

# REVIEWS: CHICAGO PREMIERE OF 'LOWLANDS'



## LOWLANDS + UNIVERSAL HOTEL

Chicago premiere!

Peter Thompson in person!

LOWLANDS, 2009, Peter Thompson, USA, 52 min.

"A marvel by Chicago's best filmmaker."

—Jonathan Rosenbaum, Film Comment

With: UNIVERSAL HOTEL

1986, Peter Thompson, USA, 21 min.

Effectively combining disparate historical information, a narrative shaped by raw encounters and dreams, meticulously accurate reenactments, and a daring chamber opera/masque, *LOWLANDS* explores the domestic life of Catharina Bolnes, widowed by the Dutch painter Vermeer and left bankrupt with ten children. Placing the Bolnes narrative against a background of seventeenth-century wars, and in counterpoint to the 1996 Hague trial of Bosnian war criminals, Thompson makes a profound inquiry into the nature of conscience. In English, Dutch, and Serbian with English subtitles. The program opens with the world premiere of the digital restoration of *UNIVERSAL HOTEL*, Thompson's meditation on eleven photographs and two drawings from an experiment performed on Dachau prisoners in 1942. HDCAM. (BS) Director Peter Thompson will be present for audience discussion at both screenings.

**By Barbara Sharres**

**GENE SISKEL FILM CENTER GAZETTE, October 2011**

## LOWLANDS

2009 | 51 minutes | Rated NR

Local filmmaker (and Columbia College professor) Peter Thompson has the rare gift of making history seem mysterious and expansive, forging dreamlike connections between disparate facts and observations. This 2009 video centers on the life of Johannes Vermeer but also spins outward to consider various atrocities that befell the Netherlands during his lifetime, biographical interpretations of his paintings, and (in a crucial framing device) memories from Thompson's own childhood. "I often experience the historical world less as a series of 'facts' than as a stream of analogies and rhymes unearthed and amplified while walking the dog," Thompson once remarked; this is a vivid and earthy re-creation of that experience. Thompson attends the screening. Fri 10/14 and Wed 10/19, 8:15 PM

**By Ben Sachs**

**THE CHICAGO READER, October 13, 2011**



Lowlands makes you forget that you are watching a film. I could string up the adjectives that frequent film reviews, but that would be belittling a work that is so new, so intelligent and so loving. I've never seen a film that uses half a dozen pieces of art and tells a story that spans over 400 years. What's more impressive than the newness of "technique" was how seamless and tangibly fluent the experience was. Visually, the film jumps from a close up of a 17C etching to casual video clips of modern sights, to somber images of WWII news footage. And yet the narrator's voice gently carries your whole perception through such space-time continuum without single moment of jerkiness. In theoretical physics a good theory is described as parsimonious (every component absolutely necessary each serving unique function) and elegant (it explains multitude of phenomena, not just one). Lowlands is a singular example of such parsimonious and elegant filmic experience.

**Viewer-submitted review by H.J. Bae**  
**THE CHICAGO READER, October 15**

## **CRUCIAL VIEWING: PETER THOMPSON'S LOWLANDS AND UNIVERSAL HOTEL**

(New Experimental Essay / Experimental Documentary Revival)  
Gene Siskel Film Center — Friday and Wednesday, 8:15pm

The newest film by local filmmaker (and Columbia College photography professor) Peter Thompson makes a belated Chicago appearance this week. A curiosity that has more of a European sensibility than something from the U.S. (hints of Godard, Greenaway, de Oliveira), but continuing Thompson's engaged curiosity and examination of his earlier works, LOWLANDS is an experimental essay on the life and circumstances of revered Delft painter Johannes Vermeer and his wife, Catharina Bolnes. Thompson constructs his film through a radical juxtaposition of paintings, etchings, recreations, contemporary footage of the Netherlands, found footage, narration, war crimes testimony relating to the Bosnian war, and an extended, highly theatrical and stylized "dream" sequence of Vermeer's then-widow. It shouldn't work, but it does. Thompson uses Vermeer and his wife as focal points from which he can depart and return to, allowing him to contemplate issues of representation, poverty, war, family. It's a suturing across centuries that is strangely even more relevant now than when it was in production. Perhaps a two year wait to see it wasn't such a bad thing after all. LOWLANDS screens with a new HD transfer of Thompson's stunning 1986 short UNIVERSAL HOTEL, which investigates the possible meaning of photographs and drawings documenting experiments on prisoners at Dachau in 1942. Thompson in person at both screenings. (2009, 51 min/1986, 21 min, HDCAM Video)

**By Patrick Friel**

**CINE-FILE, October 11**

<http://www.cine-file.info/list-archive/2011/OCT-11-3.html>

## **A HANDFUL OF WORLD: THE FILMS OF PETER THOMPSON, AN INTRODUCTION AND INTERVIEW**

(extensive online essay and interview, originally in FILM COMMENT, with 15 illustrations from Thompson's films, plus references to the Chicago premiere of LOWLANDS and to the contents of the newly released LOWLANDS dvd).

**By Jonathan Rosenbaum**

<http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=27534>

## 'LOWLANDS' ★★★1/2

Working with his own dense but lucid visual grammar inspired by Chris Marker, Peter Greenaway and others, Chicago filmmaker Peter Thompson's 52-minute gem focuses on Catharina Bolnes, the widow of 17th century painter Johannes Vermeer. Bolnes had it rough, and the domestic details of her life never directly penetrated Vermeer's canvases. Thompson daringly sets up a parallel with the 1996 Bosnian war criminal trials in The Hague and largely succeeds in pulling it off. Mainly, though, his approach in the Bolnes scenes proves that an essayistic filmmaker can draw precise visual inspiration from his subject (Vermeer) without settling for a carbon copy.

**By Michael Phillips**

**THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE, October 14, 2011**

## LOWLANDS

2009, Peter Thompson, USA, 52 min.

With: UNIVERSAL HOTEL

1986, Peter Thompson, USA, 21 min., HDCAM

Effectively combining disparate historical information, a narrative shaped by raw encounters and dreams, meticulously accurate reenactments, and a daring chamber opera/masque, Lowlands explores the domestic life of Catharina Bolnes, widowed by the Dutch painter Vermeer and left bankrupt with ten children. Placing the Bolnes narrative against a background of seventeenth-century wars, and in counterpoint to the 1996 Hague trial of Bosnian war criminals, Thompson makes a profound inquiry into the nature of conscience. In English, Dutch, and Serbian with English subtitles. The program opens with the world premiere of the digital restoration of Universal Hotel, Thompson's meditation on eleven photographs and two drawings from an experiment performed on Dachau prisoners in 1942. Director Peter Thompson will be present for audience discussion at both screenings.

**By Dana Immertreu**

**CEERES: CENTER FOR EAST EUROPEAN AND RUSSIAN/EURASIAN STUDIES,  
University of Chicago, ebulletin, October 12, 2011**

## REFLECTIONS ON LOWLANDS

"Lowlands" slowly reveals itself to be a delicate but audacious story of love for another man's anima. At first the film seems a male feminist attack on Vermeer and the impotence or refusal of his art to support his wife and family or even to engage with the reality of their life. Isolated in his esthetic aerie, the artist stands accused of bracketing out the pains and most of the pleasures of life, leaving his wife Catharina among ten living children (and memories of the five who did not survive) and their beds, bedpans, whining and laughter. But even here, in the film's "documentary" first half, one feels the irony of art being interrogated and condemned so artfully. Thompson's montage juxtaposes images from three wars and over three centuries, mixing Vermeer's paintings with the work of lesser masters, etchings, video of a Bosnian war crimes trial, contemporary film of Delft, and dramatized events in the life of the artist. This is brilliantly put together, and unfolds against an equally stirring and evocative musical score. Perhaps the most audacious sequence in this first part is the war crimes footage where a soldier recounts his rape of a Serbian woman. Along with Louis XIV's rape of Holland to which the montage compares it, we seem meant to associate this act with Vermeer's use of his wife for sexual (15 pregnancies!) and esthetic pleasure while ignoring her concrete, human reality. It is Vermeer that is on trial. Although the dream context is not explicit here, the feel of dreaming is present in the juxtaposition of imagery, and prepares us for the fully dreamed last part of the film. Moments of surrealism

occur mysteriously (notably the floating cows' legs that presage the dream sequence that appears later in the film) and one is reminded of Bunuel and Dali, and other experimental filmmakers of the 1930s-1950s such as Maya Deren.

A dramatization and musical interpretation of Catharina's imagined dream forms the second half of the film, and shows that this is not primarily a documentary but an exploration and expansion of the documentary form, again drawing from European experimental film. We see the director's esthetic obsession with Vermeer erupt in a bravura attempt to redeem the artist in Catharina's imagined psyche. Converting the two dimensional painterly canvas into the five dimensions of sound film (time being the fourth and music the fifth), Thompson brings Vermeer—and especially Vermeer's style, his art—to an eerie life, fully believable because it is a dream that actually feels like one. In fact, few filmed dreams work (Hitchcock is particularly bad at this, though his films as a whole work brilliantly interpreted as dreams—see John Beebe on "Vertigo"). "Lowlands"'s dream is fully oneiric, and the moment when Catherina imagines a ship's rigging in her bedroom reminded me of the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus where the pirate ship's ropes turn into grape vines. There is a quality to *genuine* myth, or dream, that is unmistakable. It is present here.

As feminist as this film is, Catherina's husband is at its heart, as he evidently was in hers. (How could it be otherwise when we treat anything that touches Vermeer?) Thompson seeks Catherina's psyche and finds Vermeer's anima, the very thing he seemed at first to wish to avoid or condemn. The open window of the dream sequence recreates Vermeer's magical light and invites us to enter the psychic world where She has always dwelt. We (and "Vermeer," who, viewing alongside us, is the dream ego of the piece) learn about the blood-stained "birthing bed," the worthless (but priceless) cups and plates on which the family ate so many thousand meals, and especially about that good man, the blind notary Boogart who was Catharina's "unlikely champion" after her husband's desertion through death (we may imagine the director, wearing one of his humbler caps, behind this initiatory figure). We are in Vermeer's psyche here, not Catharina's, a kind of after-death Bardo state or purgatory channeled by the director where Vermeer is taught about parts of his beloved that he did not value or perhaps could not see. He comes at last to feel the worth of his embodied family and its mundane culture.

Perhaps the most moving, and revealing, moment in the film comes when the director/narrator, musing about Vermeer's absence in his work, discovers the artist's hand in a shadow along the side of Catharina's head, supporting and caressing his wife. This, I think, is the aim of the film itself, to give Catharina the love and respect it imagines Vermeer for the most part denied her. But I wonder about this, for what, after all, is the meaning of Vermeer's work except love of an inner spirit of his wife as she dreams of music, imagines the glorious New World (in my favorite Vermeer, the "Young Woman and Officer" inconspicuously placed at the Frick), or burns in ecstasy over the mysteries of the Catholic faith? What Thompson wants for Catharina is just what Vermeer found in her but more; besides her soul, the director would include her earth, her female biology, and her fate. I feel sure that Catharina recognized the imaginal aspect of herself that her husband painted, and that she loved him for revealing it. Thompson's great achievement is that he mirrors so well the soul, anima, and love for his wife of the greatest artist the Western modern tradition produced, but also reclaims parts of her that Vermeer's public persona left out.

**By Al Collins, Ph.D.**

**Pacifica Graduate Institute**

**Santa Barbara, California, November 14, 2011**