



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

A Country Auction: The Paul V. Leitzel Estate Sale by Robert Aibel; Ben Levin; Chris Musello; Jay Ruby

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thropologist Jane Belo, as well as Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and painters such as Walter Spies) and the Balinese? The existence of such a community is barely hinted at in an interview with Katharine Mershon, whose house was a social center for luxury cruise visitors like Lord and Lady Mountbatten. "We had servants," she reminisces, "well-trained servants, food, and liquor."

Although the film is professionally shot and superbly recorded, frequent cuts between interviews, concerts, and old and new footage are sometimes disconcerting. The fast transitions, for example, between images of 1930s black-and-white gamelan and 1980s gamelan in vivid color (pink-shirted musicians on bright green grass) almost negate the half-century of history rather than let us register it. At times the rich sound track and complex images work against each other. Finally, some scenes seem simply gratuitous: Aaron Copeland chuckling about his first meeting with Stravinsky, or a friend's recollection of McPhee's trip to Paris solely to pursue a recipe for crayfish bisque. Although such anecdotes are amusing, there are richer, more intriguing themes that burble to the surface in this film. The conclusion, for example, brings us back to Bali with rehearsals and performances of new Balinese music that is now being shaped by ideas from the West. And what of this comment by Steve Reich:

Non-Western music to a Western composer is dangerous. It's dangerous because it's powerful, it's dangerous because it's beautiful, it's dangerous because it has a very very long, very solid tradition behind it. And when a Western composer, who is an individual and who represents really nothing but himself and whatever now derailed tradition he has left, faces it, it's a little bit like a man sitting by himself in front of a cyclone.

A Country Auction: The Paul V. Leitzel Estate Sale. 1984. Produced and directed by Robert Aibel, Ben Levin, Chris Musello, and Jay Ruby. 58 minutes, color. Purchase \$760 (16mm), \$280 (video); rental \$32 (16mm), \$21 (video) from Pennsylvania State University, Audi-Visual Services, Special Services Bldg., University Park, PA 16802 (814/865-6314).

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A Country Auction is a film which demands active participation by its viewers. If viewers

are to understand this auction as the social ritual the filmmakers claim it to be, they must be prepared in advance with a framework of interpretation. In this regard, the film would work very well as a vehicle for discussion in undergraduate and graduate anthropology and folklife courses. It provides a basic portrayal which is amenable to a variety of cultural interpretive modes and perspectives. The accompanying study guide is useful in preparing a class to discuss the film.

Fundamentally, the film is about value and values. As a small-town family moves through the process of offering for sale a country store and most of its contents, we glimpse the often painful decisions concerning what to keep and what to sell. Precious little may be kept, so choices are difficult. As they choose, an absorbing tension between the practical and the spiritual unfolds. A man chooses useful objects—a bookcase and a typewriter stand—while a woman selects the personalized family quilts; a son keeps the old BB gun with which he first learned to shoot; a daughter selectively attempts to "recreate the store" in a small way, as a sort of shrine, in her home. Contexts range from the instrumental to the ritual.

The consideration of value(s) leads one through the family out into the community and beyond. Not only do family members feel the weight of sentimental attachment to certain artifacts, so do members of this close-knit Pennsylvania German community. Some have strong attitudes concerning "where objects belong." Handling an old handwritten ledger from the store containing names of former townspeople (and ancestors), a townsman remarks that he would "hate to see documents of . . . this kind get out of the community." The ledger is an exemplar of a shared past which would not have the same meanings to an outsider.

The auction itself embodies these tensions in the form of social roles and associated expectations, particularly those of insider versus outsider. Seen from within the community, the professional antique dealer occupies the ambiguous role of "a necessary evil." His interest in artifacts is not spiritual; his criteria for evaluation are materialistic. However, as a member of the family expressed it, "we needed to have him to buy." Still, the distress is obvious as the material representations of a family's history are reduced to monetary value. Following the auction, a family member summarized the disjunction of values, observing that a particular object "would have value to me but brought practically nothing."

Viewers of the film also get a sense of the auction as a performance event, from the ob-

vious verbal and nonverbal artistry of the auctioneers to the more subtle aesthetics of bidding. The careful arrangement of objects to be auctioned suggests a visual component to the event, and, as they are handled, the objects elicit personal experience stories. Food made and sold by townspeople adds the aesthetics of smell and taste. The filmmakers have distilled the rich texture of this event without belaboring various articulations with intrusive voice-over narrative.

The relative absence of narrative, however, means that viewers are left to their own devices in sorting through the chronology of the event. Sometimes the temporal sequence is confusing, as interviews and other footage shot both before and after the actual auction are edited into the unfolding event. The interviews are helpful in filling in background—responses from the family, questions to bidders asking why they bid on certain objects, and following the “life history” of an artifact purchased by a dealer—but often the questioning stops short of penetrating into deeper layers of meaning. Too many questions took a superficial form, such as “How do you feel about —?”.

Technically, the film is of consistently good quality. Scenes are framed well and in focus. Sound problems are most evident in group shots where crowd noise sometimes overpowers individual speakers. Overall, *A Country Auction* provides a good entrée into a number of anthropological and folkloristic issues.

In Search of Cool Ground. 1985. Three films: *The Mursi*, *The Kwegu*, and *The Migrants*. Produced by *Andre Singer*. 52 minutes each, color. Purchase \$575 each (video only) or \$1,650 for all three; rental \$150 (16mm), \$60 (video) from Thomas Howe Associates, Ltd., 1-1226 Homer Street, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 2Y8 Canada (604/687-4215).

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In Search of Cool Ground is a trilogy covering a decade in the life of the Mursi. These Nilo-Hamitic cattle-keeping people, who number about 5,000, live in scattered settlements along the Omo River in southwest Ethiopia. Parts 1 and 3, titled “The Mursi” and “The Migrants,” respectively, document some of the dramatic changes to Mursi traditional ways of life, brought about by environmental catastrophes and the revolutionary politics of greater Ethiopia. Part 3, “The Kwegu,”

which focuses on a group of fewer than 500 people for whom the Mursi serve as patrons in an unequal symbiotic relationship, was reviewed earlier (*AA* 86:512–513, 1984).

Part 1 was filmed in 1974. For the Mursi it was a time of war; a war quite unrelated to that of greater magnitude being waged hundreds of miles to the north, the fallout from which nonetheless affected Mursi traditional ways of life. The Mursi’s enemy were the Bodi. Cattle raids and frequent skirmishes over disputed boundaries were commonplace. An uneasy truce between them existed in 1974. Set against the cultural backdrop of the dominant role cattle play in their lives, the film focuses on Mursi political organization, as expressed in leadership and the decision-making process. The political context is a Bodi peace proposal to end a protracted dispute over contested grazing land the Mursi had occupied for 20 years. We see that in this stateless society without formal leadership, decisions on all matters pertaining to the community’s well-being must be debated publicly. David Turton, the maker of this excellent film, explains that public debates provide occasions for mobilizing action. The underlying principle in a Mursi debate is not only to obtain maximum public support for an issue, in this case the Bodi peace proposal; the debate mobilizes collective action, which cannot be publicly dissembled. Public debate provides maximum support for a line of action. Only men past their mid-twenties may speak in public debates, the most influential among them speaking last. Eloquence in debates earns for a man the title of “elder,” one of the few status roles in a society devoid of hierarchy. Before the close of a debate the ritual priest speaks. He takes no sides in the debate. He sums up the issues and by so doing symbolically represents the desired goal of maintaining community solidarity. Decisions are reached by consensus, a long drawn out process of talking. A Mursi maxim might be, as Turton puts it, “a community that debates together stays together.” Part 1 ends with the Mursi moving north into Bodi territory, now accessible because of the peace treaty, where the natural resources are better for their cattle. The cool ground they sought as relief from drought and hunger lay closer to the Ethiopian highlands.

In 1980 about one-third of the 5,000 Mursi resettled on high ground. Part 3 is about the migrants and their transition from relative isolation on the lower Omo River to becoming integrated into the highland Ethiopian market economy. The move to high ground was costly. Tsetse fly attacked their cattle. Army worms devastated their sorghum fields. As