

## Film Review

- *The Lost Children*, directed by Orlando von Einsiedel, Jorge Duran, and Lali Houghton. Colombia, 2024<sup>1</sup>

The documentary *The Lost Children* reconstructs the extraordinary rescue of four Indigenous children who survived a plane crash in the Colombian rainforest and were found after 40 days. Following the crash on May 1, 2023, the subsequent search for survivors drew national and international attention. Of the seven passengers on the plane, only the four children of the Mucutuy family, aged between 11 months and 13 years, survived. After describing the accident, the film follows the parallel searches conducted by the Colombian military and an Indigenous volunteer group to find the children.

Drawing on archival footage, news clips, studio interviews with rescue team members, stylised shots of nature, and phone recordings from the rescuers, the film shows that the two groups employed very different rescue methods. While the military cut down trees to clear landing zones, carried weapons in preparation for encounters with gangs, and used advanced technology to broadcast a grandmother's message to the children, the Indigenous group avoided harming nature and carried no weapons. Guided by a shaman, they chewed tobacco, meditated, and used Ayahuasca, an herbal medicine, to connect with the spirits of nature to locate the children. To a certain extent, the film represents the military and the Indigenous volunteers as Hegelian opposites. On the one hand, the military is believed to have the capability to find the children due to its reliance on Western rationalism, modern technology, and control over nature. On the other hand, the Indigenous volunteers can find the children due to their spirituality, connection with nature, and ancient wisdom.

The film's visual style reflects this contrast by blending documentary realism and spiritual transcendence. Realistic archival footage, such as news excerpts and phone recordings, is juxtaposed with stylised, neon-coloured rituals. Although the military ultimately abandoned the mission, the Indigenous group's shaman, through an Ayahuasca ceremony, reveals the time and location to find the children on the 40th day. During this period, the rainforest acts as a neutral mediator between the opposing sides, forcing both groups to acknowledge each other's strengths. While the military supplied medicine to

sick Indigenous volunteers, the Indigenous group eventually located the children, who were then quickly transported to the hospital by an air force helicopter.

The collaboration between the military and the volunteers offers a counterpoint to their historically conflicting relationship. The military has often been used to suppress the autonomy of Indigenous peoples while safeguarding elite and corporate interests. During Colombia's civil wars and violent guerrilla conflicts, Indigenous territories were militarised, and Indigenous communities were accused of collaborating with drug cartels. Armed gangs in the rainforest further induced tension by kidnapping Indigenous children and training them as soldiers. These traumas have led to a deep mistrust of Colombia's military forces among Indigenous communities. Despite the 1991 Constitution granting Indigenous rights, the military presence on Indigenous lands continues, often under the pretext of security operations, yet frequently resulting in human rights violations.

Borrowing its title from a French folk fairy tale,<sup>2</sup> *The Lost Children* contrasts the fairytale-like rescue with other harsh realities as well, as revealed at the film's end. Although the children recover in a Bogotá hospital, they are placed in state care while a legal battle over their custody unfolds due to allegations of abuse against their father, who remains a mysterious figure in the documentary.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, drawings made by the oldest child, Lesly Mucutuy, are presented. They recount her memories of the accident and the following 40 days, showing the plane crash and the children facing dangers and fighting for survival in the forest. Lesly's voice narrating the drawings transports the audience to her memories. This is a creative approach to giving the children a presence, as they do not get to speak during the film, and their faces are blurred throughout to protect their identities. But while their faces are invisible, their memories are (made) visible.

The film wraps up on a somewhat idealistic note, celebrating the triumph of the Indigenous volunteers. This conclusion leans into a Hollywood-style happy ending, where Indigenous wisdom ultimately prevails over modern technology. The volunteers are paraded through the capital in decorated carnival cars, cheered on by thousands. Of course, this celebratory moment does not erase the past and ongoing injustices Indigenous communities face at the hands of the Colombian military. In its closing moments, the film presents a text about the father's trial for abuse, suggesting an uncertain future for the children who were placed in state care. Throughout the narrative, the family consistently portrays him as an abusive father in interviews. This final revelation takes centre stage in the resolution, shifting the focus from the historical conflict between the Indigenous people and the Colombian state and military to the current issue of domestic abuse and child maltreatment.

All in all, *The Lost Children* offers a balanced yet, at times, somewhat stretched portrayal of the perspectives of Indigenous volunteers and family members, as well as those of the Colombian state and military. Ultimately, the

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film highlights how the two groups, despite their initially opposite approaches, complement each other in their shared mission of rescuing the children, demonstrating how collective efforts can, at least temporarily, transcend historical conflicts.

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## Notes

- 1 Produced by and available on Netflix.
- 2 *The Lost Children* (1887), collected by Antoinette Bon. In Paul Delarue, *The Borzoi Book of French Folk-Tales*, p 365, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York 1956.
- 3 At first, the children's father, Manuel Ranoque, who is the biological father to the two youngest and the stepfather to the two eldest, appears as part of the Indigenous search team, expressing his desperation to find the children in a news report. However, as the story unfolds, accounts from family members reveal a history of abuse, with the children's grandmother even suggesting they might fear being found by him, or perhaps by men in general. The documentary does not include an in-depth interview with Ranoque, leaving his perspective and motivations unexplored.