



PETROPOLIS

AERIAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ALBERTA TAR SANDS

GREENPEACE CANADA PRESENTS
A FILM BY PETER METTLER

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PETROPOLIS

An Icarus Films release
Directed by Peter Mettler

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ENGLISH SYNOPSIS

Shot primarily from a helicopter, filmmaker Peter Mettler's *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands* offers an unparalleled view of the world's largest industrial, capital and energy project.

Canada's tar sands are an oil reserve the size of England. Extracting the crude oil called bitumen from underneath unspoiled wilderness requires a massive industrialized effort with far-reaching impacts on the land, air, water, and climate.

It's an extraordinary spectacle, whose scope can only be understood from far above. In a hypnotic flight of image and sound, one machine's perspective upon the choreography of others suggests a dehumanized world where petroleum's power is supreme.

FRENCH SYNOPSIS

Véritable vol plané de 43 minutes, les images de *Petropolis : perspectives aériennes des sables bitumineux d'Alberta* du metteur en scène Peter Mettler, apporte une perspective saisissante et troublante du plus grand projet énergivore, industriel et financier de la planète.

L'étendue des sables bitumineux du Canada correspond à la taille de l'Angleterre. Extraire le pétrole brut des sables, le bitume, en plein cœur de cette nature vierge et sauvage, requiert un effort massif d'industrialisation aux conséquences lourdes sur la terre, l'air, l'eau, le climat et la santé des communautés environnantes.

Petropolis invite le spectateur à un voyage aérien hypnotique où s'entrelacent les images au son afin de rendre, le plus simplement possible, cette étrange chorégraphie entre l'homme et la machine. Un théâtre extraordinaire, dont la portée destructrice ne peut vraiment être comprise qu'à vol d'oiseau et qui suggère un monde déshumanisé où le pétrole fait office de pouvoir ultime.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR PETER METTLER

What led you to make Petropolis?

There are a lot of paths that led to this, going back already 20 years. I've always been interested in the way we humans have the ability to create technology out of our given natural environments. My impression is that the technologies we develop are also part of "nature" and should be managed ecologically, as part of the system that is in fact, life itself.

I have long been amazed at the disrespect towards our own home, our own bodies, in relation to garbage, pollution, destruction etc. It seems that we may live within a crisis of perception, in that we are somehow able to disregard the harm we induce upon our own selves through our actions. I'm interested in demonstrating the effects of some of our lifestyle choices – or perhaps more accurately - the lifestyles imposed upon us by a rather avaricious economic system, with its short-termed interests.

In exploring the nature of consciousness and seeing, I've been making films that try to immerse an audience into an experience of something in which they must also confront themselves. The viewing experience becomes more of a meditation around a subject than strictly an absorption of information. In previous films I've explored subjects like the Northern Lights or culture in Bali, but in some way they always explore the interconnectedness of things and how we perceive them.

There has been a lot of debate about the Tar Sands, but the opportunities to actually see and somehow experience them have been rare. There is a lot of information readily available out there, from a variety of perspectives, but nothing that really lets you "feel" it. The beauty of cinema is that it can deliver an experience at least somewhat close to the real thing - in this case though, seriously lacking the smell.

I was in the process of researching the tar sands for my own next feature project, which in part explores clouds and what goes into them from the ground. A fortuitous request about cinematography came in from Greenpeace at the same time and things evolved from there. We all agreed on the importance of simply showing the tar sands to our own country and the rest of the world, in the interest of sparking constructive discourse.

Were the Tar Sands what you expected?

I was expecting some rather gargantuan smokestacks – which I found. But they were dwarfed by the size of the rest of the vast openpit mines and tailings ponds. The industry that we actually physically saw was dwarfed once again by the comprehension of the potential size that it could become if fully developed. And it didn't stop there. As one begins to understand many of the ramifications and issues entangled within the tar sands development, it becomes mind-bogglingly immense and important. It is not only a manifestation of our current oilbased lives but also one that reflects our current consciousness and values.

What did you learn during the making of this film?

This would be a very long answer, perhaps another film, or a book – of which there are already some good ones for further reference. But to be succinct, in a kind of random point form, I'd say – a lot of statistics and factoids, and how this all impacts not only the environment, but also economics, community, drug abuse, immigration, wildlife, international relations, territorial conflict, free trade agreements, consumer lifestyle, health, climate change, Native American culture... and the list goes on to implicate the intricacies of our daily living, our media and as I said before, perception itself.

I put the word "perspective" in the title because indeed that is what was offered to us in the process of making this film – a perspective on a situation, that when considered in an associative way, has an immense importance in relation to so many aspects of our lives.

and fast-food were in abundance. Seados raced aimlessly along the river. So much seemed fabricated, temporary and disposable. The town seemed to serve mostly the boom of the economic moment, predestined to become like one of those earlier goldrush ghost towns.

Also, we mustn't forget the medium we work with ourselves – video and film – its machines, plastics and processes are all part of Petropolis.

Is shooting a film from the air more challenging than shooting on land?

Every film is challenging, whether shooting in a helicopter or a canoe. The greatest challenge is trying to capture a cinematographic vision that pertains to, and is imbued with, the character or essence of the subject. In this case, it was very clear from the ground that we can't actually see much. The companies won't even let you shoot from the side of a public road, let alone invite you into their facility. But even if they did, there would be no way to understand scale and relationships.

So in some respects the content determines the form, and the form determines the technology. In this case we needed that overview and we needed long shots to show what sits next to what: the upgraders by the tailings pond, by the river, across from the mines etc. A particular challenge was to present this topography to the viewer. As soon as you edit shots together the tendency is to see a construction of images. We tried very hard to not edit too much, rather letting the camera explore details then panning or tilting to reveal the horizon or relationship to the big picture.

We respected the 1000 foot altitude limit of private airspace and thus worked with a considerable zoom lens that was mounted on the nose of the helicopter controlled remotely with joysticks and dials. Inside, the pilot and the operator Ron Chapelle sat in the front while I sat in the back with a preview monitor. I could talk to them both through headsets and thus could help direct and anticipate the flow of shots. We had about 3 hours to do everything. In the editing we then used some of the robotic characteristics of the camera moves and various adjustments to emphasize the idea of machine looking at machine.

Are projects like the Tar Sands inevitable?

Well, they are already here. We have indeed already made ingenious uses of many natural resources throughout a relatively small period of time – but without caring much for the associated perils. I don't think that anyone ever set out with the deliberate intention to destroy themselves. Most of our development has been done in the interests of making life better, easier, nicer. However, too little attention has gone into industry and technology as ecology - into seeing the whole global, or even universal, picture with all the interplays. There has been too much emphasis placed on financial profits rather than sustainability of the most valuable commodity – life itself.

It's a good thing that we are hearing more thoughts about this from thinkers and scientists in the last few years. Perhaps for the first time we are actually in a position to collect enough information and knowledge to actually have a full enough perspective at all. Yet serious action needs to be taken quickly and the onus is not only on the consumer, but even more so on the governments and corporations that devise the lives we lead and things we consume. Something needs to give. Anyhow that's my humble filmmaker's perspective - one of millions, I'm sure...

What do you expect the impact of the film to be?

I think the film has fallen into a unique position in that it has combined the resources of Greenpeace, as a large well-informed enlightening institution, with the resources of a filmmaker, and his associated vision and cinema audience. Ideally this will cross-pollinate the audiences. I think that what the film shows could be shocking to some people. Ultimately we see it as a catalyst for discussion and as a conduit to more information. The rest remains to unfold.

CRITICAL PRAISE FOR 'PETROPOLIS'

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OIL SANDS RISES ABOVE THE SPIN: PETER METTLER'S AERIAL TAKE ON THE OIL SANDS REVEALS 'A LANDSCAPE THAT CANNOT BE COMPREHENDED FROM THE GROUND'

BY JENNIE PUNTER
JANUARY 22, 2010

The Athabasca oil sands (commonly known as the Alberta tar sands) have attracted Cree fishermen, European traders, oil explorers and workers, and in the past few years documentary crews. Toronto multidisciplinary artist Peter Mettler (*Gambling, Gods & LSD*), the latest filmmaker to focus on the vast region, literally rises above his camera-toting predecessors to deliver a unique perspective in *Petropolis*, a compelling environmental art film that leaves the viewer up in the air.

Over the past decade, the escalation and impact of Canadian and international oil sands projects have created a big, complex and evolving story with an array of spins. There are, of course, the almost daily business news reports, including a major announcement of the second phase of the Surmont project earlier this week. The *New Yorker*, *Time* and *National Geographic* are just a few of the major U.S. magazines that have sent feature scribes to boom town Fort McMurray to get the dirt.

But documentary film has proven one of the most accessible and powerful ways for the average person to gain a ground-level understanding of the business, environmental and human impact of what's happening in the region. Tom Radford's *Tar Sands: The Selling of Alberta*, Leslie Iwerks's *Downstream* and Shannon Walsh's *H2Oil*, three of the most prominent features, were all accompanied by a degree of controversy when they first screened.

On the surface, *Petropolis*, accurately subtitled *Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands*, hardly seems a film that will inspire controversy, despite being presented by Greenpeace Canada.

We never hit the ground, let alone see or hear a talking head. The film's power is the contemplative space crafted by Mettler and his collaborators.

Mettler's frequent filmmaking style is that of visual personal essay, *Picture of Light* (1994), about his journey to "capture" the Northern Lights, is the most shining example. When he works as cinematographer for others, notably for Jennifer Baichwal's *Manufactured Landscapes*, his camera takes on the personality of a curious, often playful, observer. In *Petropolis*, we move over the rivers and boreal forests until we reach oil extraction activity, with its matrix of roads and pipes, tailing pools, upgrading plants and smokestacks, voracious diggers and parade of dump trucks. Sparse use of text,

particularly in the opening minutes, helps give us a sense of what we are seeing: facts about bitumen (heavy crude oil), the scope of the Alberta deposit, extraction methods, etc. But we soon get caught up in the sights of the flight: patterns, movement and light.

It's heartbreaking when it hits you that the overall visual experience of Mettler's film is like the journey of a bird, following a river route and then suddenly spotting strange creatures below as it searches for a place to land. Hundreds of birds die every year after landing in tailing pools filled with toxic water.

Mettler's soundtrack mixes natural, industrial and electronic sounds, providing subtle enhancement without pushing the viewer to feel wonder or horror as movie music so often, annoyingly, does. Only toward the end does Mettler's voice chime in with his brief, almost whimsical narration. Citing the first flight of a hot air balloon in 1783 France, he then refers to the oil sands as "a landscape that cannot be comprehended from the ground."

For 80 years we have made ingenious use of petroleum, Mettler says, "What will we do next?" He leaves us with something profound to contemplate as we return to terra firma.

THE TIMES

PETROPOLIS: A 45-MINUTE TONE POEM THAT SWOOPS AROUND NORTHERN CANADA AND OBSERVES THE TOXIFICATION OF THE LANDSCAPE BY THE PETROLEUM INDUSTRY

BY KEVIN MAHER
MAY 14, 2010

Eco documentaries. Can't live with them. Can't ban them. And still, on an almost weekly basis, they leap, lemming like, on to our screens. *The End of the Line*, *The Vanishing of the Bees*, *The Age of Stupid*, *Crude*, *Black Gold*, and on and on. Always the same jaded formula. A group of impassioned boffins stare down the lens and reveal how the planet's very existence is being threatened, before predicting in precise scientific detail the imminent arrival of the Apocalypse, and then finally, in the closing frames, slapping up a web address and asking for donations to a campaign that, given enough consumer attention and media exposure, will reverse the seemingly irreversible effects of the global catastrophe predicted in the previous 90 minutes.

Worst of all, most eco-docs are not films. They are simply animated pamphlets made by people whose imaginations have long since been calcified by cant. Which makes the gorgeous, affecting and deeply cinematic eco-documentary *Petropolis* something of a movie miracle.

Although, and giving it its full title, *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands*, is not strictly speaking an eco-documentary. It is a 45-minute tone poem, almost entirely without dialogue, that glides and swoops around the forests of northern Canada and eventually observes the gradual toxification of the landscape by the petroleum industry. We learn, of course, from some helpful opening title cards, that the forests are sitting on tar sands the size of England. Contained in the tar is a form of crude oil called bitumen. The sands represent, thus, the second-largest oil reserve on the planet. But extracting the oil from the bitumen, the bitumen from the sands, and the sands from underneath the forests is, to say the least, messy.

And yet, *Petropolis*, directed by the award-winning Canadian photographer and artist Peter Mettler, is about more than this. Shot almost entirely from a helicopter, but with rotor noise completely, and thankfully, absent, its nearest cinematic relative is the title sequence from *The Shining*. Here, after the initial bullet points, Mettler wisely and ingeniously asks you to find your way alone through footage that never once touches the ground. There is something eerie in the way his camera arcs across the landscape, like the ghostly points of view in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*. The effect quickly becomes hypnotic, while ravishing images of early-morning forest life convey the sense of being a cinematic eavesdropper, witnessing undiscovered secrets from low-level flybys.

Of course, the refineries, the processing plants and the pollution are not far behind. The footage in this section is endless and devastating, as it should be. The high-definition depiction of open-pit mining is a rape analogy writ large. And yet Mettler seems to have even bigger fish to fry. His godlike perspective, for one, castigates all humanity, and pities it too. There is a comedy of insignificance in the procession of mining trucks across the landscape — giants on the ground, but Tonka Toys from the air. People, meanwhile, the rare few who sneak into frame, are insects.

This, ultimately, is the film-making of ideas, a project that is constantly looking to the curve of the horizon for answers. At its best it recalls the famous words of the Nasa astronaut Loren Acton, who stared at the same horizon from space and wondered how "there, contained in the thin, moving, incredibly fragile shell of the biosphere is everything that is dear to you, all the human drama and comedy. That's where life is; that's where all the good stuff is." The good stuff, presumably, and the bad. And so, *Petropolis* asks, quietly, and without any fanfare, boffins, or doom-laden prognostications: which side are you on?

Montreal Gazette

***1/2 Ace doc maker Mettler's visually dazzling aerial coverage of the devastation caused by the Alberta tar sands project resembles one vast moving Ed Burtynsky photograph; you don't know whether to weep from the terrible, graceful beauty, or the horror of a territory potentially the size of England torn open and raped. With minimal narration very late in its 43-minute running time, and only ambient and spare industrial score, this Greenpeace initiative stays with you.

NOW Magazine

Who better to capture the horrible beauty of the Alberta tar sands than the man who shot *Manufactured Landscapes*? Gifted cinematographer Mettler brings a high-definition rig to the massive oil extraction project's ruined grasslands and rivers, gliding effortlessly over thousands of acres of devastation. It's strikingly beautiful and presented in such confident, assured rhythms that you're almost hypnotized by the flow of images - until you realize you're watching grand-scale systematic destruction.

The Toronto Star

The vastness of Canada contributes to the outsider instinct. Peter Mettler makes huge swaths of Alberta seem like an alien planet in *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands*. The fluid flyover of one of the world's biggest and most invasive oil projects is done almost silently, with a minimal voiceover accompanying its images. Produced by Greenpeace Canada, the documentary finds both horror and strange beauty in man's capacity to force nature to bend to his skewed vision... Canadians have heard for years of Alberta's mammoth tar sands project, which covers an area about the size of England. But few have seen it. Documentarian Peter Mettler takes to the sky to show a scarred, torn and toxic remote vastness. Reviewed by Peter Howell, film critic.

The Globe and Mail

Petropolis: "A sumptuously shot aerial view of an ecological disaster, the Alberta tar sands. Using footage he created looking downward from a helicopter, Peter Mettler has created his own plaintive moving-image version of photographer Ed Burtynsky's politically engaging work." Reviewed by Marc Glassman, editor of *POV Magazine*.

Maclean's

And the movies? Oh yes, the movies. Saw three good ones yesterday: Peter Mettler's amazing *Petropolis*, *Solitary Man* with a wonderfully seedy Michael Douglas, and the aforementioned *Up in the Air*—plus Drew Barrymore's feature directing debut, *Whip It*, starring Canadian sweetheart Ellen Page as a roller derby queen. By Brian D. Johnson

Toronto Sun

The problem with one of the most alarming post-apocalyptic settings you'll ever see in a movie? It's real. So while films such as *9* and *The Road* have to imagine it, director Peter Mettler (*Manufactured Landscapes*) needed only to travel to the tar sands in Northern Alberta. There, millions of hectares of ancient forest have been turned into a lunar landscape of toxic waste -- all so that a crude oil called bitumen can be extracted from the sand and clay. The film doesn't use words to make its potent point: Only an aerial view that leaves one staggered -- and likely ashamed. Kevin Williamson

PETER METTLER **BIOGRAPHY**

From the very beginning of his career Peter Mettler has created films deemed impossible to make, yet readily appreciated once they exist. A key figure in the critical wave of 80's Canadian filmmakers, Mettler produces works which elude categorization. Melding intuitive processes with drama, essay, experiment or documentation, his films hold a unique and influential position in creative expression not only in film but also in new art forms where cinema and other disciplines merge.

Additional artistic activities include a wide range of ongoing engagements in music, dance and photography. Over the years Mettler has presented photographic gallery exhibitions in Europe and Canada. More recently he has been experimenting with live sound and image mixing performances with a diversity of musical artists in an extremity of locales ranging from radio theatres to dance clubs and wilderness locations. An interview with Mettler on these activities is included in the 2005 publication *The VJ Book* by Paul Spinrad.

Based both in Switzerland and Canada, Mettler is a strong supporter of independent creativity, having collaborated with numerous filmmakers, artists and musicians such as Werner Penzel, Michael Ondaatje, Atom Egoyan, Peter Weber, Fred Frith, Jim O'Rourke, Alexandra Rockingham Gill, Robert Lepage, Andreas Züst, Bruce McDonald, Patricia Rozema, Andrea Naan, Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and many others. He is active in the development of community networks which foster and share the growth of innovative creative forms and new means of production and distribution which will allow the independent artist to reach his or her particular audience while lightening the financial and ideological pressures of the commercial market.

A book on his work entitled *Making the Invisible Visible* was published in 1995 and another entitled, *Of This Place and Elsewhere, The Films and Photography of Peter Mettler*, by Jerry White was published in 2006 as a retrospective film and photography edition by the Toronto International Film Festival. Meditations on our world, rooted in personal experience, his works reflect the visions and wonder of their characters and audiences alike. Mettler's films have garnered many prizes and been the focus of several retrospectives internationally.

PETER METTLER FILMOGRAPHY

Scissere ('82) and **Eastern Avenue** ('85)

Experimental investigations into the movements of the subconscious. The first, a structured feature, the second an intuitive diary.

The Top of his Head ('89)

Feature drama following the search for identity in a media driven world.

Tectonic Plates ('92)

Feature drama, an adaptation of the play by Robert Lepage & Co. The movement of the earth's tectonic plates is used to illustrate interconnecting stories on a human scale.

Picture of Light (94)

Feature documentary, takes a film crew to the Sub Arctic to capture the wonder of the Northern Lights on celluloid.

Balifilm ('96)

Diary/performance, is a lyrical tribute to the creative forces found on the island of Bali.

Gambling, Gods and LSD (02)

Documentary, A three-hour journey across cultures, people and time, an exploration of the notions of transcendence and belief.

Manufactured Landscapes (06)

(As creative consultant and cinematographer) feature documentary, follows photographer Ed Burtynsky witnessing China's massive industrial revolution and its impact on the planet.

Away (07)

Cellphone film for the National Film Board of Canada on the trials of being electronically over-connected.

Shostakovitch/Notes in Silence (07)

With Andrea Naan, dance theatre piece, an evocation of the times and spirit of composer Dimitri Shostakovitch.

PETROPOLIS FILM CREDITS

Director and Writer	Peter Mettler
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Editor	Roland Schlimme
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For more information on the Alberta tar sands: www.petropolis-film.com
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