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# In the Middle of it All: Words on and with Peter Mettler

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Peter Mettler's work raises more questions than it answers, this is his documentary mode. It makes for a singular blend of scientific, social and personal inquiry coupled with an attitude of open curiosity towards the workings of the world. For this reason, Mettler's approach to filmmaking can be read in contradistinction to a pervasive 'expository' tendency within documentary filmmaking that insists on the communicative totality of a given set of (political) circumstances. By this, I am referring to the framing of a political situation's complexity so that it neatly coheres with filmic and pedagogical forms - forms that when mutually standardized, lend themselves to one another. Pre-established, standardized film form, meaning an approach to constructing the visual organization of a given film that is divorced from immersion within the political circumstances being communicated (separation of form [of the film] and content [of the political situation]). Pre-established, standardized pedagogical form, meaning a didacticism that rests on the transfer of important information from the filmmaker (posited as knowledge-bearing) to the audience (posited as in need of a lesson). Often, film form and pedagogical form coalesce towards this expository pole of documentary filmmaking resulting in a number of generic tropes: the talking head expert, the authoritative voiceover of a 'respectable' and well-known person who lends their voice to 'the cause' of the documentary, and a patchwork of footage assembled after-the-fact in order to dramatize the event through the foregrounding of 'significant' moments abstracted out from their lived duration and relationality. While *the message* of these films is often

commendable in spirit, we're frequently left with a tired aesthetic subsumed under the strict pedagogical aim of communicating that very message. Lost in the communication is the possibility for an experimental film form immanent to the politicality of the event – a film form with a non-didactic mode of address, that 'subjects' its spectator around the film's very *lack of information*. Such a mode of subjection initiates a mode of questioning that won't take a final answer for an answer.

I wouldn't bother to foreground how Mettler's work differentiates itself from this expository tendency that structures itself around the communicability of 'political issues' if it were not for the fact that Mettler has made the most prominent of activist documentaries on the Alberta tar sands – a subject that has lent itself to so many documentaries of this expository type. *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands* (2009) features Mettler's understated voiceover removed from all penchant for directives, his lingering camera that refuses to cut on action, and his propensity to take the longest shot possible in order to evoke the impossibility of perceiving a given political totality. These formal strategies co-compose to produce a socially committed documentary which suggests that the crafting of techniques that could lead the way out of the ecological crisis embodied by the tar sands is intimately bound up in the very (im)possibility of perceiving the sands and their effects in their totality. *Petropolis* proposes that one of the many tactics for stopping the tar sands project and growing the political will to construct viable green alternatives for global energy production lies in finding the artistic means for expressing the infinitely large. Mettler is all too aware of representation's limits in this regard, he expresses the infinitely large by making it felt, not by making it frame-able content. Mettler's camera enacts this thought-in-motion by adopting an aerial perspective from a helicopter, by sweeping great breadths of exploited terrain below, by accessing the most 'unnatural of perspectives' in order to understand the most vulgar of manipulations of the 'natural world'; in other words, by aiming to make felt the visually and representationally ineffable: the 'ecological-political' situation in its entirety. In making felt that which lies beyond the field of vision and beyond the realm of representation, the constraints of perspective are used as enabling constraints to foster a political re-imagination of the possible.

Despite Mettler's preoccupation with the limits of the frame and what lies beyond it, a trait that can at times lend itself to a meditative, bordering on supernatural tone, his cinema remains secular and sober. Documentaries such as *Picture of Light* (1994), which films an escapade to see the northern lights and *Gambling, Gods and LSD*, which tracks peoples' search for altered states of consciousness, never spin off from the real of the social into the transcendental of the sublime. I would say that Mettler's aesthetic borders on the scientific if only the essence of his approach wasn't so opposed to being bound by hypothesis. Somewhat like a microscope or telescope, Mettler's camera brings into the spectrum of human perception visions otherwise beyond its unaided capacity for sight (like a time-lapsed sequence of the northern lights captured by leaving a camera outside in arctic temperatures overnight). Yet in dwelling on what can be seen via technological intervention, Mettler's camera maintains a keen sense that what is contained and presented by the frame-bound image is never enough to come to any hard and fast conclusions (whether they be scientific, social, political or otherwise). Not because the image is imbued with an inherent, medium-specific *lack* – a mourning for the reality it can only represent via the mediation of the apparatus – but because *the limit* of perception that renders perception operative must also delimit, abstract out a perception from the totality of the world perceived. The inability to 'see all' either with our own eyes or with the aid of a camera need not be lamented. For as Mettler demonstrates, the outside of the frame, the more than is perceived, necessitates the perpetual resituating of oneself, and one's perspective vis-à-vis the world in order to come to terms with the more-than of one's environment. Resituating one's perspective in the face of the more-than of one's perception then functions as an auto-critique of the self's will to scopic omnipotency. If the ability to see the world with absolute clarity is foreclosed, aesthetically rendered an impossibility in line with the inner limits of perception, then so too is the possibility of the standardized subject who was to be the recipient of the didactic approach to expository documentary. And there lies in this foreclosure a kernel of truth not at all connected with the indexical veracity of photography, but rather a truth about the limits of the act of (cinematographically) bearing witness, of having been a participant who was made felt in the becoming of a political ecology. In making felt that the

'document' of the documentary is as much in the off-screen as it is in the on-screen space, the cinema stays true to the ecology's non-reducibility to being explained, packaged, or used as a directive to whatever or whoever's political ends.

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AS: Adam Szymanski

PM: Peter Mettler

AS: You have said that your film *Picture of Light* is about "what people believe in and how we relate to each other."

Yet I see the film as not only being about how people relate to one another but also about how people relate to their broader surroundings.

When making a film, how important is it for you as the director to look beyond simply a human drama, and furthermore, beyond 'the human' as narrative subject or thematic focal point?

PM: I think it's almost my *modus operandi*. Relativity and association – where we stand in respect to the infinitely small and the infinitely large – is important to my work. An astronomer whose name I forget, he put it like this: that the human in terms of size proportion is exactly half way between the atom and the stars in the universe, or something like that. That in proportion, we are in the middle of it all. It's certainly interesting to think about.

My films try to create relativity and to say, "yeah, we're significant but we're also insignificant." We tend to think we run the show but we just have our place in it.

AS: Your films often exist on a scale that oscillates between the human, the larger-than-human and the smaller-than human. Since you also work as the cinematographer on your films, that must raise the question of what to photograph and what distance you want to take from the subject-matter – let alone what the subject-matter even is; if it's the human, the microscopic (the

infinitely small), the telescopic (the infinitely large), etc. How do you decide what to put in front of the camera if the film's interest is beyond this human scale?

PM: In the case of the northern lights [the focus of *Picture of Light*] it's obvious they are up in space and it's the result of the sun's rays that react with the Earth's magnetic field in order to create light, like in a fluorescent tube. And so again, there's this very specific reason for going there. And then in *The End of Time*, it's the idea of travelling light, of the beginning of the universe, of the Big Bang and how far we can look into time via looking into outer space. So in fact, there is a specific reason for showing what I do in each film.

AS: Much of your cinematography is double mediated by technology in some way. For example, in *Picture of Light* there's that sequence where there's the contraption that you've set up to leave outside and capture the northern lights in a way that no human cinematographer could, since no one could ever actually stand outside with a camera for that long. In this instance, it's the camera on a specially designed mount, and in *Petropolis* the camera is remote controlled and attached to the bottom of a helicopter. Where does the impetus to perceive things that the human eye can't perceive come from?

PM: If we start from the very beginning, if there's no recorded image then you only see with your eyes. As soon as there is technology that offers the possibility of recording an image, everything's different. The permutations of an image that can be recorded have been multiplying and getting more complex and taking our eye to places where we haven't been able to go which has increased our understanding of the world, whether that's going into microscopic interiors of our own bodies or aerial views of the ground that we live on. It's interesting to see art from before the time of aerial views which started with ballooning. I reference ballooning in *Petropolis* because of that. It's like suddenly you have this perspective that you never had before, because of the simple technology of hot air. And consequently, relationships are understood in a different way than from the ground. Us flying over the tar sands is a further evolution of that situation and it's compounded by the fact of being at a mining operation that's digging up

oil, that's fuelling most of our technology today. It's a paradox because oil is fuelling the helicopter, oil produced the videotape and all these things that are enabling us to see that aerial perspective. I want to see as far as I can with the technology that's available. There is an innate curiosity to look further and see more and understand more, and that's what's propelling it: to see more and thus better understand our relationships.

AS: In *Petropolis*, as you mention, there is a dual focus on the infinitely large and the infinitely small. I got this impression when watching the film because even though you're filming from an aerial, *objective*, point of view there is always some fragment of movement, or part of the geographical landscape, that is outside the frame. So on the one hand, you are zoomed out to the max, in a helicopter and you're taking this aerial footage, but at the same time it never entirely captures what is going on because the tar sands are so big, the project's totality is constantly beyond the frame, beyond the bounds of an intelligible image. I think this dawned on me when watching the film because there is so much movement in the camera work. The camera is constantly moving along with the helicopter and so the way that the editing works is that it is constantly piecing together the different parts of the tar-to-oil production process like the mining pit, the oil refinery, etc. Is that something you see in your own film where on the one hand it is capturing something that is infinitely big but at the same time what is captured still seems to be too small?

PM: Yes, which is the nature of perception itself. You can only see what you are looking at. And then you try to look at as many things as possible to create as big of picture as possible but you're always limited to what you are looking at and how you are looking at it. In *Petropolis* I consciously wanted to show the expanse of the place and that there was more outside the frame than was visible. To encourage that, partially, by having long takes so that it could be understood that when moving from here to here to here to here, it is possible to see the whole continuum, that whole set of relationships, whereas if there was a cut, the continuum wouldn't be understood in the same way. If that trajectory is made visible, it's understood that there are many more trajectories over there on the

horizon. The magnitude of the tar sands project is made visible that way, made visible through movement.

AS: In *Petropolis* there is clearly a pragmatic reason to why you're shooting aerial footage and I'm assuming it's because there is no ground access to the tar sands.

PM: That was the obvious reason to go up in the air, as it can't be photographed any other way. But then it became this beautiful metaphor, in a way, this great position to think about perspective and where we are in our own environment.

AS: Continuing on about aerial perspective, how do you see it connecting to the political implications of the film in terms of trying to raise consciousness about the tar sands' contribution to environmental degradation? Is there a connection between having an aerial perspective of an event and giving people an opportunity for reflection or self-critique in relation to the process going on below that wouldn't otherwise be accessible from another perspective?

PM: That's the gist of the idea of the word 'perspective'. Also, there's the double play on the word perspective at work, like to have a perspective that tries to illuminate something about the repercussions of our lifestyle by the use of this product that they're digging up out of the ground. So that's 'perspective' as an idea. But at the same time it's a visual perspective which is created just by standing back or rising up. *Petropolis* is like a conscious play on the word perspective.

AS: Your films often have a diary feel to them; there's a very personal aspect to your films. Especially in viewing *Picture of Light*, I get the impression of really being with you and the crew. In *Petropolis*, your presence is especially felt at the end of the film. I think it's after 30 or 35 minutes that your voiceover comes in. How do you negotiate your own presence within the film and is there something about the tar sands and your position from the helicopter that made you want to create a certain distance between the visuals and your personal voiceover?

PM: Yes. I think that ultimately, in *Petropolis*, it just didn't seem necessary to say anything. But at the same time I wanted to wrap it up at a certain point and make an allusion to evolution and perspective. I had done a cut of the film that was wall-to-wall voiceover because I had read an extensive book depicting what goes on in the tar sands and the ramifications of our consumer lifestyle and government's policies. What this operation signified was really eye opening. So my first inclination was to try and get that information into the film. But it was too much information and the information is already available. One, by any number of books and also through the website that Greenpeace put together, and lots of other places. And there's other films that deal with it.

AS: And that's the strength of your film, because I've seen plenty of environmental documentaries and whether they're about water, oil, deforestation, or some other topic, they often have this very didactic approach where you get the impression that the film posits a viewer that has absolutely no previous knowledge of the topic being presented. I don't often think that's the case with these sorts of activist films because you're not going to stumble into in a megaplex movie theatre by accident and see them. There is little to no publicity urging the public to go see them. A film of this type is usually something that has been sought out at a public library, cinemathèque, public institution or activist event.

Unlike many activist documentaries, *Petropolis* doesn't really feel the need to fill people in on things they might already have known. I think it really stands alone as a film that works on its own terms; not solely as a piece of green propaganda or as an educational film you show in classrooms to teach people about the tar sands, but as a meditation on film's place in resolving the ecological crises we face.

PM: Yes. *Petropolis* is about creating a visceral experience that will make the audience understand a little bit the dimension of the tar sands as I saw it. When I first saw the tar sands its immensity really bowled me over and that's what made me want to make the film to begin with.