa un Continente povero. Perché non è così. L’Africa non è affatto un Continente povero: detiene il trenta per cento delle risorse minerarie del mondo; detiene il sessanta per cento delle terre coltivabili. Il sessanta per cento della sua popolazione ha un’età inferiore ai venticinque anni, è il continente più giovane del mondo, e questo lo rende anche una terra dalle enormi potenzialità di capitale umano. Ma si tratta anche di un continente immenso, che racchiude al suo interno mille peculiarità e dunque anche necessità molto diverse tra loro.

(Mattei was fond of saying that “ingenuity is seeing possibilities where others see none.” Where others saw difficulties, Mattei saw opportunities. He taught us that it was possible to combine Italy’s need to make its growth sustainable with the need of partner nations to experience a time of freedom, development, and progress. Today, we want to build on that intuition and write a new page of this story, together.

Certain distorted narratives need to be dismantled first, like the one of Africa allegedly being a poor continent, because that is not the case. Africa is not a poor continent at all: it has thirty percent of the world’s mineral resources and sixty percent of its arable land. Sixty percent of its population is under the age of twenty-five, making it the world’s youngest continent, and this also means it has enormous potential in terms of human capital.) (Meloni 2024)

Even in its unveiling to the world, the plan continues the inescapable drive to produce extractive subjectivities by presenting Africa as a body-territory whose value for the Global North derives from multiple interconnected potentials: its mineral resources, arable land (marked for the prospecting view of the oilmen), along with its youth, the human capital; the Odurohs of today, waiting to be transformed into agents of extractivism’s next frontier.

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