

An Interview with Peter Mettler

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*In the cosmology of Canadian cinema, Peter Mettler is our seeker. From his early experimental narrative feature, *Scissere*, to his inventive adaptation of Robert Lepage's *Tectonic Plates*, from his sprawling essay film, *Gambling, Gods and LSD*, to his god's-eye survey of the Alberta tar sands, *Petropolis*, Mettler has maintained a constant forge into the terra incognita of the transcendental. His peripatetic lens is ever gravitating toward outsiders in search of ecstatic states, strange spectacles that defy straightforward documentation, and sacred places that promise some metaphysical deliverance. There are precedents for his methodologies—the films of Chris Marker and Werner Herzog come to mind—but Mettler's gifts as an open and unobtrusive interviewer and capacity to discover shared sensibilities between people of vastly diverse cultures and creeds feels singular. When I asked Mettler's friend and collaborator Atom Egoyan what he felt Mettler's core virtue was as a filmmaker, he replied, without hesitation, the ability to be fully present.*

*Which is to say that Mettler makes himself available to chance. Chance has played a pivotal role in all of Mettler's most vital work, most notably in the genesis of what may be his most emblematic film, *Picture of Light*. This meditative, at times profoundly beautiful non-fiction adventure film follows Mettler and a small crew to Churchill, Manitoba, where they hope to capture on celluloid the aurora borealis. En route, they find themselves engaging with peculiar characters who choose to reside on civilization's periphery and interrogating the intersection where technology collides with the primal. None of this would have transpired were it not for Mettler's serendipitous encounter with Andreas Züst, the eccentric Swiss polymath—meteorologist, artist, and collector were just some of his vocations—who provided Mettler with the challenge and financing for *Picture of Light*.*

*I've been conversing with Mettler about his life and work for a few years now, accumulating material for a book entitled *Nothing But Time*. What follows is a condensed version of our conversation regarding *Picture of Light*, which screened in a new digital restoration at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival as part of its Canada 150 celebration. Mettler's most recent film, *Becoming Animal*, co-directed with Emma Davie, premiered at CPH: DOX, the Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival, in March of this year.*

José Teodoro: How did you meet Andreas Züst?

Peter Mettler: I was in Zurich and my friend Manoel Siberman invited me over for dinner. Manoel's girlfriend was a painter and friends with Andreas, who was also invited to this dinner. It was just the four of us. Andreas and I started talking. I knew nothing about him, but he was obviously an eccentric. He said he was a meteorologist and an artist and that he'd always wanted to get the northern lights on film. I'm from Canada . . . Could I do that? Would I *want* to do that? It struck me as a good idea. I said, "Sure," not expecting that anything would come of it. I told him I didn't want to produce it, but if he could get the money, I'd make the film. He said, "Yeah, no problem." I went back to Canada.

Not long after, perhaps a month, perhaps two, he calls me up and says, “Okay, I got the money. Are you ready? We should go in the dead of winter. That’s the best time for the lights.” This was interesting. None of the usual proposal-writing, money-raising, people-convincing. I prepared as best I could. I researched the northern lights. I talked to people who’d filmed in Arctic conditions. The one clear objective was to get the lights on film; the rest would be exploratory. He was good with that. I told him it could be a raw document. It could be an experimental film. It could be a TV half-hour or a real cinema film. We agreed to just see what we find. Of course, I’m thinking this is how you should *always* work! You’re on a path and you let things bloom.

Teodoro: Where did the money come from?

Mettler: A very famous Swiss-German painter named Sigmar Polke. Andreas had a lot of painter friends. Sigmar sells his paintings for millions. This is unofficial, no one really knows this, but the film was basically funded by him. Or anyway the first trip was. An artist funding art, instead of a patron of the arts.

Teodoro: In the voice-over for *Picture of Light* you say, “I met a man who loves to watch the sky.” That’s Andreas?

Mettler: Yes.

Teodoro: Did you know from the start that Andreas would be part of the film’s story?

Mettler: I really didn’t have an agenda. I just recorded stuff that struck me, that fit the fabric of our journey somehow. Andreas is an interesting character. He fit the fabric. He’s a big guy. And his way of intoning in English is reminiscent of Werner Herzog.

Teodoro: As is the mock-heroism.

Mettler: Yes. Epic. Though Andreas isn’t really an epic person, everything comes out his mouth like that. He was very funny on-camera, so I put him on-camera at every stage of the shoot.

Teodoro: *Picture of Light* begins with the camera test in the cold chamber—which is a really amusing scene. How prepared were you for the project’s unusual technical challenges?

Mettler: We didn’t know how to film the northern lights. We brought the gear, but we didn’t know how bright the lights were. We didn’t even have a light meter, so the first thing we had to do was test exposures with a regular still camera. We made these cards. We had a scale of one to six, but it was a very subjective evaluation. We might decide that the brightness was a two, and while the lens was always wide open that two might equal, say, five seconds per frame. We knew we had to go into single-frame photography, that it wasn’t bright enough to be filmed. We’d shoot according to these hypotheses and then develop the images in the bathroom. You see a moment of that in the film, us landing on a ballpark figure for the exposure. I thought the process of getting the northern lights on film was interesting in its own right, though I didn’t yet know what the film was about. The themes that developed later were not themes I was deliberately trying to illuminate.

Teodoro: In the voice-over you speak of how everyone involved in the film had this thing in common: “the pursuit of wonder.” *Picture of Light* is where your pursuits converge. *Picture of Light* is in part the product of an alliance, a friendship.

Mettler: The pursuit of wonder: that was Andreas’s way, as a scientist, glaciologist, meteorologist, and as an artist, to an extreme degree. He would collect

mushrooms in the forest and makes pigments out of them. His place in the Swiss countryside, Spiegelberg, where I now live, was teeming with all this stuff that he'd collected and made colours with. There would be a raging storm outside and he'd take a plywood board and paint all over it, then take a second board and go out into the storm and push these boards together, creating a kind of natural painting generated by pressure and friction. He'd pull them apart and have these crazy, swirly things and he'd name the painting after the storm. That was the kind of thing Andreas would do. He had a fax machine in the house and every day the Berlin weather chart would come in. He was a collector. He amassed an immense number of items to do with Arctic exploration. He had original paintings that were painted on Arctic expeditions. He had diaries. He had photographs. He had kitsch. I didn't know about all this at first, but I did intuit that, while we weren't going on an expedition on the scale or with the risk factor of those early Arctic explorations, what we were doing had a tingle of recognition for him. Again, "pursuit of wonder." That's what I'm into too. I do it by pointing cameras and microphones into the world. He did it through a mixed study of science and art. We were a good team. He was a great producer. We would show each other things. Once in a while he would say, "Oh! You should film that!" But basically he was just letting me do what I wanted.

Teodoro: So Andreas would take something inherently chaotic and unpredictable, like weather, then bring order to that chaos through the collection and assessment of data, then re-establish a certain chaos through the creation of art whose character is derived from random factors. That's quite a mind.

Mettler: Yes. He'd never theorize like that about it, even though that's arguably what he's doing. He would just say, "Oh, yeah, that's really nice," without explaining it. He was funny that way.

Teodoro: It's rare to find someone who can engage so intensely in both science and art, creativity and analysis.

Mettler: He felt genuine awe toward nature. You know his house almost burned down while I was in it. I actually saved the house, which is perhaps why I ended up living there after his death. The fire would have consumed Andreas's entire life, yet in the immediate aftermath of this potential disaster he would look at the damage and say, "Oh, look at how beautiful the smoke patterns are! The cobwebs all covered in soot are just amazing!" I filmed this. We went around the house looking at stuff. He would get very excited for a moment, then he would start to cry when he realized what almost happened, then he would switch back into a state of fascination again. He was drawn to aesthetics but also to learning how things work. You could ask him any number of things about the physical universe, how stars implode, whatever. He had it all in his brain.

Something else we had in common was the desire to meet people and hear stories. One of the things we did in preparation for *Picture of Light* was send Gavin Connor ahead of the rest of us. Gavin was someone I had been working with on the research for *Gambling, Gods and LSD*. He wasn't a filmmaker, but he was a guy I really connected with.

Teodoro: He's credited with reconnaissance.

Mettler: That's right. I asked him if he wanted to go up a week ahead of us, scope out the terrain. He gave us a huge head start. Up north, everything takes four times as long as it would on a normal shoot. Getting dressed, getting the gear ready, going outside,

coming back inside, letting the gear thaw. And when you're outside, you're moving slowly. You can't see what you're doing. Even on a nice day you're freezing and fogging up. You look through the camera and the eyepiece is murky, then you get the images back and they're crystal-clear. You never saw what you were shooting.

Teodoro: Which also lends the project more of an air of a scientific experiment.

Mettler: That's right. Especially the northern lights footage. We'd FedEx the negative down to Toronto to be processed and then have the material sent back up. We had a huge amount of gear with us, including a projector, and would screen footage in the hotel.

Teodoro: *Picture of Light's* beautiful title sequence is followed by the train journey across the tundra. Was that the original train journey or the second one?

Mettler: This is where the chronology gets interesting. The real story is we went up by train the first time. We filmed a lot of *Picture of Light* on that trip. We filmed the northern lights with a system that had been tested in the cold chamber, with my Aton and a homemade intervalometer. But on location a number of things went wrong. We'd have to heat the cameras because they were out all night. We had Canadian Tire battery warmers plugged into a generator via extension cords. You would wrap the warmer around the camera. That stuff we hadn't tested. The battery warmer got so hot that it melted the inside of the magazine. Then there was an issue with the pull-down's relationship to the registration pin. What it meant—and you see this in some of the footage—was that there were these bright stripes like the stars. What was happening was the film was being exposed while being pulled down. It creates an effect like in *2001*. Slit-scanned. Sort of. There was no slit, but it's exposing while the film is moving through the gate without the shutter being closed. There was also the issue of us spotting some lights and scrambling to move the camera, then before we could shoot they'd be gone. So our first batch of northern lights after our first trip wasn't good enough. Although it was visually interesting. I had taken out a policy from a Hollywood insurance company for this shoot. We showed them this bad footage and they basically bankrolled a second shoot. They thought it was kind of cute, these Canadians shooting up where the polar bears are. There was a year between the first and second shoots.

Teodoro: So everyone went back to their lives for a year?

Mettler: Yes. And it gave us a chance to edit here in Toronto. We were editing *Tectonic Plates* and the first phase of *Picture of Light* in the same edit room. Two different Steenbecks. Catherine Martin was doing the first assembly of *Picture* while Mike Munn was editing *Tectonic*, and I was going between, while still developing *Gambling, Gods*. It was a methodology that I still implement. You go, you explore, you shoot, you collect, you edit and crystalize things to some degree. And then when you go to shoot again, you can really fill in the things you need. The second time we went to Churchill, we flew. We took a 35mm camera because there's better control, better image. We had decided that this was probably going to be a bigger film. We began editing in Switzerland after that. The decision to structure the film as a linear journey came quite late.

Teodoro: That sequence on the train, with the movement and the ice fog, contains all these little portraits of you and your fellow travellers, all of you silent, looking quite ruminative. It always puts me in mind of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* and the journey to the Zone.

Mettler: I don't recall when I saw *Stalker*. I had definitely seen and loved Tarkovsky. The palates. The long takes. The spiritual dimension. Water dripping. Moss. All those things I was totally into. I was kind of annoyed, actually, because I sensed that I had a vision that felt somewhat similar to Tarkovsky's. When I saw his stuff, I was both enchanted and disappointed because I realized I couldn't follow that. It would just be quoting Tarkovsky. I know, of course, that we all come to things from our different perspectives.

Teodoro: Waiting, silence, stillness, and boredom coalesce to play an essential role in *Picture of Light*. In the voice-over, you muse upon the idea of boredom in the north as its own activity. That boredom must have affected the process.

Mettler: Very much so. We had to wait out a week of intense blizzards. We couldn't do anything. That's how we ended up being in the motel so much. You know, the solution to boredom for a lot of people up there is to drink and watch TV. We're in this hotel making friends with Steve, the owner, and Leona, who worked there. We hung out. Oddballs would come over and drink with us. At one point, Andreas starts talking to everyone about how you could get a snowdrift through a little hole in the wall. I thought, That's something we can do! Let's try it out! Part of the hotel was closed off. I said to Steve, "Can we get the room at the end and make a hole in it?" He said, "Fuck, no!" We had to talk about it for hours. We continued drinking. And then he kind of warmed to the idea. "Okay, okay, so how are we gonna make the hole?" I said, "Do you have a drill?"

Teodoro: "Do you have a rifle?"

Mettler: Somebody said I could find a drill in a garage a couple blocks away. No one was willing to support me enough to go get the drill; I had to go get it. I went out looking for this garage in this whiteout. You can easily get lost within fifty feet of your home in such weather. I find the garage, go in, get the drill. There's no drill bit. I get back to the motel. "There's no drill bit!" Somebody had a gun. It was frozen, but it was nearby. We started filming. We shot a hole in the wall. The snow didn't come in because the angles were wrong or the wind was too cold, so Andreas built us this artificial drift, which was beautiful.

Teodoro: There's this sequence in *Picture of Light* where we see cars and forests and houses engulfed in snowdrifts that resemble frozen tidal waves. It feels like a rehearsal for extinction. The North, the edge of civilization, seems like a great place to build mock-ups for apocalypse. Do you get that tingle when you go north? Like you're unmoored from a functioning society?

Mettler: I don't know that I thought of apocalypse, but you feel unmoored, for sure. There's this moment in the film when Fred Hoyle describes the creation of the universe as an event whose likelihood was roughly equal to that of a 747 being assembled by a whirlwind. While you're hearing that you're also seeing a destroyed military base covered in snow, the corridors full of it. So there is this sense of the quiet after destruction.

Teodoro: I can only imagine that, living in a place like that, your attachment to a comfortable, easily navigable, civilized environment would be looser.

Mettler: It gets very elemental. A common problem in Churchill is people passing out drunk outside and freezing to death. The cold creates this membrane between you and dying. The house you live in is a membrane keeping the heat in, but what keeps it warm and safe is fragile. Once the membrane is gone, you get the destroyed military base. The

snow-monster and the cold come in and obliterate everything. You feel that edge. You know you can't go outside for long and must be completely prepared.

Teodoro: The filming of *Picture of Light* was clearly rich with exploration and discovery. Did the same hold true for the post-production?

Mettler: We did the first phase of editing, as I mentioned, in Toronto between shoots. Following the second shoot, Andreas proposed we edit in Switzerland. I liked the idea, so producer Alex Rockingham Gill, editor Mike Munn, and myself went to Switzerland. Which began a whole other phase of my life, I guess. We went to this region of Appenzell where Andreas owned a farm that was actually farmed by another farmer. In the farmhouse was a little apartment, and the farmer would rent that out sometimes. That was where we edited *Picture of Light*, this cow farm in the hills one thousand metres above the Rhine Valley. Those were Steenbeck days, so we had to bring all this heavy gear in and get it lifted up to the third floor, where we installed the edit room.

Teodoro: The last image in *Picture of Light* is of Alex, right?

Mettler: Mm-hm. Wearing my coat.

Teodoro: It's such a striking finale. She's not a character in the film, unlike Andreas or Mike, yet the final, parting image is of her.

Mettler: She's not a character mainly because she wasn't there on the first shoot. She could have been. Who knows? Gavin wasn't intended to be a character, but there he is heating up the gun.

Teodoro: Tell me about the last image.

Mettler: We have a human, a landscape, a sky, the mystery of being. That membrane, the coat, the fragility of it. It's interesting that you don't see her face. It wasn't intentional, but when I saw the footage I really liked it. She's like a ghost, almost.

Teodoro: I always identified that figure as a woman because of her gait. Which is interesting because *Picture of Light*, unlike your other films, is otherwise very much a man's movie.

Mettler: That's true. It's populated almost entirely by men.

Teodoro: So the image of Alex walking closes the film with this suspended feeling, of things unresolved. There's this stranger in the landscape who we never followed. We don't know where she came from.

Mettler: But we know she's going somewhere.