Stranded

I’ve come from a plane that crashed in the mountains

(126’)

A documentary film by Gonzalo ARIJÓN

Coproducers: ARTE France - Ethan Productions - La Realidad - The ITVS
International Media Development Fund (IMDF)

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www.artepro.com/sales/news
The story

On 12th October 1972, a Uruguayan army plane left Montevideo for Santiago in Chile. The plane was chartered by the “Christian Brothers”, a rugby team from Carrasco, an upmarket suburb of Montevideo. These adolescents were supposed to go and play a friendly match and – accompanied by a few parents and friends – spend a pleasant weekend on the shores of the Pacific. There were forty-five people on board… The bad weather in the Andes forced the plane to land in Mendoza, an average-sized town on the Argentinian slopes of the cordillera. On 13th October, the plane took off once again. At 15:30, the pilot transmitted his position and his altitude to the control tower in Santiago. But when the tower attempted to communicate with the aircraft a minute later, there was no reply… Chile, Argentina and Uruguay joined forces to search for the plane. But there had been exceptionally heavy snowfall in the Andes and the plane’s cabin was painted white… Therefore, there was little chance of finding the plane and even less chance that one of the forty-five passengers had survived the crash… The tenth day after the catastrophe, the searches were abandoned. The survivors learnt this through a radio that was still functioning… And on the tenth day, there was nothing left to eat… Ten weeks later, a Chilean shepherd who was watching his flock in the valley located in the foothills of the Andes, caught sight of the outline of two men on the other side of a torrent. They were gesticulating frantically then fell to their knees, their arms wide open. The shepherd, who took them for tourists – even for terrorists – left. However, the next day he came back to the same spot and saw the figures who were still there. The sound of the water was so loud on the banks of the river that it was impossible for the three men to hear each other. The shepherd then threw a piece of paper and a pen, wrapped in a handkerchief, over the torrent. The two bearded men in rags, wrote something on the paper and sent everything back to the shepherd: “We’re from a plane that crashed in the mountains. Fourteen of our friends are still alive up there… Where are we?” Seventy days after the crash, Fernando Parrado (20 years old) and Roberto Canessa (19 years old) had travelled 70 kilometres in the mountains, crossing three quarters of the Andes cordillera on foot and crossing summits more than 4,000 metres high with no equipment other than rugby boots… Seventy-two days of hell, during which some had lost their mother and others their sister, and all of them some of their best friends. In total, there were sixteen survivors. Reports worldwide spoke of the «survivors of the century», and – maybe because they were rescued two days before Christmas – the “miracle of the Andes”. Four days after their rescue, in a heated press conference, the survivors took the plunge: “… the day came when we had nothing left to eat, and we said that Christ, by offering his flesh and blood during the Last Supper, had shown us the way by indicating that we had to do likewise: take his flesh and blood, incarnated in our friends who had died in the crash… It was a personal communion for each one of us… It’s what helped us to survive…”. One of our greatest taboos had been defied. And made public. The whole world was in shock.
One of the greatest survival stories of all time is finally told by the survivors themselves, brilliantly crafted by their childhood friend and master filmmaker, Gonzalo Arijon. If this is a story that you think you know, think again. In October 1972, a rugby team from Uruguay boarded a plane for a game that they would never play. Their plane crashed in the Andes. Miraculously, 16 of the original 45 passengers managed to defy nature and stay alive for 72 days on a frozen glacier, despite brutal conditions. How they did it became a story that shocked the world.

Arijon goes beyond the lurid tale of cannibalism that swept the headlines to discover the essence of this extraordinary human drama. Exceptionally crafted re-enactments set the stage for an experiential journey that unlocks the truth of this amazing story.

Thirty-five years later, the survivors and their children revisit the crash site known as the Valley of Tears. One by one, they disclose the intimate details of their harrowing experience—including the precise moment when they realized their only hope was to eat human flesh. Recovered photos and footage of their rescue illuminate the interviews with an immediacy that is palpable. Gonzalo Arijon’s film is a profound parable of the human condition, as hauntingly powerful as it is true.

Alfredo Delgado, one of the sixteen survivors

“The tenth day arrived… The day when we heard on the radio that the aerial searches had stopped. The day we had nothing left to eat… And we told ourselves that by offering his flesh and blood, incarnated in our friends who had died during the accident… It was a personal communion for each one of us… It’s what helped us to survive…”
The survivors

For the first time, the survivors have accepted to tell us everything – from “from beginning to the end” – to re-live the raw, intact memory of those seventy-two days in the mountains.

The joy of the departure. The crash, the deaths, the wounded. The wait. The rescue services not turning up. The discouragement. Hunger setting in. The terrible decision to eat the bodies of their dead friends. The avalanche in the middle of the night which killed another eight people. Fighting to stay alive, while the world continued without them… The beginnings of a “new society”...

Roberto CANESSA

As time goes on, I increasingly have the feeling that we experienced a sort of “laboratory experiment”: you threw thirty or so young western city-dwellers into the snow. You deprive them of aid and supplies. But that’s not all: you provoke an avalanche that wipes out a dozen of them but which, paradoxically, offers the others the protein necessary for their survival… And you wait….

Gustavo ZERBINO

At the time when the group was having trouble making the decision, I remember saying: “If I were dead, there, in the snow, and you were debating whether or not to use my body in an attempt to survive… If – while being dead – I had the possibility of getting up, I would kick your asses, you bunch of idiots!” They all listened to me in silence, and I think that these words helped the group to take the step.

Adolfo “Fito” STRAUCH

When Roberto cut the first thin strips of meat, he placed them on the cabin. I went to eat hastily, in secret… I felt ashamed the whole time I was up there. I wanted to hide that. For a long time, I was obsessed by this story of human meat… But I couldn’t admit it…

Roberto CANESSA

What we did was the result of thinking things through from a pragmatic and material point of view. Something like filling the tanks with petrol. The only way to buy time, to delay fatal issues, while waiting to see what we could do to get out of our situation. And our strategy succeeded.

Carlitos PAEZ

When Roberto and Nando finally left the burnt-out plane – to attempt to cross the Andes on foot towards the west – Nando, who had lost his mother and sister in the crash, turned around to me to say: “Carlitos, if it takes longer than expected for us to return, I authorise you to do as you see fit with the bodies of my mother and sister”. He didn’t have to say such a thing to us, but he wanted to do it. For me, it was the bravest act possible.

Gustavo ZERBINO

When the first rescuers came down from the helicopters, they must have had an incredible shock when they say all these human remains around the cabin. They had to spend the night with us in the fuselage, to wait for a storm to blow over. Their presence filled us with joy, because we were saved, and it made us feel incredibly hungry. Their powdered soup wasn’t enough, and we ate human flesh in front of them, because we had nothing to hide. In the end, they decided to sleep in a tent, about fifty metres from the plane, holding a revolver…. Poor guys!

José-Luis INCIARTE

When we were coming down the mountain, thin and starving, I saw a priest, and without thinking, I told him everything. Absolutely everything. It was like a purge, something I had kept inside me and that “had to come out”, one way or another. Immediately afterwards, I asked him to hear my confession. And he replied: “My son, you’ve already confessed. May God be with you”. This helped me so much to accept what I’d done…

Carlitos PAEZ

If I had my time over again, I wouldn’t wait so long – ten days – before deciding to eat human flesh. What we did, others did before us – during wars for instance, only we gave “surnames and first names” to this act.

Eduardo STRAUCH

The Vatican approved what we had done. However, if it had condemned us, it would have had the same effect on me. I have no scruples and don’t feel guilty about what I did. I accept it. Life – i.e. poetry, invention, intelligence – is more important than death. That’s my one and only rule.

Roberto CANESSA

The spirit of my dead friends isn’t inside me, no. On the other hand, I can feel them floating around me. In the beginning, not long after it happened, those who were no longer there were still omnipresent. It was as thought they were shouting at us, which prevented us from visiting their parents and families, despite the fact that we had known each other for a long time, because we all went to the same school and lived in the same area.

Maybe in the beginning, owing to the fact that they were too young to die, they didn’t know what to do to be only pure spirits. They still wanted to be part of the land of the living. That created a conflict between them and us. Little by little, they seemed to find their place. Or perhaps it was us that learnt to simply make them invisible. Even though I feel more like their father every day, the father of all those that aren’t here…

I must admit that as the years go by, I can hear them increas-ingly. They’re there all the same, and they’re whispering to us…
Director’s Notes

Several of these survivors are friends of mine. We shared the same carefree teenage years. I was shocked by their disappearance and dumbfounded when they came back to life. I shared whole nights with them, listening to their stories which constantly revolved around their survival up there. Their tragic – but also amazing! – epic continued to haunt them, day after day, year after year. And it’s still the case today. Despite a best-seller (“Alive! The story of the Andes survivors” by Piers Paul Read, five million copies sold in English alone), and despite a Hollywood movie (“Alive!” by Franck Marshall, a Disney-Paramount co-production), we still have the feeling that this story has never been told from the inside, that what they have to say has never really been heard. And there is always this growing feeling among them that they have something to tell us, to transmit to us, that is way beyond an “enormous anecdote”... Thirty years after the event, I suggested making a film about it. A film that tells of the creation of a new society, cut off from the rest of the world, requiring the reinvention of codes and rules. No leaders – in the traditional sense of the term – but rather a collection of personalities that are gradually revealed, which harmoniously head towards a common objective: to get out of this hell together, and return to the land of the living together. An exemplary story about exceeding oneself, getting to know one another, that deals with the importance of friendship and solidarity in extreme situations.

Gonzalo Arijon

SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

He was born in Montevideo in 1956 (Uruguay), and has lived in France since 1979. After studying film and anthropology, he made numerous documentaries for major television channels worldwide.

Lula, a proposito da esperança
Production Dissidents/ARTE France. 60’. 2005.

The “dark side” of Milosevic
Best Investigation Prize: Figra 2003 (Le Touquet, France)

Matis d’Amazone: l’appel aux ancêtres

Rio de Janeiro : a “vertical war”
Within the framework of the documentary series «Des flics dans la ville» Little Bear/France 2. 55’. 1999.

Esther et Mariana, d’une rive à l’autre
(For These Eyes, Por esos Ojos)
Freedom of Expression Award / Telluride Film Fest. 2000.
Gran Premio MIDIA / Madrid. 1998.

Somalia : the price of spilt blood

The “reconstruction” scenes of the plane’s cabin after the crash were filmed in super 16 mm by Cesar Charlone, cinematographer for “The Constant Gardener” and Oscar-nominated for the best photography for “The City of God” by Fernando Meirelles. Cesar Charlone wanted to participate in this film: he comes from Uruguay and should have been in the plane.
ETHAN PRODUCTIONS
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ethan.prod@wanadoo.fr

Before he founded Ethan Productions in July 2000, Marc Silvera had a varied career in the French audiovisual sector, both private and public. As a producer, he produced TV movies in former companies he belonged and the documentaries since Ethan Productions' creation:

Serge Blanco, the uncatchable
Director: Bernard Debord (52’) – Delivery: April 2008
Ethan Productions / Canal +

Colombes
Director: Jean-Christophe Klotz (57’) – Delivery: December 2007
Ethan Productions / France 2

Stranded - I’ve come from a plane that crashed in the mountains
Director: Gonzalo Arijon (113’, 127’ and 2x55’) - Delivery: November 2007
Ethan Productions / La Realidad / ARTE France / ITVS (USA) / BBC (UK) / Ares Docs & Films (Spain) / Morocha Films (Argentina) /YLE (Finland) / TSR (Switzerland) / RTBF (Belgium) / SBS (Australia) / CBC (Canada) / SVT (Sweden) / TV2 (Denmark) / VPRO (The Netherlands) / Media (European community / CNC / Pro cercip…
Joris Ivens Award (International Film Festival of Amsterdam) – November 2007
Selected at the Sundance Film Festival 2008

Great sporting duels
A 49 x 52’ series (2001 - 2007)
Ethan Productions / ARTE / TV5 / ESPN Classic Europe

Friends of the Jews
Directors: Bernard Debord & Cédric Gruat (2007 - 52’)
Ethan Productions / Planète

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