

Alexandra Anthony is an award-winning filmmaker who writes, directs, shoots, edits and narrates her own work. *Lost in the Bewilderness* is the second in a trilogy of non-fiction films – intergenerational family stories which centre on young protagonists caught between two cultures, between youth and adulthood, and at a crossroads in their life. The first of these, *Yaya (Grandmother)*, was completed in 1984 and the third film, *Three Pomegranate Seeds*, will soon be in post-production. Anthony is particularly intrigued by the parallels between these contemporary stories and Greek myth and tragedy. For over twenty years she was an editor of PBS's award-winning U.S. television series *Nova*, *Frontline*, and numerous specials for national and international broadcast. Her freelance sound recording work has taken her to Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Mongolia. Anthony teaches filmmaking at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island, USA.

**This interview with Anastasia Bakogianni was recorded in Athens in December 2015.**

**AB.** Perhaps we could start with a short summary of *Lost in the Bewilderness*, for the benefit of our readers.

**AA.** *Lost in the Bewilderness* is a feature-length documentary about my cousin Lucas, kidnapped at age five from his native Greece, and found on the eve of his sixteenth birthday in the U.S. This story of international parental abduction, filmed for over twenty-five years, chronicles Lucas's journey of growth and self-discovery, and culminates with a surprise ending. *Lost in the Bewilderness* is not only a detective story but also a lyrical meditation on childhood, lost and found, and an exploration of how the themes of ancient Greek myth and tragedy, with the family at their centre, are still very much alive in the modern world.

**AB.** Alexandra, the subtitle of your documentary film is 'A Tale of Mythical Realism' and interweaves a very personal story with references to Greek mythology. Why did you choose to use this mythical framing? How did these ancient stories facilitate your telling of the story you wanted to share?

**AA.** The mythical lens through which the story is told came about organically. As Greeks, the myths are in our DNA. I've always seen life and characters around me through that lens.

The challenge at the beginning of editing the film was how to tell the backstory – everything that happened before I started filming. There was no footage, only a few photographs. I needed to recreate a world out of nothing. I wanted to bring the characters and the past to life so that the viewer would come to know the family members well, as well as I did, in order to understand the story from their perspective and to be on the same emotional page by the time Lucas is found. So as a first step, I began by exploring each of the protagonist's names – Orestes, Athena, Euphrosene – and finding facets which either resonated with or differed from their mythical counterparts. That was how delving into Greek mythology started. And the more I researched, the more parallels I found.

I took the liberty (as a Greek) to do a mash-up of many myths. There were small, fun parallels to sprinkle throughout the film, such as likening the airplane that brings Orestes to the U.S. to wing-footed Hermes accompanying souls to the Underworld (actually this didn't end up making it into the film!) or the fact that Orestes, like Orpheus, is a musician. I also wanted to mix the familiar myths with bits of more obscure stories, or lesser-known facts about ancient Greek thought, such as the notion of 'inherited friendship', which I discovered in *The Iliad*. It was thrilling to find these juxtapositions, to cull them from the existing story.

But the real epiphanies for me were recognising that there were two bigger, structural themes at play in the story: the two central metaphors – the Orpheus myth and the hero's journey. Trying to dovetail them, to have them fuse by the end of the film - that took me forever to figure out.

At some point this mythical framing becomes another layer in the film, which oscillates – sometimes visible, sometimes not, but always there beneath the surface.

The subtitle 'A Tale of Mythical Realism' is obviously a riff on, and homage to, the term 'magical realism' – but with a Greek twist. When I took a course on Latin American literature in college, and first encountered the work of Garcia Marquez, Fuentes, Llosa, and others, like almost all who read them, it was a seismic event. It changed the way I saw the world. What I had always felt intuitively was now validated – the fluidity between the real and imagined, fiction and non-fiction – it was possible to perceive and report on the world via this other dimension, often more real than 'reality'.

**AB.** As a Greek American filmmaker you are very familiar with classical mythology. What are your earliest memories of these mythical tales and what has been their importance in your working life?

**AA.** My earliest memories are two-fold. The myths were our daily bread – our bedtime stories. My grandfather, who used to babysit me a lot, was a master storyteller, and a 'logoplastis' to boot – a word-maker – who brought the myths to life for me, keeping me up past my bedtime. I was in thrall, as gods and heroes were conjured up in our living room.

As a kid, I was also obsessed with *Illustrated Classics* comic books (and still am). They had the most vivid, and to me, beautiful, and transporting illustrations depicting the myths. I'll never forget the picture of the Chrysomallos – the golden ram – flying over the Aegean with Helle and her brother Phrixus on its back, among many, many others! It really fired up my imagination.

For me, the myths and tragedies are a playful, exhilarating portal into a current story – a way to begin to understand human nature, to see the continuity of the human condition. The superficial patterns may change over the centuries, but the human psyche remains the same.

**AB.** The importance of family is a key theme in classical mythology, which offers us numerous examples of broken and dysfunctional families. Did these mythical

examples of terrible struggles within royal families aid your project? And if so in what way?

**AA.** Every family has its own mythology. And throughout time and in all cultures, the family is the starting place for any story. It's universal. I'm intrigued by the idea of dynasties – these royal 'Houses', where all the primal family stuff is happening – emotions writ very large.

I was struck, for instance, by the construct of the House of Atreus and the idea that one person's sins are visited on many generations to come. As they say, the sins of the father... or mother, in this case. This idea of one person's actions affecting everyone around them and into the next generation is what resonated for me in *Lost in the Wilderness*. Also, the theme of identity for a young protagonist, and how to emerge from your family with your own identity, is a fascinating journey.

**AB.** A familiar *topos* in mythology is the journey of the hero, his difficult return journey, and his struggle to reintegrate back into society. How did the mythical examples you mention in your film work to provide a parallel with your own family history?

**AA.** I was struck by the similar path almost every Greek hero takes – Perseus, Theseus, Jason, Oedipus, even Zeus – boy children stolen from their homes to avoid fulfilling a terrible prophecy, and returning on the cusp of manhood to reclaim their rightful place on the throne, only to have tests and obstacles start anew, to prove themselves worthy of their place in the world. Furthermore, like Lucas, none of these abducted young men knew the secret of who their fathers were while growing up. It was amazing to me how closely this journey paralleled Lucas's life. He's kidnapped from Greece as a little boy, and returns to his father's family in Athens literally the day before his sixteenth birthday. It's so difficult when he first arrives. He can't communicate with most of the family, they're strangers to him. So he has to learn a new language, start a new school, get to know his relatives, all while trying to figure out who he is.

**AB.** In our earlier discussions you mentioned that one myth which resonated particularly strongly with you was Orpheus' journey into the underworld and his failure to rescue Eurydice. Why did this particular myth speak so powerfully to you?

**AA.** There is something so poignant about this myth of loss, made even worse by screwing up a second chance and having a double loss. It hewed so closely to how I saw the U.S. as the grey underworld and Greece as the light-filled land of the living (Lucas's T-shirt late in the film which says 'In the Land of the Living' was one of the seemingly endless coincidences).

I saw Orestes as Orpheus, Lucas as Eurydice, and the U.S. (or where Lucas was living) as Hades. Orestes comes to rescue his son, to take him back to the land of the living. Will he be able to make it? This myth became the central metaphor of the film and it took many years to figure out how to break it up and weave it into the film at the appropriate places with what I hope is a light touch. First I had to explain the myth (succinctly) for those who weren't familiar with it, and then figure out how to apply each part of the myth to Lucas's story, with the final twist being that in our modern

story, the mortals get the better of the half-god's impatience, and allow Lucas to come out of the darkness. They don't blow their second chance.

Coming into the light is how I saw the arc of Lucas's journey. For most of the film he is in half-shadow, half-light, in suspended step – will he make it? Will he be allowed to come into his own, in his own time? Step fully into the sun? This literal and metaphorical step was so integral to the way I saw the story that until the last week before the film was picture-locked (editing finished), the title was *In Light of Lucas*.

**AB.** Greece, its modern history and its classical past is more than mere background – it is part of the action. You included scenes of the family on Athenian streets, Lucas' visit to the Acropolis and his first swimming trip. Why do you feel these connections were important to establish?

**AA.** The fact that we are walking on the same stones as our ancestors is mind-blowing, seeing the same views of the sea, feeling the same sun on our skin.

In his poem *Mythistorema*, George Seferis writes, 'I woke with this marble head in my hands; it exhausts my elbows and I don't know where to put it down.' Our ancient legacy seen as a burden, something weighing us down, perhaps as a hindrance to re-inventing our identity as modern Greeks, or at least something with which we must grapple. My relationship to this rich past is more lighthearted. Past and present co-exist, in our human nature and in our surroundings. Layer upon layer of time, right in front of us.

**AB.** A major theme of the film is the fundamental importance of language as a means of communication. Your hero Lucas returns home having forgotten his Greek, but he and his father Orestes can communicate through their mutual love of music. In other words communication goes beyond the verbal. In your opinion, how can film and music enhance a spectator's experience of a story?

**AA.** Language is another theme in the film. I have been deeply interested in language, linguistics, poetry, and etymology since I was a kid. I love words. The Portuguese singer Caetano Veloso once said 'I love each and every word of the Portuguese language'. Well, I feel the same about Greek. The origins of words reveal so much about the particular culture.

In the film, verbal communication is repeatedly obstructed by other noise – lots of airplanes above, chain saws (as when Orestes meets Lucas in Maryland), jackhammers, etc. Generally Greece is a noisy place. So not only can you not hear each other at times, verbal communication is also almost impossible between Lucas and the older Greek relatives, since no-one speaks the other's language, and there remains a wall between them.

**AB.** Memory is a major theme in the film and I was interested in whether language plays a role as a repository of memory. And if you no longer remember your childhood language, are the memories or emotional connections still there?

**AA.** Yes, music (and also art as both father and son draw) forms a huge part of their communication. It's a language they both understand, and love. How lucky that they

shared this. In terms of using external music in film, it's a very powerful tool. But it's a tricky one – how to include music in a subtle, nuanced way, so that it accesses something in the narrative that can not be experienced in any other way. The challenge is how to use it judiciously – to heighten understanding, to evoke empathic feelings with a character, or to viscerally 'get' the atmosphere of a location, and not merely as a shortcut to manipulate emotion. Music should be at the service of the story and serve to underscore emotion. I chose not to have the film scored but instead selected each music cue based on my own emotional response and associations with it, from the Roma lyrics of the opening piece *Ederlezi* (a Roma child longing to be reunited with his family), to the Pontic song that prepared warriors for battle (to reflect Orestes's jumping to action upon receiving the call from Athena). It was a nightmare to get music rights – amazingly time-consuming and expensive. But I love the idea of a musical mosaic, disparate pieces of music that build a whole unified picture.

**AB.** Film has become a major means of communicating in our ocular-centric society. What are the advantages (and disadvantages) of telling a story in moving images? How can it aid us in our common desire to preserve our memories and personal stories?

**AA.** In film, you can build an immersive, visceral experience for the viewer – drawing on so many narrative or documentary, descriptive devices – images, text, colour, music, voice-over, sound design. You can choose whatever genre is best for the particular story you want to tell, from documentary, experimental, narrative, or any combination of these, all the way to creating filmic experiences in virtual reality. There is something profoundly compelling in bringing dreams to life.

The only limitation of film is that it is a time-based medium – it unfolds in time – as it moves in a linear direction from scene to scene. It can't handle much complexity at any given moment. The challenge is to understand what the essence of a particular scene is and figure out how to convey information and emotion in the most economical way, using everything in your toolkit, elements that the viewer may not even be consciously aware of. From the choice of what shot follows what shot to how a scene is paced to a barely discernible sound design.

In terms of personal stories or oral histories, there is nothing like seeing a person on screen, and hearing their voice as they speak, so to preserve memories and stories in non-fiction, especially after a person is no longer with us, is a magical thing – capturing time.

**AB.** At the end your film you ruminate on how with the passing of time stories become half-remembered myths to be passed down. As a contemporary filmmaker what do you consider the role of film to be in the forging, and dissemination of modern (and indeed ancient) myths? And why do you think modern audiences still need myth in order to make sense of the world?

**AA.** These days it seems that people are reading less, and watching more. In our visually-oriented world, film has become even more important as the main storytelling device, as a repository, and as an archive. The irony is that the way most stories are told today in film – and have been told, from Hollywood on down – are

based on Aristotle's ideas on drama and its three-act structure. And most of the stories in the world are variations on existing themes. The hero journey is a real staple, and informs almost every film made.

What can centuries-old stories illuminate for us today? Are they still relevant? And why? These questions were on my mind the whole time I was making this film. And frankly, I couldn't really come up with answers, at least not until I was almost done and until the film got feedback from audiences at festivals. I understood that these stories tap into universal themes and that we look to our roots to understand who we are, to understand how our ancestors made sense of their world. It's a connection to who we really are. Myths – stories – are in every human's DNA. To paraphrase Cicero, we can't know who we are unless we know where we come from.

**AB.** Your film shares certain features with Greek epic. In the Homeric epics authorial commentary is kept to a minimum, except for certain key moments; for example, the famous opening of the *Iliad* with its invocation to the Muses. With the exception of a few scenes you mostly placed yourself behind the camera acting as the narrator who provides the mythical framework via your commentary and the interviewer of the actors of this familial drama. Why did you position yourself in this way?

**AA.** This was the most natural way for me to tell this story, to invite the viewer to experience it as I am, through my eyes. I wanted to make clear what my connection to the family was, and then to retreat and let the events play out, so it can be as much a first-hand experience for the viewer as possible. I am the storyteller, but I wanted to allow the viewer to interact with the story themselves, not to be passive or spoon-fed. My function is to serve as the guide, the liaison, between the story and its characters and the viewer. I wanted the voice-over to convey only what's absolutely necessary to understand something specific.

I am the only one filming and this allows for greater intimacy. Because of my relationship to all the characters, I wanted to remain the person they know and are speaking to, so I have no hesitation of including my reactions or questions in the film. I wanted to still be a human being, even if I had a camera between us.

**AB.** Fate, or *moira* in Greek, is a key motif in your film. In ancient literature this was a fundamental concept. It became personified in ancient thought in the three Moires who attended every baby's birth handing down its destiny. In your film you explicitly refer to this ancient myth, at the very beginning. Why did you feel this was important to do?

**AA.** Starting with the first moments of a baby's life – but one which alludes to the arc of his entire life – seemed like the place to open the film. The idea of the Moires – the Fates – spinning out each person's life is much like making a film narrative. Because this is the moment when a person's story is determined or at least begun.

I find the concept of fate, which is still so prevalent in Greece, really intriguing, philosophically. In ancient literature the idea of fate created much drama – monumental, elemental struggles to overcome it, to outfox it, or to honor it, by any means necessary. It brings in the notion of *hubris*, and the question of personal responsibility.

Can you make your own destiny? Perhaps when you're born, others provide your fate, but I believe you have a choice as you come of age, to make your own destiny, as I believe Lucas does by the end of the film. The serendipity of the first dance at Lucas's and Mindy's wedding reception to the song 'Destiny' was 'meant to be'!

I also liked combining an ancient idea about fate with its more recent folkloric version, that of 'reading the coffee'. The aesthetically pleasing visual of the round open cup with its coffee sediment hieroglyphics containing a life story also provided the film with bookends – suggesting the cyclical nature of human history.

**CLIP:** <https://vimeo.com/127980655>

**AB:** You finish the film with a reflection on time, its passing and the changes it brings. This film represents a truly epic personal journey for you. Thirty years in the making it was your own personal Odyssey. What extra layers did this long gestation period add to your project? How do they inform your closing scene and the decision to end the film in this way?

It was indeed a personal odyssey. Odyssey, times three. I thought I would never reach Ithaca! I watched my face age over the years in the reflection of the screen I was editing on. And one by one, several of the older people in the film, died, including my mother. As I quote her towards the end of the film: Time gallops forward, never back. Everything is ephemeral. I really experienced the passage of time on every level, even the technologies I used that came and went, from Super-8 film to Hi-Definition video. But then, there is constancy in everything as well, in the human condition.

Had I finished the film shortly after completing the majority of the shooting – that is, when Lucas is 'found' and returns home, end of story – it would have been a straightforward documentary. I didn't set out to take three decades to complete it yet the long-term work provided an advantage. Without it, you wouldn't experience the arc of Lucas's and others' lives, you wouldn't have the opportunity to see the big picture and how things begun in childhood played out into adulthood. There wouldn't have been any personal reflections that are sprinkled throughout the film, and there would not have been any mythical aspect.

These came about as I evolved as a filmmaker and matured as a human being. The film feels to me more like a novel than a documentary. It was a long process, one of continuous mining, trying to dig deeper and deeper to find meaning and connections, to understand things myself so that I could give the same experience to the viewer, and to mix my metaphors, it was a process of distillation, to whittle down hours of material to its bare essential, which took a very long time.

In the end, *Lost in the Wilderness* is a story of love and forgiveness. I got to experience what Lucas missed – the unconditional love that I felt as a child from this household and the strength that gives you for the rest of your life. A feeling that you can do anything, you are immortal. It's a glimpse of immortality. So for me, my aunt Katina's lovingly preparing the sugared egg treat, is a metaphor for ingesting / being filled with love. It was ambrosial, and like Psyche, tasting this divine act of love, gave those who tasted it, immortality. Lucas received the same love but then was deprived

of it and I wondered if those few early years were enough to carry him through. But I believe he returns just in the nick of time, in the final phase of childhood/adolescence and benefits once more from his family's love for him.

The film is a valentine to my family, to Greece, and to storytelling. Because in the end, stories are what remain.

**AB.** And one final question for you Alexandra, do you have any further plans to create another modern mythical film?

**AA.** *Lost in the Wilderness* is the second in a trilogy of films. There is a third and final film, *Three Pomegranate Seeds* (working title), which is a work-in-progress. In the first film, *Yaya*, there is no explicit mythology – I hadn't yet thought about using that framework. In *Lost in the Wilderness*, there is a mash-up of different myths, but *Three Pomegranate Seeds* focuses on one principal myth, that of Demeter and Persephone. It's the story of a mother and daughter (my aunt and cousin) and their life's journey together following a head injury my cousin suffered as a toddler – an event that changed the course of their lives. I actually started shooting it before *Lost in the Wilderness*, so it will include and cover a longer arc, one of 40 years. I don't plan, however, to take another 30 years to complete it!