

## Pieter Van Eecke about PLANET B

“The life of an activist doesn’t have a ‘switch off’ button”

In the feature documentary PLANET B - that was the opening film of this year’s DOXS Ruhr festival, director Pieter Van Eecke follows two young activists. It is difficult to distinguish the real driving force behind the story: is it their commitment to the climate struggle or their friendship, because both elements are inextricably linked with one another.

**PLANET B talks about activism and climate change, but in some way it is also a coming-of-age story. Which is only logical for a film about two teenagers growing up.**

Pieter Van Eecke: What does it mean for young people to be facing “the end of the world as we know it”, growing up in a society that is destroying itself? In 2018 all around the world, kids came on the streets, inspired by Greta Thunberg’s school strikes. I wondered: what will become of them over the years, as they grow from children into adults?

**We tend to forget how young Bo and Luka are. Until we hear them in**

**a brainstorming session, suggesting to “put an end to capitalism”.**

Van Eecke: In her discourse Greta Thunberg expresses herself in simple words, like a naive truth thrown into the adults’ faces. Kids who are facing this apocalyptic horizon of a disappearing future can’t understand how it is possible that adults are creating a world that is worse than the one we’re living in today. Bo and Luka were only 13 years old when they joined a radical group called Extinction Rebellion. Gathered in the woods, without any legal power, these kids think about how to change the world, and this is what they come up with. I find that scene both funny and emotional.

**How does Extinction Rebellion differ from other activist groups?**

Van Eecke: They are willing to go one step further through acts of civil disobedience. “To make people listen, we have to break the law.” This movement started in the UK as a resistance towards the complete collapse of the living world. Our biodiversity is being undermined to such an extent, that



at some moment soon the biological conditions for human existence will no longer be there.

**In the opening scene youngsters are doing a “climate flash mob” and what you see on the faces of people passing by is a great indifference, slightly annoyed, trying to look the other way. Does this represent the general approach towards the climate crisis?**

Van Eecke: This opening scene is Bo’s confrontation with being ignored.

You are an activist, you have a mission that you want to communicate, but the people’s reaction is not what you expected. Not every person wakes up every morning with the ambition to change the world. Life goes on, as if we do not understand the urgency of the situation.

**This is why both Bo and Luka already have lost their belief in politics? “We’re going to bring down politics.”**

Van Eecke: Initially they were



convinced that the energy they felt in the streets would create a change. They had science on their side, they felt support from the public and from politicians, but then they had to realise that the world is complicated, and that politics are not capable of making a change. So they lost confidence in politicians.

**Greenpeace had this slogan “Activism is not a crime”. When fighting for a good cause, can you still be a criminal?**

Van Eecke: From a legalistic point of view, yes; consciously breaking the law is in the nature of civil disobedience. But this is about trying to save our common future! These youngsters are confronted with the limitations of their actions and are surprised to suddenly be considered criminals, which is not how they consider themselves. This is a key moment in the creation of their political understanding about injustice.

**With Bo’s mum being an activist too, at some moments you feel a friction between motherhood and activism.**

Van Eecke: As an adolescent, revolting against your conservative parents is the way to go. In Bo’s case, things are different. She and her mum grew into activism together, simultaneous-



ly. When Bo started demonstrating, her mum asked herself: should I leave all responsibility to the young people or is it my responsibility too? How to protect my children in a context of civil disobedience? How to protect them against police violence while at the same time agreeing with the reasons for their protest?

**The police come into the picture quite often indeed!**

Van Eecke: It is their job to secure the status quo. I don’t portray them as the enemy but as people doing their job. Except for one time in Brussels when they acted particularly violent. This is the riot police; dressed in black like robocops, they look pretty fright-

ening. Many times they tried to make me stop filming. We constantly had to negotiate our rights.

**Why did you pick these two youngsters?**

Van Eecke: When the climate manifestations started, I wanted to capture the implications for some of these kids, as for the audience to connect with them more easily. When I met Bo, I got immediately struck by her capacity to explain her motivation. Witnessing her beautiful friendship with Luka, this is how this small project over the years grew into a feature documentary. Initially I planned to follow them during manifestations, but after spending time together, I started filming their personal lives. For four years, I followed their activist agenda - which is often a ‘secret agenda’. Then COVID fell upon us and suddenly the climate movement died. As they only met through zoom meetings, I asked them to start filming themselves. Bo and Luka have known each other for ages. Sometimes a distance grows between them that comes with the rhythm of growing up, but their friendship always brings them together again.

**It is Luka who says: “Activism can be so demanding, and if you don’t know**

**exactly where and who you are, it can easily make you lose yourself.”**

Van Eecke: Once you’re in it, the life of an activist doesn’t have a ‘switch off’ button. Grown-ups have learned to balance their energy, but adolescents do everything with passion, for the full 100%, which can easily become too much.

**You made PLANET B in the first place as an activist or as a filmmaker?**

Van Eecke: I grew up as an activist myself, involved in civil disobedience, and I include this background into my work, but the story that I’m telling is about Bo and Luka. What Extinction Rebellion does, is sensitisation; it is bringing the debate to the society, and as a filmmaker I do the same. I depict a certain dissonance in our society, and I portray people who disagree, hoping to launch a debate.

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Gert Hermans

This interview is part of a bigger series of [DOXS Ruhr podcasts](#).