

“I’m a documentary filmmaker, but I’m not really interested in reality”

In conversation with director Thomas Renckens

What does it feel like to be addicted to your fantasy? When he was young, director Thomas Renckens (1987) used to create fantasy worlds in his mind to escape to. This became the base for his Grierson-shortlisted, 2Doc ‘Filmmakers of the Future’ film: *The Daydreamers*. In the film Agatha and Jessica share with us their experiences of living with maladaptive daydreaming: losing yourself in your fantasy to such an extent that your reality suffers from it. Together with Prof. Eli Somer they try and overcome their shame.

“Even though I’m a documentary filmmaker, I’m not really interested in reality. I’m interested in visualising and documenting people’s fantasies and what goes on in their mind. Where does this contradiction come from?”

What made you so interested in exploring the psyche?

“I grew up in Friesland – a rural region in the north of the Netherlands – and I think this greatly influenced the theme of my films. As a child, I always used to be quite bored. There wasn’t much to do in Friesland. I would often lock myself in my room, and created different fantasy worlds in my head. It was a way for me to keep myself entertained. I think I’ve always had an urge not to be present in the real world. I think the fact that I was gay also played a part. I always felt different from others. Because of that, the films I make often deal with the theme of fantasy and escapism.”

How did you come up with the idea of making a film about *maladaptive daydreaming* (MD), and what was the research process like?

“For my graduation film, I was looking for a particular concept that I could explore. In my films, I generally don’t really follow a particular character, but I’m more interested in exploring a certain phenomenon. I had made a couple of films that deal with fantasy and escapism in the past. So, when it came to my graduation film, I locked myself in my room for a couple of days to really try and find a subject I was passionate about. I watched a lot of films by Tarkovsky and Jodorowsky for inspiration. Then, it all of a sudden occurred to me whether you can actually be addicted to your fantasy. By doing a bit of research, I stumbled upon the term *maladaptive daydreaming*.

Following that I started posting messages in various forums dedicated to MD, and I started speaking to people all over the world who recognised themselves in the description of MD. Some of them cried when I spoke to them. Many of them were afraid to openly talk about it, because they felt ashamed. I could see a parallel between their stories and the shame I used to feel about being gay: being in the closet and being scared to come out of it. In the meantime, I also managed to get in touch with Prof. Dr. Eli Somer; he coined the term *maladaptive daydreaming*. I think he has a very charismatic personality and he dedicates his whole life to studying MD, so that’s why I was eager to include him in the film. The idea of recording conversations between Somer and individuals with MD was inspired by ‘You Have No Idea How Much I Love You’, one of my favourite documentary films.”

Can you briefly explain to us what maladaptive daydreaming is?

“According to Somer, individuals with MD have a special trait which enables them to fantasise in a very intense way. The daydreams are very vivid and fanciful. Some of them can always see and hear the daydreams, that’s how intense they are. I believe that this capacity for immersive daydreaming is something that I, and many other individuals have, but for those with MD, it actually becomes something that negatively impacts their life. For me to get a better idea of what MD constitutes, I think I spoke to more than a hundred individuals from all over the world who are suffering from it. Those with MD are very aware of the fact that it’s not real, and their fantasies can be very elaborate. It can for example be a fantasy world with thousands of characters, which they’ve been living with for many years. It can be a Harry Potter type of world which they escape to. But it can be also be an idealised version of yourself.”

In the film Jessica and Agatha talk about their condition. How did you find them, and what was your reason for including them in the film?

“They reached out to me through messages which I had posted in the various online support groups. Unfortunately, I could leave the UK because I wanted to make the film in a studio space at the school. Jessica and Agatha were one of the few individuals who lived near London. In the film you can see how shy Jessica really is, because she’s suffered from MD her entire life. She wanted to take part to try and overcome the shame she felt about her MD. Agatha told me she only wanted to participate if she could wear a blonde wig, which is how she sees her alter ego in her daydreams. You can tell that she wears a wig, but it’s not something I explicitly mention. At first, I kind of struggled with that idea, because I wanted her to be fully herself. In the end, I was okay with it because it allowed her to feel more comfortable, and it also underlines the shame that so many individuals with MD still feel. I even had another individual who suffers from MD that was supposed to take part in the film, but she decided not to do it at the last minute, as she was too afraid to face it so publicly.”

The film is filled with poetic imagery and fantasy-driven scene. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

“You can’t make a film about daydreams and then not do anything with it visually. As a filmmaker, I find it challenging and exciting to try and show what goes on in someone’s mind. How do you visual something that’s intangible? I felt really attracted to that idea. For the film, I needed scenes that show the appeal of daydreams. In the end, that became the watery scenes, shot in an aquarium.”

What do you think is the purpose of this documentary?

“I find it important to make films that serve a purpose. Because MD is something so unknown, I firstly wanted to spread awareness. But I also wanted to show what it’s like to always feel the urge to escape, and not engage with reality. It is big part of who I am, and how I lead my life. The film doesn’t necessarily need to provide all the answers for the audience, but it’s helped me give answers to things I deal with on a personal level.”

Are you finished with this now, or are you interested in explore the subject further?

“After completing the film, I started receiving so many messages. Even to this day I receive e-mails almost on a daily basis from individuals who recognise themselves in it, but also from psychologists who are keen to watch the film so they can better understand their

patients with MD. Right now, with COVID restrictions preventing me from going anywhere outside of the Netherlands, I'm making a short film about the grief that people can experience after the loss of a pet. Just like with MD, there's a lot of shame surrounding the subject. But I'm very much keen to make a feature film or series about MD. 'The Daydreamers' was only *the tip of the iceberg!*"

Thomas Renckens (1987) lived in London for the past seven years, but recently moved back to Amsterdam. He studied Communication Science and an MSc in Political Communication in Amsterdam. After that he worked internationally in documentary programme development. In the UK, he studied at the prestigious National Film & Television School. He graduated in 2020 with the film The Daydreamers. Now he works as a documentary filmmaker.