

Unsentimental Compassion

The Documentaries of Peter and Petra Lataster

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Peter Lataster (Amsterdam, 1955) and Petra Lataster-Czisch (Dessau, GDR, 1954) have worked together as documentary filmmakers for the past quarter of a century. A harmonious alliance – ‘together we are a single director’, they always say – that has already earned them a wide array of Dutch and international film awards, including a Golden Calf for *Tales of a River* (1994) and *Not Without You* (2010). And in 2012 the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision spotlighted the team as ‘Documentary-makers In Focus’, an honour falling previously only to John Appel, Hans Heijnen and Heddy Honigmann.

This confirms the Latasters’ status in the Dutch film world, all the more remarkable considering the fact that the couple’s repertoire is hardly one of large-scale, sensational stories or of dazzling cinematic flamboyance. Their work consists mainly of intimate, personal documentaries. ‘We’re not after exoticism or shock value,’ they wrote in the introduction to the Sound and Vision booklet *Petra Lataster-Czisch & Peter Lataster In Focus*. ‘For us, making a film is an encounter with other people, a journey of discovery to places we’ve never seen so close up. We believe that by focusing at length on the smaller picture, we can better comprehend the big picture, and are able to communicate something universal.’

Artists and caregivers

The Latasters’ oeuvre, developed largely in co-operation with the humanist broadcasting company Human (formerly the Humanistische Omroep), can be roughly divided into two categories. The first includes films about artists and thinkers whom they admire. In 1991 they made their debut with *De bekoring*, a poetic portrait of Peter’s grandfather, the sculptor Frits van Hall, whose participation in the Dutch artists’ resistance movement resulted in his deportation in 1944 to Dachau and, later, Auschwitz. And over the years they have produced portraits of other artists and scholars, including the sculptor and illustrator Auke de Vries (*I Like to Touch Everything*, 2006), the mathematician Hendrik Lenstra (*The Things You Don’t Understand*, 2010) and the Moroccan-Belgian choreographer and dancer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (*The Need to Dance*, 2014).



The other thread in their work is the relationship between society's more vulnerable members and the people who care for them. They documented the life of a group of at-risk women in a domestic violence shelter in *This Will Never Go Away* (2005), the difficult but loving relationship between a severely autistic boy and his ever-patient caregiver in *Jeroen Jeroen* (2012), and paediatricians at the Groningen University Medical Centre wrestling with ethical issues in *If We Knew* (2007).

Peter and Petra Lataster
Photo by Gertjan Miedema

Sometimes the two facets overlap. *Call it Sleep* (1996), for example, is an affectionate portrait of the American author Henry Roth. Peter and Petra Lataster filmed him throughout the last year of his life: a frail, elderly man who relied entirely on his bandana-wearing caregiver. And the much-lauded film about Peter's own parents, *Not Without You*, is in fact an amalgam of the two themes as well – although, in this case, the filmmakers themselves were also the (off-screen) carers.

Demise of grand ideals

It is not difficult to trace the origins of the Latasters' dual fascinations. Peter is the son of the painter Ger Lataster and photographer Hermine van Hall. Their social awareness likewise stems from their youth. For starters there was the untimely death of Petra's mother, which she says 'linked her to the transience of life'. And their parents' political leanings were also influential. 'My father

was a devoted communist,' Petra once said in an interview with film journalist Jan Pieter Ekker, 'and Pjotr (her nickname for Peter, ed.) grew up in a communist family too. We had to redefine our world view, and film is an extremely suitable means for doing so.'

The demise of grand ideals played an important role in their early work. They made three films about life in the GDR after the fall of the Berlin Wall: *Tales of a River* (1994), *River of Time* (1999) and *Dreamland GDR* (2003). In the first of these – winner of the Golden Calf for best feature documentary at the Netherlands Film Days (now the Netherlands Film Festival) – they investigated the effect of German reunification on the everyday lives of the inhabitants of Petra's home town of Dessau. *River of Time* is a chronicle of the town of Groß Lüben, situated on the border between East and West Germany. And in the final (and finest) segment of the trilogy, Petra invited her own former schoolmates to share their recollections from before and after the fall of the Wall. 'Cherished memories of a bygone youth in a country that did not truly exist', wrote the Dutch daily *Trouw*.

The GDR trilogy is, in a certain sense, the odd man out in the Latasters' oeuvre, partly due to the dreamy voice-overs that play a conspicuous role, but also because of the degree to which it features the makers themselves. *Dreamland GDR*, for instance, opens with the following quote from Petra: 'I was very young when I fell in love with a cameraman from capitalist Holland. We married and I climbed over the nearly unscalable wall separating two hostile worlds.' She appears on camera often: not only as an interviewer, but also as a participant, visiting her parents' vacant house ('a place of endless dreams'). The viewer watches her peruse her own Stasi dossier and shares her relief in discovering that none of her family or friends had ever betrayed her.



Stills from *Not Without You*, about the parents of Peter Lataster
Photo by Peter Lataster © Lataster&Films 2010

Stills from *Tales of a River*
Photo by Peter Lataster ©
Lataster&Films 1994



The most enduring elements of the trilogy, however, are two figures who openly long for 'the good old days'. In *Tales of a River* there is a man whose entire youth had been spent preparing for his future career as a border guard – until everything he believed in and dreamed of fell to pieces along with the Wall, and he attempted to take his own life. And in *Dreamland GDR* there is Petra's ex-classmate Peter, the son of a former party chief, who out of a sense of nostalgia keeps the East German army's European invasion plans under his sofa.

Dreamland GDR, however, marked the end of the 'grand narratives' in the Latasters' films. Since then they have focused their attention on smaller, closer-to-home dramas – a rather remarkable development, in the light of their shared background. The filmmaker couple met in the mid-1970s at the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen in Potsdam-Babelsberg, at that time one of the leading film academies behind the Iron Curtain. Peter studied camera technique, having been rejected twice by the Amsterdam Film Academy. And Petra studied scenario-writing and cinematology. She would later recount their first meeting to Jan Pieter Ekker: 'I saw Pjotr in the dormitory kitchen and knew at once: this is Mr. Right. He was a bit slower...'

Direct cinema

It is not only the themes of their films that have changed over the years. The way the Latasters present their stories has undergone a transformation, too, albeit a subtle one. Their style has always been sober and simple – more television than cinema, the acerbic critic might say – with the emphasis on content. But since *Fragile Happiness* (2001) – one of the few lesser works in their oeuvre, a somewhat artificial portrait of ten ordinary residents of The Hague and their day-to-day vicissitudes – the couple no longer makes films on celluloid. Digital



Stills from *River of Time*,
Photo by Peter Lataster
© Lataster&Films 1999

photography, which allows them to film much longer and more cheaply, has clearly freed up their style. And in the tradition of 'direct cinema', their work tends to rely less on interviews: what the viewer sees mainly happens spontaneously in front of the camera.

What has not changed, though, is the meticulousness of their groundwork. In interviews they explain how they often spend weeks discussing a certain camera position or debating to what extent they themselves will be present in the film. And while it is hardly noticeable, there is a specific choice of imagery for each film. Take, for example, *Not Without You*. They agreed beforehand that Peter's parents, Ger and Hermine, would always be shown together in each shot, underscoring their mutual reliance. If this was not physically possible, then the camera would always pan from the one to the other in the course of the shot. And the tempo was to be intentionally slow, forcing the viewer to become a participant in the rhythm of their daily lives.

The result is a poignant portrait of the last year Peter's parents would spend together (his mother passed away during filming). An honest film too, which often confronts the viewer with the decrepitude of old age, the elderly couple's quarrels, and the rare moments of tenderness. 'Intimate without being voyeuristic, and moving without being sentimental,' wrote *Volkskrant* reviewer Pauline Kleijer. And the weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer* had nothing but praise too: 'More and more, documentaries revolve around the maker himself or his immediate surroundings. This requires walking the fine line between closeness and distance, between intimacy and voyeurism. The Latasters – all four of them – have made a masterpiece.'

For the likewise magnificent *Jeroen Jeroen* (2012, nominated for a Golden Calf for Best Short Documentary) the camera was removed from its tripod. The film closely follows the profoundly autistic Jeroen for two days, observing him

in good as well as bad moments. One minute he is as happy as a child, the next minute he flails wildly, trying to hurt his caregiver. And the Latasters, albeit out of sight, are right there on top of it all, not affording the viewer a moment's respite, just as Jeroen's parents and coach never get a moment's rest.

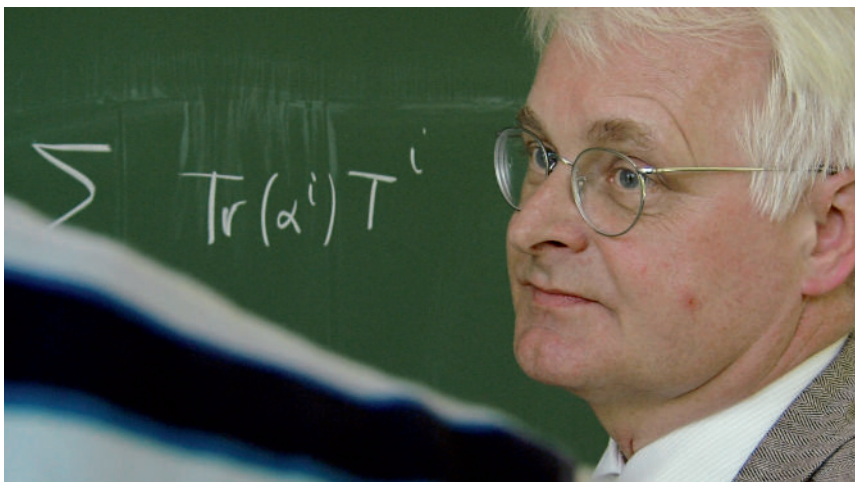
Sincerity and integrity

These are just two examples of the Latasters' use of film in the service of dramaturgy. And there are plenty more: perhaps their greatest visual coup is how, in *If We Knew*, they transform a sterile hospital into a cocoon of warmth, love and security. But in the end, that is not their forte *per se*, because what makes the Latasters' films so unique is the integrity and sincerity of their approach, regardless of the subject. As the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* put it: 'The Dutch documentary world probably has no more meticulous and conscientious directors than the Latasters.' Bert Janssens, a former editor at the broadcaster Human and its present director, praised their methods in *Petra Lataster-Czisch & Peter Lataster In Focus*: 'Their talent is that they are not calculating in approaching a subject (...) Averse to cheap effects, they focus above all on the subject itself.'

The Latasters never make a film in order to advocate a certain standpoint, or to draw attention to social injustice. The individual is the focal point, and not what he or she stands for. A good example is *The Things You Don't Understand* (2010), their humorous portrait of mathematician Hendrik Lenstra, who garnered worldwide attention as a twenty-eight-year-old professor at the University of Amsterdam and co-discoverer of the LLL algorithm. But rather than mathematics, the Latasters asked him about issues like love and happiness, and turned the camera on Lenstra's close relationship with his mother, who still calls him up every morning and evening.

Stills from *The Things You Don't Understand*, about the mathematician Hendrik Lenstra

Photo by Peter Lataster © Lataster&Films 2010



Making films *with*, and not only *about* people, is the Latasters' philosophy. And this evidently results in a deep trust between filmmaker and 'subject', because time and time again they are privy to the most intimate, often painful moments. In *If We Knew*, for example, when a premature baby dies in the operating room and they witness the father as he touches his child for the first and last time. Or in *Awake in a Bad Dream* (2013), where a woman with breast cancer is being assisted in the shower, because she is unable to wash herself. In the interview with Jan Pieter Ekker, Petra said of this film: 'It's a terrible situation of course. But at the same time it's deeply moving to see how people bare their souls. They have to, otherwise they wouldn't survive. And sharing this results in a deep feeling of sympathy and solidarity.'

Filmmaking has its price

The Latasters do not airbrush reality: illness, decline, death are presented true-to-life, and as painful and confronting as the situation may be, the camera never turns away. Not even in *Not Without You*, when Peter's own father strips and shuffles into the shower. 'It's normal to present bold, hard, reality in war reports or on other momentous subjects, but as soon as we show an elderly man, naked and in need of assistance, people find it unpalatable and in-your-face,' they said to *de Volkskrant* of this particular scene. 'Because it's so much closer to their own reality.'

Stills from *This Will Never Go Away*

Photo by Peter Lataster © Lataster&Films 2005





Stills from *The Need to Dance*,
about the choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui
Photo by Peter Lataster © Lataster&Films 2014



Stills from *Awake in a Bad Dream*
Photo by Peter Lataster © Lataster&Films 2013

Witnessing all sorts of misery up close is not always easy. In a variety of interviews, Petra has said how difficult making *Awake in a Bad Dream* was. Its completion felt like a grieving process, although she maintained contact with the women in the film after shooting it.

But, they admit, this is simply the price filmmakers like themselves pay for their *modus operandi*. If you want subjects to bare their souls for a documentary, you have to do the same. They wouldn't and couldn't have it any other way: engagement is second nature to them – albeit somewhat less so for Peter, as he confesses on the Human website. Being the cameraman, he says, creates a certain distance: 'Peering through the lens is in fact the first step in translating reality into an artificial product. I certainly won't say I'm never moved, but it's different.'

And perhaps that is the strength of the Lataster team: the combination of Petra's compassion and Peter's unsentimental eye. The viewer never feels like a voyeur, no matter how personal and intimate the events in their films. ■