

PRESS RELEASE

FLOW & RIVE

Documentary film: 65 min, Germany & Switzerland, 2021

Spoken languages: German, Swiss-German, and English

Production: Roberto Luis Ellis

Direction: Danielle Rotholi Balensifer

PROJECT'S BACKGROUND

“If philosophy were to have a purpose, shouldn't at least one such purpose be the alleviation of suffering through the dispelling of ignorance?” Naïve though the question may appear, it drove Roberto Ellis from New York City to Mainz, Germany, to deepen his knowledge of philosophy and language; such fundamentals inform his endeavors and inquiries. It was, of all things, in an essay by the infamously questionable and somewhat deplorable Martin Heidegger (*Die Frage nach der Technik / The Question Concerning Technology*) that he was struck by Heidegger's assertion regarding the seductive nature of understanding; these emerged from out of allegedly universal existential elements which disincline one away from, to put it simply, changing one's mind. With the help of an often cited line from “Patmos” a poem of the famous German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, Heidegger proceeds toward a solution: “Yet where the danger is, arises, too, the saving power.” Concretized vis-à-vis the multidimensional complexity of climate change, the lyric's gravity can be more clearly exhibited. If climate change indeed poses the threat that researchers across the natural sciences have been warning us about, and this with increasing intensity for over half a century, why aren't we taking it seriously? Is Heidegger right? Would only a gripping confrontation with the coming danger motivate us?

This project then gained traction in the year 2017, when, sitting on the banks of the Rhein under the ascending twilight and gazing out blankly at the traffic of ships, automobiles, animals, detritus, and various pieces of trash across and over the water that those questions' incessant rumblings burst in Roberto's mind: “Haven't we gone through this before?” The Rhein's history throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and the accompanying progression toward a broad societal awareness of the industrialization's consequences mirrored the understanding articulated by Heidegger. That this one instance of dependent arising between Human and Ecosystem so precisely incorporated this issue microcosmically, only gravitated more concern toward the possible correlations with the environmental crisis world-wide. What other scenarios had already played out along different rivers or other manners of ecosystems around the world? How do their individual consequences add up across the globe to reckon the current catastrophe?

Compiling the results in a typical academic article seemed as insufficiently able to encompass the message's possibility as a stiff written work would be equally unable to reach a wider

audience; and we understand climate change to be a Human problem. So rather than taking the consideration of these questions to the library and typing up an essay few would read, the research and end result would need to impress the importance of these issues upon a broad audience.

Regarding the Process: Sitting along the Rhein always begged the question of the Rhein as a phenomenon extending beyond the horizon of Mainz; Roberto needed to get to *know* the river. Inspired in part by Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, the project's laboratorium was to be an errant one; a more complete and multifaceted knowledge of the river would be best served by varying the manners of travel along, over, and through it. From the source of the Hinterrhein he investigated the Rhein by hiking along it to Konstanz, sailing across the Bodensee, rowing up to Basel, and finally traveling by container ship to Mainz. This process's unfolding was also left intentionally flexible, that the various happenings along the way could reveal the full extent of their potential. Thusly encountering and exchanging with all manners of people along the way, Roberto was able to dialogue directly with many regarding their experience of the river, and compare thoughts about its past and future.

Regarding the Result: How should we explain all of this? Although the Documentary Essay, Visual Poetry, Narrative Audio Pieces and other audio and visual forms of communication had accompanied his considerations from the beginning, nothing concretized until he teamed up with Danielle Rothli. Educated in a variety of audio visual formats, with a passion for documentary filmmaking, in autumn of 2018 Danielle Rothli had just settled into her new job at a news agency in Berlin, yet was itching to exercise her creative talents. They both believe in the transformative power of consequent conversation and the experience of exchanges as major triggers for change. Combining her nascent expertise with his experiences from the previous summer, in the winter of 2018 they worked together to craft a new project for 2019. Both aurally and visually, in communicating the project's dimensions they wanted to vary the forms articulating the incipient theses and accompanying conversations, so as to stimulate spectators across a broad spectrum to decelerate the projection of their interpretations, consider more deeply, and shift beyond the perspective of their immediate needs. The hope is to therethrough engender a more holistic and common perspective about the ways in which our behavior enables and perpetuates the problem.

Receiving funding and support from the Film & Nachwuchsförderung Rheinland Pfalz, the duo planned excursions to Mainz, Basel, and the Hinterrhein/Nufenen area to conduct particular interviews and gather the audio and video material needed for their Investigative Documentary.

SUPPORT

The **Zentrum für Interkulturelle Studien** from the Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz has sponsored this project since it began, as an alternative method of bringing philosophical discussions off campus, closer to the people it addresses, breaking existentialist debates out of “closed circles of thinkers” and into people’s lives in a realistic way. The ZIS’ work/study support primarily helped set the initial 2018 journey into motion.

In a summer that broke records for low water in the Rhein (2018), precluding the goods’ delivery to Switzerland and France, the journey led the philosophy student back to Mainz, and the idea for a documentary was concretized, in order to raise awareness on how the Rhein’s past situation is reflected in today’s environmental concerns. This way, the philosophical argumentation can be illustrated with contemporary and lively images. The **Film- und Mediennachwuchsförderung Rheinland-Pfalz** sponsored the project so the journey would be revived, this time to record in video the nature, impressions, and opinions of those who live close to the river in their particular ways. **FMRP** also granted the use of its facilities, such as recording equipment and access to their cutting lab, besides covering the costs described in the project selected in their public bid.

AUTHORS

Roberto Luis Ellis

Co-director, Producer, Camera assistant, and Scriptwriter.

It was while completing his Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology and Anthropology with a focus in languages and theoretical linguistics from Vermont’s Middlebury College in 2009 that Roberto first encountered Heidegger’s essay *The Question Concerning Technology*. His interests in answering the questions opened therein led him to pursue a Masters in German Studies through Middlebury’s Summer Language Institute, which included a year at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz. With this degree he was able to enroll at the JGU as an international student, where he has been studying philosophy since 2016.

Danielle Rotholi

Director, Co-producer, Camera woman, and Scriptwriter.

Descendant of a German family, Danielle grew up in various cities throughout Brazil, constantly fascinated by the regional cultures and accents, which embody the local, genuine personality of its people. She received her bachelor in Audiovisual & New Media, graduating with honors from the University of Fortaleza; for her, documentary production is a vivid artistic expression (*Abyssal*, 2016). After starting her career as a TV producer (Rede Globo), Danielle immigrated to Germany in 2015 to pursue a masters degree in International Media Studies at the Deutsche Welle Akademie in Bonn. Since then she has dedicated herself to integrating into German culture and its media market. *Flow & Rive* is her first European production; as a foreigner, her aim is to share a unique perspective towards a culture she admires and seeks to complement, as well as delivering a global message of awareness.

SINOPSIS

Short synopsis

Version 1: After migrating to Germany a nascent philosopher and an independent film producer teamed up to craft a message about climate change. In this dialectic, visual argumentation they weave an analogy of micro- and macrocosmic instances of humans' confrontation with nature, seen through an existentialist lens and heard through voices of the river's witnesses.

Version 2: In this dialectic, visual argumentation, a nascent philosopher and an independent filmmaker teamed up to craft a message about climate change. They weave an analogy of micro- and macrocosmic instances of humans' confrontation with nature, seen through an existentialist lens and heard through voices of the river's witnesses.

Version 3: A nascent philosopher and an independent filmmaker team up to weave instances of humans' confrontation with nature, seen through an existentialist lens and heard through voices of the river's witnesses.

Medium length synopsis:

Voiced by some of those who live it in its diverse forms, from its source in the Swiss alps, flowing between France and Germany, before reaching the sea in the Netherlands, the river Rhein is the main character of this work. The Rhein's history during its straightening and industrialization reflects dangerous societal practices, the consequences of which are devastating for the human world and the environment at large.

Therefore a nascent philosopher and an independent filmmaker teamed up to weave instances of humans' confrontation with nature, seen through an existentialist lens and heard through voices of the river's witnesses. By listening to different accounts of people's relationships with the Rhein, we hope to engender reflection regarding the nature of these insidious structures and sort out the depth of their integration in our collective ways of structuring reality.

Long synopsis:

By virtue of its turbulent history, the river Rhein microcosmically illustrates many facets of humans' relation to nature. With the constant threat of floods simultaneously possibilitating its fertile margins, and its seemingly ceaseless curves once making it Europe's most plentiful source of salmon while also complicating fluvial travel and transport, the Rhein has always been a phenomenon wrought with dialectical complexity. The straightening of the Rhein during Germany's industrialization accumulated the consequences of this way of understanding reality to a breaking point, when in the 1980s the river's effective death paved the way for environmental reform across the economic sector.

The project began inspired from a philosophical essay by Martin Heidegger, warning of a danger inherent in a *way of looking* related to the essence of what he calls Technik; this essence produces not just a *manner of seeing* the world but also a way of extracting its dynamism to render and secure its fluctuations into static blocks of stored energy and processed products, assuring safety and survival with one hand, yet sowing seeds of dangers to sprout in the future with the other. Therefore a collective discussion is urgently necessary to find our way out of this situation, which was caused by our own collective mindset, not acknowledging relevant roots of the problem.

In this dialectical, visual argumentation, a nascent philosopher and an independent filmmaker team up to craft a message about climate change. They weave an analogy of micro- and macrocosmic instances of humans' confrontation with nature, seen through an existentialist lens and heard through the voices of the river's witnesses. These documentary authors utilize lines from the philosopher James Carse, to salvage what they can of the theories articulated by the controversial Martin Heidegger, in order to engage in a discussion about man's illusions of safety, order, and control which bridges the gap between the problems of the past and the needs of the present. Aiming to bring philosophy closer to people's reality, the argument of danger as a trigger for salvation is raised as a possible solution. What do we need to awaken our action?

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Title: Flow & Rive (2021)

Format: Documentary film - Color - HD - Stereo

Duration: 65 minutes

Countries: Germany and Switzerland

Production house: Zentrum für Audio-Visual Produktion Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz

Support: Film- und Mediennachwuchsförderung Rheinland-Pfalz & Zentrum für Interkulturellen Studien

Direction and Executive Production: Danielle Rotholi & Roberto Luis Ellis

Screenplay: Roberto Luis Ellis & Danielle Rotholi

Cast/Interviews: Toni Weibel, Elke Sabou, Kristina Jeromin, Sebastian Zimmerman, Melmer Lodder, Hugo Aaiben, Daniel Stolz, Mario Brunhold, Roman Eggenberger, Sandra Bill, Stefani Bill, Martin Trutman, Erin Wen, Mary Löw, Klaus Werner Löw.

Photography direction: Danielle Rotholi

Photography assistance: Roberto Luis Ellis

Cutting: Danielle Rotholi & Roberto Luis Ellis

Art direction: Roberto Luis Ellis & Danielle Rotholi

Direct sound: Roberto Luis Ellis

Sound mixing: Danielle Rotholi