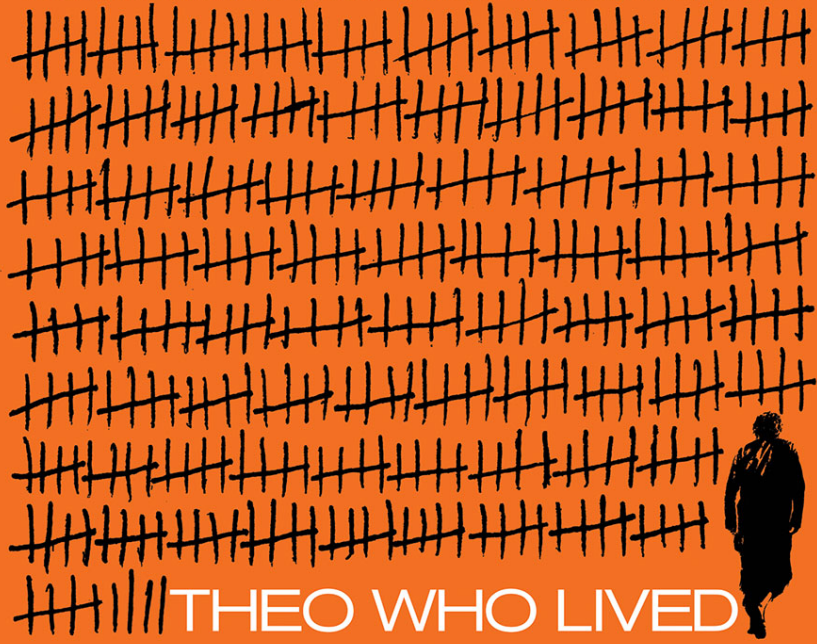


ON OCTOBER 20, 2012, AMERICAN JOURNALIST THEO PADNOS WAS KIDNAPPED IN SYRIA. THIS IS HIS STORY.



# THEO WHO LIVED

"THEO WHO LIVED" FEATURING THEO PADNOS NANCY CURTIS AND VIVA HARDIGG PRODUCTION DESIGNER KNOX WHITE  
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY TIMOTHY GRUCZA EDITOR JANE JO MUSIC COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY BYRON ESTEP  
CO-PRODUCER MARK STEELE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS EVGENIA PERETZ DAN COGAN PRODUCED BY AMANDA BRANSON GILL  
SCREENPLAY BY DAVID SCHIGALL DIRECTED BY DAVID SCHIGALL WWW.THEOWHOLIVED.COM



## Theatrical & Festival Booking Contacts:

Nancy Gerstman & Emily Russo, Zeitgeist Films

nancy@zeitgeistfilms.com • emily@zeitgeistfilms.com • 212-274-1989

## Publicity Contact:

Julia Pacetti, JMP Verdant

julia@jmpverdant.com • 917-584-7846

**A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE**

# THEO WHO LIVED

In the late fall of 2012, Theo Padnos, a struggling American journalist, slipped into Syria to report on the country's civil war and was promptly kidnapped by Al Qaeda's branch in Syria. Because he spoke fluent Arabic, his captors suspected he worked for the CIA and, for months, brutally tortured him during interrogation sessions. But his fluency, coupled with his remarkable personal expansiveness, also led to an extraordinary engagement with, and understanding of, his captors. By the time of his release, twenty-two months later, he had become a confidante of al-Qaeda's top commander in Syria. In THEO WHO LIVED, Padnos returns to the Middle East and retraces the physical and emotional steps of his harrowing journey, performing his memories, and enacting the fantasy world he created as means of mental escape. A gripping narrative that includes betrayal among the imprisoned, unlikely friendships, and thwarted escapes, THEO WHO LIVED is an intimate portrait of personal resilience, and grace in the face of hate.

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I had never met Theo Padnos when I approached him to make this film, but my wife knew him. Theo had been her brother's friend in elementary school, and had spent a lot of time in her house in Cambridge, Massachusetts as a kid. So when he disappeared inside Syria, my family was among those who anguished. Initially we thought he must be dead. Even after we heard that there had been proof of life, we feared that he'd never come home. I could relate. Like Theo, I had done journalism in conflict zones and had gotten into cars with locals I thought I could trust.

A few weeks after Theo was released, in the fall of 2014, I contacted him about making a documentary film. He turned out to be a fan of a documentary I produced, *Operation Filmmaker*, about an Iraqi film student brought from war-torn Baghdad to work on the set of Liev Schreiber's feature *Everything is Illuminated*. *Operation Filmmaker* chronicles the best intentions of every Westerner, including me, as they misfire. Many Americans who study the Middle East are fans of that film.

The very first time Theo and I met in person, we played tennis, and we played more tennis in the days to come. Theo would also ride his bike for hours and play hacky-sack at every opportunity to keep his body moving. He had always been an athlete, and his physical training helped him recover. We were just two old oddballs on the court, and I began hearing his story.

As you can imagine, with her son just a few weeks home from his grueling ordeal, Theo's mother, Nancy, was very protective of him, and reluctant for him to delve back into the horror. The whole family had just been through the most awful experience, and here was this outsider wanting to make a film about it. But Nancy soon came around.

I had experience making films with people coming out of traumas before. Most of my conflict zone reporting, as you'd expect, involved trauma. I'd filmed former hostages of the narco-terrorist FARC in Colombia, family members of suicide bombers on the West Bank, and American girls recovering from commercial sexual exploitation in the South Bronx. I knew that making a film like this can be therapeutic, but I also knew there is much more to the person in front of you than his or her trauma.

To shoot and record the movie, I brought in a team of two veteran war videographers, Tim Grucza and Rachel Beth Anderson. Rachel had been inside Syria not long before Theo made the same journey. They both had known Jim Foley, one of several American journalists kidnapped and subsequently killed in Syria. I felt that surrounding Theo with people who could relate to the choices he had made would make for the most honest and intimate possible film.

Initially Theo talked about doing something in the vein of *Swimming to Cambodia*, and that's where we started thinking about the style of the film. We decided to

retrace his steps, physically and emotionally, telling each part of the story either *where* it happened, or in a place that *looks* like where it happened — places we would either find or build. It was Theo's idea to go to Turkey first, to see if he could possibly make contact with his kidnappers.

For all conflict reporters, Theo's experience should raise uncomfortable questions. Can the duty to bear witness outweigh the potential anguish to oneself and one's family? How much does desire for professional glory, to say nothing of adrenaline, tip the scale? At the same time, what Theo has to say is important. No Arabic-speaking Westerner has spent as much time living with and talking to jihadis as Theo Padnos.

Theo lived, while others died, for a variety of contingent reasons — Al Qaeda's desire, at a certain moment, to appear less radical than ISIS, the government of Qatar's desire to ingratiate itself with the US, and our government's desire for a piece of good news from Syria. In the end, though, I think Abu Mariah, the Al Qaeda commander who ultimately decided to release Theo, sent him home in no small part because he stopped seeing Theo as an enemy and saw him as a person. Theo had fought through his own pain, despair, and anger to connect to the humanity of his captors, and, in turn, his captors could no longer see him just as an enemy. If there is any policy prescription to be found in *Theo Who Lived*, it is that we should, as a nation, do just that.

– David Schisgall

# THEO PADNOS TIMELINE

**1986** graduates The Putney School

**1990** graduates Middlebury College

**2000** PhD English Literature, UMass Amherst

**2004** publishes My Life Had Stood a Loaded Gun, his memoir of teaching literature to prisoners in Vermont.

**2004-2012** writes articles for The New Republic, London Review of Books, Huffington Post, Chicago Tribune, mostly about the Middle East and Russia. In addition to French and Arabic, Theo also speaks fluent Russian.

**2006-2008** Theo lives in Yemen, as reporter at large for the Yemen Observer, an English-language newspaper based in Sanaa.

**2008-2011** Theo moves between Yemen, and Damascus, Syria, researching and writing.

**2011** Theo publishes his second book, Undercover Muslim, his memoir of studying for more than a year in a Salafi mosque in Sanaa. Theo is the only non-Muslim to have studied at Dammaj, once the world's largest academy for Salafi Islam.

**October 20th 2012** Theo becomes the second American journalist kidnapped in Syria.

**August 24th, 2014** Theo is brought by the al Nusra front, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, to a UN base in the UN controlled buffer zone between Syria and Israel. His release is arranged by the government of Qatar as a humanitarian gesture; no terms are disclosed. The UN soldiers then turn Theo over the FBI.

**August 25th, 2014** Al Nusra launches a multi-pronged attack against the UN bases in the Golan Heights, including the one at which Theo had been released the day before. They take over these bases, collect the soldier's guns, trucks, uniforms, and equipment, and take the soldiers hostage. The soldiers are released shortly thereafter.

# FILMMAKER BIOS

**David Schisgall**, director and writer, has worked in documentary film since 1991. His feature directorial credits include *Theo Who Lived* (2016), *Very Young Girls* (2007), and *The Lifestyle: Group Sex in the Suburbs* (1999). His television documentary work in the Middle East has been widely praised, earning him the 2004 Edgar R. Murrow Award for his work in Iraq. In addition, for over twenty years, David has been a trusted collaborator of Errol Morris; he contributed to *A Brief History of Time*, *Fast Cheap and Out of Control*, *Mr. Death*, *First Person*, and *The Unknown Known*. He also produced Nina Davenport's 2007 film *Operation Filmmaker*, and co-wrote the 2011 feature comedy *Our Idiot Brother*, starring Paul Rudd and Zoey Deschanel.

**Amanda Branson Gill**, producer, most recently completed David Schisgall's film *Theo Who Lived* (2016) and Jason Kohn's short film *Hidden Idols* (2015). She also produced Errol Morris's films *The Unknown Known* (2013) and *Standard Operation Procedure* (2008). She is currently at work on Jason Kohn's upcoming feature *Diamond, Silver & Gold*. She lives in Philadelphia with her husband and their two small children.

# THEO WHO LIVED

A film by David Schisgall

Featuring  
**Theo Padnos**  
**Nancy Curtis**  
**Viva Hardigg**

Directed by  
**David Schisgall**

Screenplay by  
**David Schisgall**

Produced by  
**Amanda Branson Gill, p.g.a.**

Executive Producer  
**Evgenia Peretz**

Executive Producer  
**Dan Cogan**

Editor  
**Jane Jo**

Director of Photography  
**Timothy Grucza**

Music composed and performed by  
**Byron Estep**

Production Designer  
**Knox White**

USA - 2016 - 86 mins  
In English and Arabic with English subtitles

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[www.zeitgeistfilms.com](http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com)