On *Communion Los Angeles* and the infrastructural travelogues of Peter Bo Rappmund

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A video still from *Communion Los Angeles* (2018)

Over the past decade, the filmmaker Peter Bo Rappmund has generated a remarkably consistent body of work tracing the landscapes that surround linear infrastructural corridors, from borders to pipelines, waterways to interstate highways. Superficially interpreted as time-lapse, his films are more accurately described as stop-motion animation. His scenes are sculpted through meticulous compilations of location sound alongside still imagery captured at a variety of intervals, carefully framing the eclectic landscapes that adjoin or transect his chosen object of study. Often, neighboring environments become more prominent than the border, river, or road itself. Time becomes an elemental substance coursing through intimate, flickery, hyperrealist travelogues alongside the Los Angeles River (*Psychohydrography*, 2010), the U.S.-Mexico border (*Tectonics*, 2011), and the Trans Alaska Pipeline (*Topophilia*, 2015).
Men delsohn (2018), is a collaboration with Adam R. Levine following Los Angeles’s 110 freeway -- one of the city’s oldest -- at day and at night.

Rappmund’s films can be read as the effort of an individual to locate analytical, perceptual, and spiritual clarity within the confines of ideologically and discursively saturated pathways. Whether it be the decades of neurotic, jingoistic news coverage stoking fear of migration from Mexico, or the mythological overcoding of Los Angeles as a city of tangled, sunbaked highways, his projects look at infrastructural objects that carry substantial archival baggage. What’s more, this baggage usually includes sedimented legacies of brutality and environmental racism. The burdens of post-war freeway construction in Los Angeles, for example, have predominately impacted Chicanos and Chicanas (Avila, 1998). In the case of the U.S. Mexico Border, a consistent site of ethnic violence, Rappmund captured his own affective responses to landscapes that are more often viewed through sensationalist imagery and narration. In the case of the Trans Alaska pipeline, he traced his encounter with a category of monumental infrastructure that is routinely contested over land and water rights, Indigenous sovereignty, and the consequences of global fossil-fuel capitalism without end.

As his fourth feature-length work, and the first to be co-directed with a collaborator, Communion Los Angeles invites reflection on the solitary, devotional production process driving Rappmund’s films. While Communion Los Angeles is packaged as the product of an equal partnership, it is shot and edited using Rappmund’s techniques. While Rappmund’s films read as ultra-high definition, his entire sound and camera rig fits into a single backpack, and the majority of his field outings are solitary affairs. “It’s a lot easier to get clarity, in a place like that,” he tells me, using language that blurs the line between knowledge of himself and knowledge of the landscape. The devotional rigor of these infrastructural pilgrimages is furthered by a post-production process that he describes as both tedious and meditative: “once you get into it, it's a frame by frame thing.” In the resulting flickers, accelerations and pauses, Rappmund’s images become a relay of his own oscillating emotional states.

Communion Los Angeles also speaks to the occasional criticism of Rappmund’s films for being de-peopled, sociologically naïve, and fetishistic. The film is in fact profoundly social, reflecting both a responsiveness to his critics as well as a stubborn insistence on the capacity of his formal strategies. Communion Los Angeles not only incorporates a collaborator, but it also makes prominent use of human figures, characters, and voices. The film contextualizes the road
as almost incidental to the formation of publics alongside, underneath, or intersecting with it. This omnidirectional gaze -- influenced, but not overdetermined by the path of the highway -- works against the fetishizing impulses of infrastructural cinema. There are certainly several shots of tangled overpasses abstracted into mysterious concrete tendrils, worthy of thousands of likes on Instagram. But there are many more images of commuters waiting to board bus rapid transit vehicles or trains, and at least as many images of Angelinos hanging out, hustling, or living underneath stretches of highway.

The film might also be treated as an essay in elemental media theory and its interest in the mediating properties of large infrastructural systems. In *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (2015), John Durham Peters suggests that media studies focus on infrastructure in order to isolate the political leverages inherent in various spatial technologies, a paradigm that he calls “infrastructuralism.” This approach is useful not only for interpreting the politics of nature and space, but for assessing how power operates in environments where spatial and architectural media intersect with intense circulations of sonic, cinematic, and textual communications (p. 30). In *Communion Los Angeles*, this set of relationships is foregrounded in the opening images showing radio towers that broadcast their signals into the distance. The idea is furthered as Rappmund and Levine traverse the 110, dialing into the broadcasts that a commuting subject might hear within her car. The audio track also collages a mix of ecstatic drone music, remixed samples from classic Hollywood cinema, and snippets of voice and ambient sound recorded on location. As a result, the film presents this highway as an embodied archive of recorded media as well as a vector in a dense force-field of parallel and intersecting transmissions, of bodies as well as signals.

If this is all sounding a bit new age, this is also the point. Rappmund’s films are suffused with a sort of mysticism that links a meditative viewing experience with a disciplined artistic practice in which the artist scripts and then performs a sequence of repetitive acts. Rappmund cites two film theorists for shaping the spiritualism of his films. The first, Nathaniel Dorksy, famously outlined an approach to “devotional cinema,” in which moving image artworks can “transform what might feel like leaden claustrophobia into an expression of openness and clarity” (2005, p. 17). Dorsky puts his faith not in organized religion but in the possibility of cinematic encounter, in “the opening or the interruption that allows us to experience what is hidden and to accept with our hearts our given situation” (p. 16). Rappmund also cites Paul Schrader who identified in the films of Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson (among others) a “transcendental style” that pivots on
transforming the restrictive pressures of the everyday through “an overpowering, irrational, and undefined sense of commitment” (1972). These are the sorts of commitments that allow Rappmund to grasp toward clarity in discursively saturated everyday environments. Yet despite the centrality of these ideas to his own thinking, much of the discourse surrounding Rappmund’s work neglects the devotional and transcendental dimensions of his films.

As a 2011 graduate of Cal Arts, Rappmund’s films are often interpreted through an imaginary mentorship by James Benning, a faculty fixture and titan of American landscape cinema. As a student, however, Rappmund focused on distinguishing his approach to landscape filmmaking from Benning’s extremely influential long duration style. As a result, Benning was initially quite skeptical, even suggesting that Rappmund’s animation work seemed gimmicky. While this is still a common reaction to his films, the sense of kitsch or gimmickry has always been one of Rappmund’s motivating interests. The final segment of *Psychohydrography*, for example, pairs a repetitive melodic drone with ten minutes of crashing waves, a guided meditation that is unabashedly woo-woo. “This is something I talked about all the time with my music composition teacher, where is the line between kitschy and transcendent with new age music?”

A video still from *Topophilia* (2015)
Rappmund’s titular references also tow this line, between “what is academically or critically accepted, and what can transcend those institutions of thought.” Two of his previous films were titled to reference classic (and currently unstylish) texts in phenomenologically-inflected social theory of place and space – *Psychohydrography* references situationism’s 1950s texts on psychogeography, and *Topophilia* references Yi-Fu Tuan’s 1974 text of the same name. Tuan defined topophilia as “the affective bond between people and place or setting” (p. 4) and unapologetically insisted that the study of space and place is meant “first of all, to understand ourselves” (p. 1). As a result, Rappmund’s *Topophilia* suggest that if his films are solipsistic, they are self-consciously and polemically so.

A video still from *Psychohydrograph* (2010)

The earlier canon of structuralist eco-cinema epitomized by James Benning, among others, helped retrain viewers to perceive environmental forms and processes (MacDonald, 2005). This was accomplished by rupturing mass media’s over-edited and spectacularized environmental images and replacing them with more static, deliberate, long duration works. Rappmund’s scenes, by contrast, do not linger. He enfolds new insights and energies that cannot be captured by extended duration alone, and these innovations address one of the most damning critiques of the previous wave of eco-cinema: how the gaze that drives many durational landscape films is suspiciously close to that of a surveyor’s theodolite, making the filmmakers
willing collaborators in logics of imperialism, settler colonialism, and resource extraction (Goldsmith, 2018). Rappmund’s incessant foregrounding of his own embodied subjectivity, of the phenomenology of infrastructural encounter, offers a potential alternative rooted in sensitivities that transcend merely optical or even spatiotemporal perception. If such an approach risks being interpreted as solipsistic, *Communion Los Angeles* reiterates the essential sociality of Rappmund’s vision, explicitly surfacing the racist legacies of Los Angeles’ highway construction while marveling at the strangeness of the spaces that these highways co-produce.
References


