Pipelines

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When thinking about pipelines, the temptation to revert to one's native Heideggerianism is almost too great to resist. In a 1955 address, when Heidegger tried to concretize his view of the essence of modern technology as Gestell, or "enframing," he turned to petrochemicals rather than his stock example of hydroelectric DAMS. Under the regime of technology as Gestell, Heidegger says, "Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry" (1969, 50). ENERGY was central to Heidegger's conception of technology as enframing, in which the world is set upon as standing-reserve, a mode of being "which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such" (1977b, 14). If pipelines are anything at all, they are surely instruments of this "unreasonable demand."

But not just instruments. This, too, we learn from Heidegger, long before we hear it from the actor-network theorists, object-oriented philosophers, media archaeologists, and new materialists: more than just instruments for transporting oil and gas, pipelines are things, of the sort that condition the possibility of Dasein, or being in the world. Dasein, Heidegger writes, is originally mediated: "it never finds itself otherwise than in the things themselves, and in fact in those things that daily surround it. It finds itself primarily and constantly in things because, tending them, distressed by them, it always in some way or other rests in things" (1982, 159). Pipelines are things that daily surround us, distress us, to which we must attend. They are MEDIA in, with, and through which we come to be in the world as the sort of beings we are.

To describe oil and gas pipelines as media is to confirm, rather than strain, the substantive meaning of this category. As media historian Lisa Gitelman writes, "media [are] socially realized structures of communication" (2006, 7). In this sense, transportation infrastructures are the oldest, most enduring media, especially if we accept that communication is not limited to the circulation of meaning via symbolic representation but also includes forms of "organized movement and action," by which "social reality…is built and organized" (Sterne 2006, 118). Transportation is communication, and its infrastructures are media by virtue of the materialities of circulation, distribution, and interaction they make present, not because of the semantic meaning of their contents. Consider the difficulty of expressing in words the magnitude of the enterprise currently underway in Alberta's oil sands. Extraction alone consumes "enough natural gas every day to heat four million homes," "enough water to supply two cities the size of Calgary…the same amount of water going over Niagara Falls in an eight hour period" (Nikiforuk 2010, 4, 62). Such equivalencies are so fantastic they almost fail to signify, but, standing near an array of transmission pipelines at Hardisty, Alberta, you experience communication of a different sort. You get the message. Following Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, we might say that transportation infrastructures are media because they "produce presence" and, in so doing, communicate "what meaning cannot convey" (2004, 16).

Nevertheless, before they are even built, pipelines prompt a profusion of meaning-making in the conventional sense. State approval and regulatory processes for pipeline developments are media for the production and circulation of contested scientific, technical, economic, and political knowledges about what pipelines are, what they do, and what they mean. Studies are made, presented, contested, and archived. There are blooms of data and information. Discourses are mobilized, claims are made, and languages are translated. State and corporate public relations

machines are swung into high gear. There are demonstrations, occupations, and protests. Moving and still images, graphics, text, voice, and sound proliferate via a similarly diverse array of media that together make up a network of which the pipeline-to-come forms the trunk. Almost none of this activity would be possible without petroleum and the pipelines that communicate between its source and many destinations.

Pipelines accomplish a range of mediatic functions: they contain, store, convey, conduct, transmit, connect, distribute, span. In these respects, they are like rivers, canals, rail-roads, and highways, and also like telegraphy, telephony, portable print media, and wired and wireless digital NETWORKS. In none of these functions are pipelines simply neutral. It matters how and what they contain and convey, between where and whom they conduct it, for what purpose, to whose benefit and detriment, under whose control, with what fore- seen and unforeseen consequences. As with all media, these contingencies make pipelines "political machines," which is to say they are technologies of and for the condensation, exertion, and contestation of power (Barry 2001). If digital networks are the INFRASTRUCTURE of the information society, then, as Timothy Mitchell (2011) shows, pipelines are the infrastructure of actually existing "carbon democracy." Pipelines mediate a "form of life" in which we are invited to become beings whose lives are always-already materially and politically organized around the production and consumption of petrochemicals (Winner 1986, 12).

Like all media, pipelines aspire to the dream of invisibility and the fantasy of immediacy. Just as it is best when digital networks deliver us images, sound, and text wherever and whenever we want them without bothering us to register the infrastructure at all, it is best (at least from the perspective of energy capital, energy states, and energy consumers) when pipelines deliver energy without anybody noticing them (Barry 2009). That pipelines are often remote to major population centers and are usually mostly buried makes them largely unseen but—again, like all media—they leap to visibility and demand attention at crucial moments: when they are being planned and built; when they are disrupted; and when they fail. These moments, in which the oil and gas cannot simply be contained, are when pipelines exceed their ready-to-hand instrumentality and become present-at-hand as things with agency, acting in the world as part of complex assemblages with other human and nonhuman things (Bennett 2010).

The networks of which pipelines make up one part are spatially expansive, intermedial, and temporally disorienting. There is no inhabited continent free of existing oil and gas pipelines, and major pipeline expansion projects are underway everywhere, with major concentrations in North America, Eastern Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region (Petroleum Economist 2012). Pipelines traverse national borders, linking typically remote, often impoverished RURAL and quasi-colonial peripheries to concentrations of industrial production and urban consumption, continuing a tradition whereby the movement of staple commodities materializes an imperial network of uneven communication that undergirds and outstrips the globalizing influence attributed to information technologies (Innis 1970). Pipelines do not accomplish this task on their own: their functionality relies on other media of transportation, including storage tanks, ships, ports, railways, and tanker trucks, without whose interoperable multimodality pipelines would be useless. The same goes for the various media of transformation that make up the "network of bodies" forming the "carbon web" that makes petrocultures and petroeconomies possible— energy, manufacturing and retail corporations, financial institutions, state regulatory agencies, the military, and the scientific complex (Marriott and Minio-Paluello 2012, xii). Far from being simple lines on a map, pipelines materialize a complex spatiality that both ramifies, in the sense of passing on effects from one site to another, and is itself a ramification, in the sense of being one subdivision of a more complex process of mediation whose boundaries are difficult to discern.

The same quality attends to the temporality of pipelines. As Carola Hein (2009, 35) points out, the finiteness of their nonrenewable contents means that oil and gas pipelines are essentially temporary infrastructures, knowingly designed to eventually join the pile of modernity's technological refuse as "residual media" (Acland 2006). But pipelines mediate a span of time whose sheer extent is almost impossible to conceive: extracting resources from deposits formed hundreds of millions of years ago to produce effects that reach infinitely forward into unimaginable futures. In the short-term calculus of industry, pipelines are a sure thing: an investment that promises healthy returns. For the rest of us, they are a wager in an uncertain game. Media structure our temporal attention, and pipelines are no exception. They are, however, exceptional in that the time to which pipelines ask us to attend is forever. Now.