

The adoration of the volcanologists

## ***Fire of Love* is an unusual science documentary.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue



Katia Krafft, wearing an aluminized suit, standing near a lava burst at the Krafla Volcano, in Iceland. (Photo courtesy of Image'Est)

“You’re looking at the space pictures, aren’t you?” my daughter asked as she came into the kitchen, where I was supposed to be making her lunch. I’d been looking at the images released by NASA from the James Webb Telescope off and on for several days, forcing my family to gather around my laptop to rhapsodize with me, returning again and again when I was alone. Even at age seven, my daughter understood that the pull of those images had sucked me out of the orbit of ordinary life.

I am very much an amateur when it comes to scientific cosmology, and I know only as much as one can learn reading science blogs for laypeople and watching NASA explainer videos. But I recognized the power of fascination—and even something of the same amateur spirit—in the beautiful, meditative documentary *Fire of Love*, about French volcanologists Maurice and Katia Krafft (written and directed by Sara Dosa, streaming on Disney+). Compiled from footage almost exclusively taken by the couple themselves, it charts their love story with each other and with the violent, mysterious forces that produce volcanoes.

The Kraffts' footage makes the mundane layers of the earth seem strange, majestic, even alien: lava streams erupt into the air like fireworks; molten flows hypnotically fold in on themselves, shedding their blackened skins to reveal red-hot magma like giant mounds of taffy being pulled apart and kneaded back together; ash clouds rise with violent force, evoking the terror and the beauty of nuclear detonation. Often backlit by the red lava exploding and cascading behind them, the tiny human figures of Maurice or Katia seem to be skipping along a crater's edge, seemingly an arm's reach from living fire. Sometimes dressed head to foot in silver fireproof suits and sometimes shockingly unprotected, they dance along these rings of fire, drawn like insects to a flame or like ritual dancers to the heart of a mystery.

*Fire of Love* is an unusual science documentary, maybe because the Kraffts were unusual scientists. The conventions of the genre often seek either to teach viewers something about the natural world or to show us the value of scientific work and how it contributes to "our" world—the world of human concern. Dosa attempts to fulfill these conventions by giving the Kraffts' story something of a progressive arc from pure observation to more politically engaged knowledge. We watch them meet, fall in love, and devote their lives to living as close as possible to active volcanos, raising grant money to fund their expeditions by writing books and creating movies about their work. After a devastating eruption claimed the lives of more than 20,000 people in Columbia, we see video recordings of Katia and Maurice's new commitment to contribute to knowledge that will help governments and ordinary citizens prepare for future eruptions. The dramatic conclusion to their story—they were killed in the pyroclastic flow when Mount Unzen erupted in Japan in 1991—is revealed in the first five minutes of the film (and in the film's trailer).

In their own words, however, Katia and Maurice eschew the narrative arcs of scientific progress and scientific explanation. They adamantly refuse to join academic life, and they don't want to classify or explain volcanoes. They repeatedly

insist that the total sum of what humans understand about volcanoes amounts to nothing. They want to live with volcanoes; almost, it seems at times, to live inside them. They move as close as possible to the edges of the earth, looking deep into secrets that exceed human measurements of time.

Dosa's own fascination with the Kraffts' images—her fascination with their fascination—also belies the traditional narrative arc. I don't think I learned a single new fact about volcanoes watching the film, and no effort was made to explain whatever scientific information Maurice and Katia discovered in their many years of up-close volcanic observation. Occasionally we watch Katia wrestling with rubber tubes and vials, attempting to collect volcanic gasses. Or we see pictures of Maurice at a desk working on a book, sorting through their collected images. What we see most often, however, is Katia standing intimately close to a volcanic rock structure, almost hugging it, the camera zooming in as her fingers lovingly trace the indentations in the stone or caress it like a lover or a mother. This is not the science of measurement and classification; it's observation born out of adoration.

I was reminded of performance artists who choose to live strange, intense, unconventional lives in order to blur the lines between art and life, to call attention to things that pass right under our eyes without our attention. I could have watched *Fire of Love* with the sound off, the images like emissaries from faraway places. *Look*, their images seem to say, *see how glorious, how mysterious, how impossible this earth is? Come just a little closer. Look.* But the looking is itself the gift, whether or not we understand what we see or can make knowing useful.

It was this spirit that I felt when I looked at the Webb telescope images. Even in my attempt to understand what those images might teach us—or what makes them exciting for the scientists who study cosmic origins—what drew me back, day after day, was the sense of shifting perspective, of scales of space and time that have absolutely nothing to do with the mundane routines of school lunches. Scientific images are meant, on the one hand, to contribute to knowledge. But *Fire of Love* reminds us that they are also art of the highest order, a demand on our minds and hearts to pay attention, maybe especially to that which we cannot easily understand.