

THE AXE IN THE ATTIC a film by Ed Pincus and Lucia Small

[DIRECTORS' STATEMENT]

We were discussing various film ideas when Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in August 2005. Mesmerized, horrified, and disillusioned by the events unfolding in New Orleans, we decided this was the film we wanted to make.

Katrina brought about the largest internal migration in U.S. history, even larger than that brought on by the Dust Bowl. This would be a story that would not only affect generations to come, but one that spoke directly to our country's complicated history.

The issues of Katrina addressed many of our main concerns – such as how race, class, and gender affect everyday interactions. We wanted to tell the story with social issues emerging through people's lives rather than relying on experts or celebrities to tell it. We were also both committed to making narrative social documentaries that explore the underlying assumptions of documentary film.

We discussed how to make a film about the immense topic of Katrina – and how to give the life of each of our subjects his or her proper due, while capturing the scope of the disaster. The focus of the film would be on the story of people uprooted and displaced – the Diaspora of Hurricane Katrina. It would ask what it means to be exiled in one's own country, with a government that is conspicuously absent.

Our aim with *The Axe in the Attic* was to create an intimate film with the people we would meet, along with an immersion in the American landscape in which the evacuees find themselves – as though the viewer was there. It was

important for us to reproduce the raw feelings and weight that such a disaster has on people's daily lives.

We felt that integrating the filmmakers into this story would offer a structure that would allow greater breadth and depth. Separated by social background, gender, and age, we hoped to integrate two points of view into our film, believing that who tells the story is integral to understanding the story. In matters of race and class this is especially important. Although Katrina damaged rich and poor alike, divergent outcomes were the inevitable legacy of the longstanding neglect of the poor.

Turning the camera on ourselves would risk making some viewers uncomfortable, but, the idea was to break the protective wall of the camera, to put the viewer in our shoes, and have them ask along with us some of the tougher questions about the ethics of the situation as well as those of documentary filmmaking itself.

Even though we wanted to raise questions of responsibility, both of government and of ordinary citizens, we did not want *The Axe in the Attic* to be a message film in any overt sense. We felt the country had voted against "big government" by electing George W. Bush. Consequently, the government was not there when needed. We wanted the viewers to understand on a visceral level what happens when a trust is broken between a government and its people. Many stories woven together joined by layers of sound, music and powerful imagery, we hoped would create this experience in film.

The title of *The Axe in the Attic* comes from an oft-repeated story about the evacuee's experiences from the floods of Hurricane Betsy (1965). In order to keep from drowning in your home, you have to keep an axe in your attic to break through the roof. This notion serves as a metaphor for the many poor people

who are left to fend for themselves. As one evacuee shakes her head: “Same old levee.” Another exclaims: “We are repeating history.” We, in fact, believe that Katrina and its aftermath is a modern-day horror story.

– Ed Pincus & Lucia Small