

Interview with «1st Shot»

March 2014

In your film we follow a family story of separation and reunion after Lucas's mother kidnapped him as a child only to reappear after 11 years. Tell us about Lucas's story and about the effect these events had on him and on the family.

Every 40 seconds a child goes missing or is abducted -- 2,100 children vanishing each day. Most are parental abductions and unfortunately, this is now a commonplace news item. In 1973, however, when Lucas was abducted by his mother, we were unfamiliar with such a scenario - especially by a Greek mother. Lucas' disappearance was a crushing blow to our close-knit family and that family trauma had a profound effect on everyone. It was a time before the Internet, before e-mail, when even a long-distance phone call was astronomically expensive. The investigation was frustratingly slow and fruitless for more than ten years and the waiting was excruciating. The decade-long odyssey defined the family -- a constant low-grade anxiety, a gray area of not knowing if the child is alive or not, if he'll ever be found. It was as if Lucas was on the dark side of the moon. Every time the phone rang, every letter that arrived, was a potential answer. As James Joyce' wrote: "Absence becomes the highest form of presence". I believe that Loukas, his grandfather, even though he had lung cancer, actually died of a broken heart.

On Lucas's side -- his mother, Athena, blotted out his past, and even erased the Greek he spoke, as they moved all over the world. As Athena tells it in the film, she "never lied to him but didn't tell him anything that was true, either". So when Lucas is reunited with the family, they're each on a completely different emotional plane -- they thought of him every day for 11 years, and he didn't know they existed until a few weeks before he arrived in Greece to meet them. Not to mention that they can't communicate, Lucas having lost all his Greek.

The interesting thing is that when I showed Lucas the finished film last month, he expressed a desire to have a chance to fill in the gaps from his side of the story. Up until this point he was very reticent about his experience. So we're going to do a Q & A together for the website and as a DVD "extra".

How did you come to make this film?

Lucas disappeared when I was a film student. Our families were very close and I witnessed first-hand the pain that his long absence caused, year in and year out. As a budding filmmaker, it had always been my intention to write a narrative script about this story, with its compelling detective mystery, complex emotional components, and wonderful characters. (At this time, parental abductions were rarely in the news, if at all.) And then, out of the blue, after 11 years of silence

and mystery, Orestes, Lucas's father, received a phone call from his ex-wife, Athena, saying, «I have your son, We live in Laurel, Maryland. Do you want him back?» That was the moment that this film began, in 1984. Orestes came to Boston, where I live, and I grabbed a Super-8 camera and off we went to find Lucas. I continued to film, intermittently, for the next three decades.

As a completely independent filmmaker, I had the blessing and the curse of being able to film as long as I wanted to. All documentarians face the question of when to stop filming, of when the story is complete – but real life doesn't just stop in a dramatic flourish. The element of time, both in the story and in the process of making it became, first a necessity (it takes time to raise funds), then a conscious decision. The passage of time gives us the opportunity to see how it affects all things and to witness a whole arc of a person's life, something more akin to a novel. We see Lucas grow up before our eyes.

The film also reflects the evolving technologies – I started with Super-8, filmed mostly in 16mm film, and the most recent scenes were shot in SD and then HD video. I edited most of the film on a Steenbeck and finally went to Avid for the last phase.

The more I worked on it, I steered away from the cinema verite orthodoxy in which I was trained, and began to allow deeper, less concrete story elements to surface, as well, such as the parallels to Greek myths and reflections on childhood, language, identity, memory, and love. The challenge was how to tell the backstory – there was no footage, only a few photographs. To recreate a world out of nothing. I wanted the viewer to know the family members well, as well as I did, in order to understand the story from their perspective, to empathize with their emotions, with my serving as the guide.

I worked on this for so many years, not knowing where it was going. I thought I would never be done. And then life presented an ending, and then another.

So this film, which I started to shoot 30 years ago, will have its world premiere in the old country, where the story began... 30 years later, almost the same day as its first screening!

Although you live and work in the U.S., in your film we witness how Greece evolves and changes over time, with a bittersweet nostalgia. What is your relationship with your homeland and with the difficulties it's been facing for the past several years?

«Lost in the Bewilderness» is really a love letter to my Greek family, and by extension to Greece. I believe the characters in the film embody the best of what makes Greece so special and unique. Personally, I've always felt like I belonged

to both worlds, the Greek and the American, but my heart belongs to the old country, maybe because I spent my childhood here and even spoke Greek before English. I visit every summer and recently come more often to take care of my father. I'm never without my camera and film every time I'm here – collecting images and scenes which will take shape later. When I'm home in Boston, I truly have intense nostalgia for Greece and feel that this profound feeling of longing inspires everything I do in my work. I've also always felt like I could see things both from the inside and the outside – which I believe is a useful thing for any documentarian, especially in making personal films.

As far as the current painful situation Greece is experiencing, I feel distraught – I've seen the effects of the crisis on everyone I know, and in every place I love. I'm always trying to set the record straight here in the U.S. whenever I encounter misconceptions, especially about the Greek national character, whether from individuals or on radio programs in which I've participated. I am particularly pained by the effect of all this on the youth of the country, in their limited opportunities and lack of hope. If there is anything I can do to help through showing my film, I will do. This too shall pass. But not soon enough.