

Interview: Peter Mettler

Camera in a Storm

I

W
e
a
t
h
e
r

S
c
a
p
e
g
o
a
t

8



In August of 2014 Scapegoat sat down with Canadian filmmaker Peter Mettler to discuss his ongoing engagement with the weather and weather devices in Picture of Light (1994), Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands (2009), and End of Time (2012).

Scapegoat

We want to begin by telling you a story. Last year we screened your film Picture of Light (1994) for a class we were teaching in Hong Kong. Then six months later we received these very strange photographs from Churchill, Manitoba (where the film was shot) taken by one of our students, who had apparently been so inspired by your film that she decided to retrace your steps.

Peter Mettler

Did she go in the wintertime? Did she see northern lights?

Scapegoat

She went in the summer. There wasn't that much snow but lots of polar bears. She really enjoyed taking pictures of polar bears. To add some important details: this student of ours is a young Shanghainese woman, who spent the majority of her life in Shanghai, followed by studies in Hong Kong, and then she studied abroad in British Columbia. Apparently she felt that she was so close to Churchill in British Columbia, she thought she would do a quick weekend trip to Northern Manitoba...

Peter Mettler

[*Laughing*]

Scapegoat

One of the things we thought was interesting about that film was the way in which the camera becomes a kind of weather device, almost like a thermometer or wind sock. To what extent was the camera a weather device in Picture of Light?

Peter Mettler

I did think of that eventually as I was shooting. It suddenly no longer became a device of expression but in fact a scientific device that was methodically trying to record this natural phenomenon. Originally when I was thinking about what the film would be, I was expecting to shoot with an intervalometer—to shoot it time-lapse. I had intended to re-photograph the raw material of the northern lights, stretch it all out again, optically print it, and give it a different feeling that may have resembled the real time-frame more. But when I saw the raw material, the 1:1 material, I really liked it in a way because it was, as you describe, the result of the instrument recording the phenomena. The exposed film material was a kind of object, or an archive of that reality on an immediate level, so I kept it that way.

Scapegoat

There's an interest in the film in the multiple technological connections that the northern lights have between your own camera, the NASA shuttle, satellites, and home televisions. Part of it is a meditation on the way these devices mediate the weather.

Peter Mettler

For me, this was an exciting first-time film-making process. I don't know how much of the background of the film you know about, but it was proposed to me to make this film at a dinner with mutual friends in Switzerland, where I'd met Andreas Züst, the meteorologist, artist, and collector. And within a few hours he said, "Hey do you want to make a film about the northern lights? I've always wanted to get the northern lights on film." And I said sure, that's a great topic and I can see myself doing that, but will you find the money for it? He said, yeah, yeah, don't worry, I'll find the money. I didn't really believe him, but a couple of months later, I got a call—I was back in Canada, he in Switzerland, and he said, "Okay Peter, I've got the money, let's go." Suddenly we were going up to Churchill to film the northern lights without a script or a great deal of preparation. So I decided that the strategy of how to film when we were up there was to ask, "what are all the things that tie into the northern lights?" So, there are a lot of obvious formal aspects, such as when you watch the snow blow across the ground and it sweeps in patterns that resemble the lights in the sky, or the artificial lighting that you see around Churchill, the curtains hanging on a wall, the obvious visual connections. But then on the level of documentation, the question was, how do people see this? How far back does it go? What did people think the northern lights were before science explained them? Because, of course,

they're incredible, and how do you explain something like that when you see it? You can only think that they're alive and that they're spirits of an ancestor. That's the first thing that I can understand that would come to mind. And then there's the whole pursuit of science and understanding, and the answers to how everything functions, and the technology we develop around that, which includes, of course, our film-making equipment—and throws us as film-makers into that dimension. In the end, we talked with everybody we could about their interpretations of the northern lights, including UFO-ologists who claimed that the magnetic fields could be used to transport technologies we don't even understand closer to earth. The NASA guy that I really liked was completely enthusiastic about what he sees from above, looking down on the northern lights from space—and at the same time as he's saying "we don't yet understand everything," he's being victimized by his microphone button, having to hold the button down with one hand, so he can't gesture properly. It's the fragility of technology that I love, both for us lugging that equipment through the cold in Churchill, but also, for the space shuttle crew re-entering the atmosphere like a bunch of kids in the back of a station wagon on a holiday trip.

Scapegoat

The film follows you and your crew going to witness the northern lights and unfolds them into an incredible proliferation of experiences. There seems to be an

emphasis on the importance of experience, of actually going to see the thing.

Peter Mettler

Yes, and I like to work by association. The lights are a catalyst. For example, what's that called when you close your eyes and see the lights, or energy, of your own retina? To me that suggests the presence of creativity in life itself, how complex that is, and how we are just one outgrowth of that entire creative evolution—the living soup, if you will. By working associatively in The End of Time, what happened was that by observing the weather I began to question how we perceive transformation, which then brought the focus to the more human dimension of the perception of change, or what we call time.

Scapegoat

In The End of Time (2012) you went to CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research). Was visiting the Large Hadron Collider (particle accelerator) like going inside a clock, or more like watching the weather?

Peter Mettler

It's to go inside an incredible piece of man-made technology which can be looked at as a kind of time machine. It's very elaborate and extensive and mostly hand-made. It quickly makes one philosophical—like, if they're recreating characteristics of the big bang, then they're setting the stage for the evolution that brought us to this point where we can create machines

like this that can explore what brought us here in the first place, and so on ... I've never thought about it in terms of weather, but if it's a Mechano-set creator of the universe, it is also the thing that starts off the weather systems.

Scapegoat

It's also from all this solar weather—kind of like the northern lights, which are caused by the bombardment of particles from the sun—that they get the materials for their experiments, no?

Peter Mettler

I'm not a specialist in this, but I know in other labs there are neutrino detectors, which are usually underground in huge spherical rooms with liquid in them, and they try to catch neutrinos that are passing through the earth. In the case of CERN, they actually create the particles (I believe) with lead ions that they send around in circles in the path of the accelerator. As far as I know, it doesn't incorporate stuff that's coming randomly from space. But maybe you know more about it than I do.

Scapegoat

What I know about CERN I mostly learned from your film ...

Peter Mettler

Oh, ok. Well, it's not the most informative source, I would say. It's funny showing it because there are sometimes science people with very advanced knowledge in the audience,

Interview: Peter Mettler

and when they see it they say, “oh, ok, this is an artist’s perspective.” But I wasn’t trying to explain the science. I was really trying to show these human beings in the structure of this machine alongside the human pursuit to understand our own condition, and introduce the physics idea of “basic research,” where you acknowledge that you will always discover if you simply keep looking, even if the goal is oblique or unknown. Also, the idea that they are recreating the Big Bang, the idea that they really don’t know what they’re doing, the idea that all this may be nature thinking about itself. We edited the sequence quite breathlessly, in order to avoid a traditional informational presentation. That was the approach.

Scapegoat

I’d like to bring in a third film of yours into this discussion of weather devices, Petropolis (2009), because these three films seem like a kind of trilogy. In Picture of Light we become aware of the camera’s weight, its temperature needs, and its ability to be a kind of time machine for us, maybe like the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, and something that connects us to space. And then in Petropolis, the film concludes with a reflection on the way in which you as a filmmaker are actually part of the Alberta Tar Sands, looking at itself through a giant mechanical eye that flies around. Were those two moments, where the camera becomes a protagonist in a way, the same for you or really different?

Peter Mettler

I’m always aware of the technology that’s recording, and often my films make the audience aware of the technology too. I think the difference is that in Petropolis, in filming that landscape and being aware that this is the result of oil extraction, the camera literally became a part of what it was seeing: the oil that goes into the plastics of the camera, obviously the petrol that’s feeding the helicopter and keeping it in the air, all these devices that we’re now using to photograph are actually photographing the source that created them. That was a new level of reflection and paradox that wasn’t there before.

Scapegoat

How surprised were you by what you saw in Alberta?

Peter Mettler

The first time I went there I just had a regular camera that I held in my hand, as I hung out of the door of the helicopter. I was just flabbergasted by the size of the Tar Sands, and also by the distinct borders between more or less pristine nature and this devastated landscape. And I realized that what made it so poignant was the lack of editing. If you look at something as a long take you really understand how big this place is and how one piece of geography leads to the next. Whereas if it’s edited it’s really just a bunch of still shots in a way. So I was struck by that immediately, in terms of how to translate this experience, or this

perspective, to a film. And also by the smell, which you can't get in a film. It was very stinky.

Scapegoat

What did it smell like?

Peter Mettler

Well, like petroleum. Oily.

Scapegoat

So there's no Smell-O-Rama device you could use for future screenings of Petropolis ...?

Peter Mettler

Well it probably wouldn't be that hard. You could just run a car outside and bring a tube into the theatre.

Scapegoat

[*Laughter*] Ok, bad idea! I mean it seems really difficult to make something look big in a film. In cinema you always just have the square frame. Did you think a lot about how to make something big appear ... well, big?

Peter Mettler

Yes, that's a good observation. That problem really became apparent to me in Picture of Light, because you've got the entire sky and you don't know where the northern lights are going to be; in Churchill they can appear on any point of the horizon. Also, because they're so fleeting, and because we were shooting time-lapse, if you try to track them, try to follow them with the camera, you get something very jumbled and erratic, and there are

some sequences like that in the film.

But towards the end of the shooting we took a different approach which was just to lock off the camera and focus it on one piece of the sky and whatever passed through the frame is what we got. And that's in fact how we got the longer shots, just by being patient, and letting things pass through the frame. But what you become aware of is how big the sky is and how small your frame is, even if you're using one of the wide-angle perspectives you can use, without going to fisheye or something. There are cameras that capture the whole sky but then everything becomes tiny, and it looks like an orb or something. If you want to get both the detail and scope of the sky, it's huge, and of course it's very hard to give that surrounding impression in the cinema—to show wide, sweeping big skies and landscapes. And I don't really think it gets any better when you see them in IMAX or something. It feels like a gimmick, I never really feel like I'm in it.

Scapegoat

You bear the curse of someone who loves the weather, and then tries to put it in a little box in the cinema.

Peter Mettler

Yes, and in fact that was one of the main themes of Picture of Light in the end. The idea that so much of what we know about life and the world and nature is what we've seen on TV, or that we've seen through some kind of mediation. Most of the people that



W
e
a
t
h
e
r

S
c
a
p
e
g
o

a
t

8

watch the film will have never seen the northern lights for real. For me standing there in an open sky and having the lights come down and almost cut you is an experience that I would never be able to give you on film. I can give you something on film that excites the imagination and the intellect, but it's not the same thing. In a way, that was the main theme of Picture of Light, that difference.

Scapegoat

Have you gone back to Churchill?

Peter Mettler

No. I didn't really like it there.

Scapegoat

Why not?

Peter Mettler

Well, it was a great place to go ... we took the train up, it was an incredible

journey of exploration. But as a place to go and hang out? Not really.

Scapegoat

One of the things that we learned from our student who went there is that there's a burgeoning tourist economy in Churchill. I don't know if this existed when you were there, but they are trying to bring people to come hang out in Churchill, and it's less about the northern lights and more about the polar bears. We got this amazing photo of this very weird museum that's in a portable or something, as well as this kind of mobile hotel. There are these little rooms that are mounted on these large tractor trailer wheels, and they move around the landscape or something ...

Peter Mettler

That wasn't there when we were there, but there was already a fair bit of tourism, for the polar bears for sure, and also for the northern lights,

especially among Japanese tourists. But the best time to go there for the northern lights is the dead of winter, which is a hard pill to swallow, because it's really cold and then if it snows its deadly. You get locked into your hotel shooting holes in the wall or something.

Scapegoat

The scenes of the snowstorms in that film are so incredible. The crew members in their snowsuits being blown around, and the snow on the ground being whipped around by the wind, and this amazing collapse of the middle-ground and background, everything is swallowed up ...

Peter Mettler

Yes, it was amazing filming there, because of course you're dressed up in these spacesuits and you're looking through the camera and it's very hard to see anything, the viewfinder is frosting over, and often you're just pointing at shapes, you can barely see what you're filming. So you can imagine the surprise when you get the film back and you see it's crystal clear. It's actually not how it looks when you're out there. Things are fogging up, the snow's blowing around, and it's glaring... very hard to see. It's much more impressionistic in real life than on film.

Scapegoat

In that way the camera really is acting like a kind of instrument, a thing that perceives the world differently than us. You put it out into the world and then you get it back later, and it's like "Oh that's how the camera experienced it, that was

certainly not how I experienced it."

Peter Mettler

Yes. Sometimes in filmmaking those two things line up pretty closely, and often they're very different. It's interesting, going back to CERN, that that's a camera as well, the detector that's photographing the trajectories of particle collisions. They're five-storey-tall, five-storey-wide cameras. Mostly just detector plates that sense the path of the particles as they explode outwards.

Scapegoat

A massive camera for a massive snowstorm.

Peter Mettler

Yeah, something like that ...