

Forgotten future

For the video series “Processions,” Ben Greber and Bram Kuypers embark on a journey to various test tracks for high-speed transportation systems. The starting point of the trilogy is the Transrapid test site in Emsland, in northern Germany. The second part explores the former track of the Aérotrain in France. Finally, the last episode was created at the test track of the Hyperloop in the hinterlands of Nevada in the United States. The artists’ exploration of these test systems for high-speed trains is based on their overarching interest in technological utopias of the industrial age. In the films, Ben Greber and Bram Kuypers approach the respective transportation systems and associated ideas of the future in different ways. Combining performative elements with panoramic shots of the landscapes, they create an atmosphere that is at times surreal.

“Procession 1” shows the Transrapid test track, which was shut down in 2010. The Transrapid had been developed and tested since the late 1960s. The track in Lathen was built in the 1980s and, in 1991, the magnetic levitation (or maglev) train became operational there. Parallel to the development test runs, tourist trips were also offered, until the tragic accident in 2006. The track is still maintained to this day, to keep the structure from falling into disrepair – and also in case it is repurposed in the future. While the technology of the Transrapid has been virtually forgotten, the track still stands there like a monumental memorial to a utopia of a new form of transportation that has failed for now, at least in Germany. Laid out in the form of an elongated infinity sign, the architecture of the track ignores the existing structure of the landscape, which is shaped by agriculture. In their work, Greber and Kuypers address these aspects of artificiality and sacrality. The drone follows the maintenance vehicle’s slow journey along the track, accompanied by abstract sounds from a cello. The special vehicle emits red smoke, lending the scene a liturgical character. The slow pace of the film contrasts with the actual idea of the maglev train – after all, it was once supposed to be the fastest train in the world.

The Aérotrain, developed and tested in France beginning in the mid-1960s, was a precursor to the Transrapid. The second part of the “Processions” series explores its track, which also still exists and is no longer in use. Here, test runs were carried out with a hovertrain on a concrete track. In the film, a camera drone once again follows the

action: a person – the artist Bram Kuypers himself – is running along the elevated track at a regular and sustained pace. While “Procession 1” thematizes faith in technological progress, and the cultivation of this faith (the track’s maintenance) is presented as analogous to a religious procession (a traditional ritual), “Procession 2” offers a view of the relationship between humans and technology, their speed, and their perception of landscapes when in motion. The view follows the runner’s steady, almost meditative rhythm. A train suddenly appears on a railroad track in the background and just as quickly disappears again from the scene. A moving car can also be seen in one shot. On the remnant of a technological future that has not arrived, humanity is moving at the speed at which it has progressed since the beginning of its current existence, even as it is being overtaken by the present state of technology. In this image, the artists link the temporal levels of future, past, and present. At the same time, it also shows the transience of utopian future scenarios that are still based on the Olympic motto of “higher, faster, further.”

In the final part of the trilogy, Ben Greber and Bram Kuypers explore our current conception of the future. In “Procession 3,” the drone, slightly below eye level, works its way through the Nevada desert towards a gigantic steel tube. While the associations with science fiction are only peripheral in the other two films, here they are evident not only in the desert landscape but also in the film’s opening credits. In this episode, the drone’s camera confronts a dystopian vision of landscape: desertification as a symbol of ecological catastrophe, of humanity’s failure in its treatment of the planet. The area seems abandoned by humans and yet is full of traces of them. The drone makes its way past scrap metal and dried-out cacti, through the wasteland to the horizon, where the giant white tube appears, in which goods – and, ideally, also people – are to be transported at the speed of sound. While the Transrapid and Aérotrain are still evocative of a classic train journey, in which the journey itself can also be the aim (namely, watching the passing landscape), this aspect recedes completely into the background with the Hyperloop. Consequently, one cannot help but wonder if our current idea of the future is to ignore the landscape, nature, in favor of technological progress. However, for now, the Hyperloop is also merely an attempt, and we do not yet know to what extent it will become reality.

In their three-part video work “Processions,” Ben Greber and Bram Kuypers undertake a kind of time travel, interweaving past hopes for the future with present ideas of the future, which soon will also be past. The constant in all three films and times (past, present, and future) is the procession, the moving forward. The liturgical ritual of the procession symbolizes faith in technological progress, in a technological future that, in many cases, remains unfulfilled. At the same time, the artists’ examination of the various rail lines paints a picture of the landscape of the present, of the Anthropocene, into which humans inscribe themselves with their infrastructural needs, shaping it accordingly. This critical examination is also evident in depictions of landscapes from the 19th century, the century of industrialization. Just as, for example, the social conditions of the time are always discernable in William Turner’s railroad pictures, Ben Greber and Bram Kuypers’s artistic exploration of high-speed railway lines in “Processions” is also a reflection of our contemporary society.

Marijke Lukowicz