



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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I keep referring to *Lige* as a film, although it was shot on video tape using Sony 3000 cameras. It was produced in cooperation with and using the facilities of KNPB-TV in Reno. The technical quality, especially the sound, is excellent throughout. *Lige* is available in both ¾" and ½" video formats, as well as on 16mm. film, so it can be utilized in many different situations. *Lige* is perfect for school use.

Nevada State Council on the Arts
Reno

BLANTON OWEN

A Country Auction: The Paul V. Leitzel Estate Sale. By Robert Aibel, Ben Levin, Chris Musello, and Jay Ruby. 58 min., 16mm., color. Three-page accompanying study guide. (The Pennsylvania State University, Audio-Visual Services, University Park, PA 16802)

Many of the documentaries we deal with professionally describe themselves as ethnographic, but *A Country Auction* is more clearly an example of that highly specialized filmic genre than most. At odds with other forms of capturing cultural reality on film, *A Country Auction* is disarmingly straightforward. Its interviewers are miked and on camera. Its narrator is a scholar who discusses what we see. *A Country Auction* is also considerably less stylized than films that employ the techniques of the art film to heighten effect. And therein lies its strengths.

Centered on an estate sale in a small community in rural Juniata County, Pennsylvania, *A Country Auction* views auctions as symbolic, economic, and social events. But the film is about more than auction as event. Instead, it suggests that this auction, and presumably any other, can be unpacked as a means of getting at many of a community's informing values and attitudes. We see the estate sale's various components, listen to the stories and think about the motivations of a sample of the people involved in the event, and reflect on the ultimate meanings the event holds for the participants, whether individuals, families, or the larger community.

The film portrays the Leitzel estate sale as a public event that involves shared but private values and motivations. Faced with the task of sorting through the tangible reminders of their father's life—and his death—the family is forced by the sale to confront that death and to negotiate an affectionate, but not always easy consensus as to which goods should be kept for their sentimental associations and which should be sold for their commercial value. Sentiment and commerce are a dialectic in this film; the auction mediates.

For the community, the auction is a reminder of death but not an occasion for mourning. At the public preview, a time for the community to view the goods to be sold the following day, neighbors evaluate the possessions and accomplishments of a life, reminiscing about Leitzel but simultaneously thinking about which objects they might want to own. The preview has the quality shared by some wakes; Leitzel family members liken it to a family reunion, an ambience evoked the next day by the sale.

The film portrays the sale itself in terms of the dialectic between sentiment and commerce. From the moment the auctioneer arrives, at 5:30 a.m., until the day ends, the film investigates the diverse motivations of the participants. Family members are uneasy about the tangible breakup of their father's estate but united in their goodwill toward their community and their desire to realize the best profit from the sale. Buyers buy for a variety of reasons. Some are sentimental, as in the example of a woman who bids on a large copper kettle that once belonged to her family; she wants it because of a sense that it should be restored to her family. Many buy because of other personal associations between objects and memories. For some, the artifacts are potentially useful, as decor or as tools. One man buys because of his interest in local history, another kind of sentiment.

An antique dealer who buys much of what is offered plays a particularly significant role, embodying the tension between sentiment and commerce. He is local and a friend. But at the same time, anything he buys is transformed to a commercial commodity, shedding personal associations while gaining cash value. His attendance makes virtually any sale a success, but he signifies a set of relationships in the larger marketplace. Much of what the auctioneer sells enters a kind of community-based potlatch in which goods are circulated, sometimes for generations, within the community. But the dealer's purchases travel further and accrue other, more tangible sorts of value. One telling segment of the film traces two benches, which the dealer buys for \$27.50 each, through a series of dealers in Kansas, to a fraternity house at the University of Kansas, whose decorator bought them, refinished, for \$250 each.

A Country Auction is a first-rate example of ethnographic filmmaking. It strives for understanding, not effect, yet it remains humane. Rather than focus on the art of the auctioneer, a subject of obvious interest to folklorists, the filmmakers have chosen to probe the meaning of the larger event and a community's set of values. The film's short study guide provides a useful orientation (the "detailed film companion" referred to in the guide was not packaged with the film), and the narration makes the point that we are watching ethnography and dealing with complex cultural matters. Ultimately, though, the filmmakers have declined to offer conclusions, a tantalizing omission in light of their very deliberate attempt to focus the viewers on a set of questions.

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BURT FEINTUCH

An Ancient Gift. By Donald Coughlin for the University of Northern Arizona. 18 min., 16mm., color. (University of California Extension Media Center, 2223 Fulton Street, Berkeley, CA 94720)

Donald Coughlin's *An Ancient Gift* is one of those rare gems that occasionally appear to make the life of a teacher a little bit easier and a great deal more interesting. It is short (a scant 18 minutes), and yet *An Ancient Gift* is able to capture certain aspects of the world view of the Navajo people better than many films three or four times its length. Filmed on the Navajo reservation in Arizona, the documentary begins at "the beginning": remarkably beautiful shots of the sun rising behind dark mesas provide a striking visual background to the voice of a Navajo narrator telling the story of the origin of things. Here we find Changing Woman, a central figure in Navajo cosmology, and discover that it was she who gave the sheep to the Navajo with the admonition, "Care for the sheep and you will be able to live on as a People." This "ancient gift" becomes the focus of the rest of the film; in a cinemagraphically sophisticated yet seemingly straightforward way, the filmmakers present the intricate relationships between humans, animals, plants and the rest of the universe, especially in terms of that gift of sheep.

For the folklorist or cultural anthropologist there are any number of relevant issues to be discussed here; every minute is packed with information about kinship, education, myth, ceremonial life, cultural values, aesthetics, and so on—and all this drawn together by the ongoing concern of the Navajo's relationship with their sheep.

Those interested in women's studies also will find a rich source of cultural information here. From the description of Changing Woman and her relationship with the Navajo people in the opening frames to the fascinating discussion of women's special bond with the sheep (since they are both nurturers of the People), the film highlights female roles within Navajo society. It is especially interesting in this regard that the narrator is a Navajo woman.