

A COUNTRY AUCTION: THE PAUL V. LEITZEL ESTATE SALE. 1984. BY ROBERT AIBEL, BEN LEVIN, CHRIS MUSELLO AND JAY RUBY. TIME: 56:00. COLOR. PURCHASE PRICE: \$80.00 FOR VHS; \$100 FOR 3/4" VIDEO; \$760 FOR 16MM FILM. RENTAL PRICE (3 DAY RENTAL PERIOD): \$13.00 FOR VHS; \$34.50 FOR 16MM FILM. AVAILABLE FROM THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY, AUDIO-VISUAL SERVICES, SPECIAL SERVICES BUILDING, 1127 FOX HILL ROAD, UNIVERSITY PARK, PA 16802. TEL. 814 865 6314 FAX. 814 863 2574.

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A Country Auction: The Paul V. Leitzel Estate Sale documents the process through which the Leitzel family comes to terms with the death of their father and grandfather, Paul, through disposing of the contents of his general store and household at public auction. This sale occurred in the Juniata County town of Richfield, which lies in the rural, agricultural center of Pennsylvania. The position from which I approach this film is somewhat unusual. I am a doctoral candidate in social anthropology and a visual anthropologist. But with respect to *A Country Auction* I am also a native. I was born and raised in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, a borough of about 5000 residents just twelve miles from Richfield. I know the Leitzel family — Celo, Paul Leitzel's son and a major character in *A Country Auction*, was the pastor of the Lutheran church I attended as a youth, and I attended high school with Celo's daughters.

My family and I have had a great deal of first-hand experience with country auctions. When I was a youngster, my mother often took me to "sales," as they are called locally. Today, I continue to attend them with her on my visits home. After my grandfather died in 1988, my grandmother — who lived just down the road from Richfield in the tiny village of Mt. Pleasant Mills — held an auction before moving to a small apartment in Selinsgrove. I thought I should take advantage of this experience, so I have included comments by my mother, my aunts Karen and Mary, and Mary's husband Donald in this review. I showed *A Country Auction* to them on my most recent visit to Pennsylvania. I also had the opportunity to chat with Celo Leitzel and his wife Doris, who is also in the film.

In the study guide to the film the anthropologists/

filmmakers claim that, as social processes, auctions are "an exciting way to illustrate many of the values and attitudes which lay at the core of life in this county" (Aibel, Levin, et. al. 1984, p. 1). They examine the auction as a public rite of passage — "the last phase of a set of funerary rituals" — through which "the family recalls the deceased and attempts to reconcile their loss while simultaneously working to adapt and affirm relationships among the living" (Aibel, Levin, et. al. 1984, p. 2). At an auction, the remaining physical evidence of a loved one's life is displayed and redistributed among the community. Thus, some items auctioned are symbolic of the social status and relationships of the deceased, his or her personal history.

But many items for sale are also symbolic of the social history of the community as well; they reference a past, and disappearing way of life in this rural community. Historically, the livelihood of almost everyone in Richfield was in some way connected to agriculture. Family farms and businesses were passed on to subsequent generations. But now fewer families own bigger farms, and many in Richfield must commute to larger towns to work for wage labor. Today, grown children are more likely to leave the community than they are to stay and reproduce traditional values. In response to these changes, contemporary members of the community often express a nostalgia for the past through collecting material reminders of it. Many people regularly attend auctions in hopes of finding cultural artifacts which invoke memories of the community's history.

As the filmmakers point out, auctions are also economic events. Families hold estate sales in hopes of raising as much money as possible, and the goods previously owned by the deceased are sold to the highest bidder. Thus, in the context of an estate sale, the deceased's possessions not only have symbolic, or sentimental, value as markers of personal and social history; they also have economic value as commodities. Families who hold estate sales must weigh their sentimental attachment to certain objects against the potential value of these objects as commodities. Likewise, members of the community who participate in the auction as consumers must decide how much they are willing to pay for objects which hold sentimental value for them either as personal remembrances of the deceased, or as artifacts of a way of life that is rapidly receding into the historical past.

Thus, an ethnographic account of an estate sale represents an excellent way to understand how particular individuals, families and communities integrate past personal relationships and community values into their contemporary lives. Examining how individuals resolve the tension between the symbolic and economic value of particular sale items can provide clues to understanding how past and present values are embodied by material objects. And, as a public ceremony and funerary rite, an auction can also provide insights into the social structure and values of the contemporary community.

These observations hold true for estate sales wherever they may occur. The goal for any ethnographic representation of such an event, therefore, is to tease out what about these relationships and processes is particular to the specific community under study. Thus, in the case of *A Country Auction: The Paul V. Leitzel Estate Sale*, some relevant questions would include: What do the events depicted in this film tell us about the values and attitudes of the contemporary descendants of the German and Scotch-Irish farmers who settled the county over one hundred and fifty years ago? What is it about particular items that cause specific individuals to value their sentimental meaning more than their economic value, or vice versa? What does this say about the conflict and continuity of the past and present values and attitudes of rural, Central Pennsylvanians? How do the family and community participate in the estate sale as a funerary rite? How is this aspect of the sale expressed in ways that are unique for this culture? What does an auction tell us about the contemporary social structure of the community, e.g.: the division of labor by gender or the effects of economic class on the contemporary values and lives of community members?

A Country Auction does show how the personal effects of the deceased evoke personal and social histories. And one can easily see how the sale works as a ritual through which family members recall the deceased, reminisce about their shared past, and affirm present relationships. The film also explains how the auction functions as a local manifestation of the national antique market and raises questions about the commodification of cultural objects. But how the auction functions as a community ritual that expresses attitudes and values unique to contemporary, rural, Central Pennsylvanians is not clear in this film. Nor is the impact of the auction as a local economic activity, apart from the antique

market, addressed. In fact, many opportunities presented in *A Country Auction* to explore these and other aspects of contemporary, rural, Central Pennsylvania culture are passed over.

By attempting to understand how members of the Leitzel family decide which objects to keep and which objects to sell, the filmmakers portray the auction and the events surrounding it as a family funerary rite. In the end, the process appears relatively straightforward for the Lietzel's—any conflict is resolved in favor of sentimental attachment. Laura, Paul's only daughter, comments in the film:

I think we both [Laura and Celso] feel that if something has meaning to you, the same way with the children, we'd rather have them have it then have it sold.

I asked my family about their own experience with holding my grandmother's sale. Their comments reveal that they felt that the experience of the Leitzel family was similar to their own in this respect, and that it was typical for their community.

Donald: You see what they do before they have a sale, the kids decide what they want and what they don't want.

Karen: And they don't choose to sell what they don't want to sell.

Stacy: But are there ever sales where everything goes on the auction block?

Mom: Only when the family can't agree to divvy it out.

Donald: I don't think that happens often.

Mary: That's an exception.

In one scene the filmmakers attempt to understand how the decisions about what to keep, and what to sell, are made as Laura sorts through her childhood toys. This scene raises interesting questions about specific objects and the values and sentiments they embody for Laura, and the relationship between these personal meanings and the contemporary values and attitudes of the

community.

Filmmaker: Will these toys go up in the sale?

Laura: Some of them will, I'll probably keep a few.

Filmmaker: Again, how will you decide?

Laura: I guess the day before the sale I'll just have to come to a decision which I'll keep and which will be sold.

Filmmaker: Is it hard?

Laura: It is difficult. I'd like to keep so many things, but I know I have to be selective. I feel I have to be.

Filmmaker: Can I ask why, you know, why you wouldn't just — Why you will be selling some of them?

Laura: Well, I don't know. I guess I would like to just have a few things that were most important to me.

Filmmaker: Just a few special things.

Laura: Um humm, special things.

This scene is also notable for its reflexivity — it shows just how difficult the process of ethnography can be. The subjects of our films and texts may not have the time or inclination to reflect on their motives and values, nor to share them with the researchers. Try as he might, the ethnographer never seems to discover the emotional, psychological, or economic bases of Laura's decisions as to what is to be sold.

Yet this same scene has one of the most spontaneous, delightful, and potentially insightful moments in the film. Celo shows a BB gun that he has decided to keep. Then he and Laura recall the childhood Christmas when Celo used this gun to shoot Laura's doll in the head. Brother, sister and filmmaker laugh — the exchange is warm, funny, and bittersweet. In this moment, Celo spontaneously provides clues to the questions that were previously posed by the filmmaker, but left unanswered. Celo's decision to keep the gun is obviously connected to the story he tells; and to the meanings, values and

relationships evoked by the object. It is unfortunate that there is no further exploration of just what these personal meanings are for Celo; and how they resonate with the values and attitudes of the larger, contemporary community.

The filmmakers also interviewed community members and "outsiders" who purchased items at the sale. Those interviewed indicated that they bought items for their sentimental value as markers of an historical or personal past. Their comments reveal that, for some, the sentimental value of the objects far outweighs concern about the monetary price. One woman claimed she was instructed by her brother to pay any price for a copper apple-butter kettle that had originally been in their own family. Another man paid \$410 for a handwritten account of transactions recorded by past, local Justices of the Peace. He admits that the object has no fixed monetary value, and that at another sale it might only have brought \$5 — \$10. But for him the document is invaluable as a one-of-a-kind record of his family and community history. Thus, the filmmakers illustrate that some sale items do embody meanings that eclipse their value as commodities for specific community members.

But the filmmakers do not go on to examine what I feel to be a crucial question raised by this observation: Just why are objects that embody the past so important for members of this contemporary community? Often, nostalgic yearnings are based on romanticized notions of the past as the oppressive and dysfunctional aspects of traditional family relationships, and the hardships of day to day life on the farm, are overshadowed by contemporary experiences of anomie or alienation. Thus, a further exploration of the buyers' motivations would have provided a means for understanding some of the personal and social bases for the continuity and conflict between past and present values and attitudes in the lives of contemporary Juniata County residents.

There are numerous scenes in the film that raise questions about the importance of the material embodiment of nostalgia. One couple from outside the community spent hundreds of dollars to purchase cabinets for their recreation of a country store. But we never find out *why* they have gone to such trouble to replicate the past. What meaning does this have for them? Did they grow up with such a store? Is this a hobby, a business, or an investment in antiques? Laura Litzel also recreated a section of her father's store in her home. Why did she choose the particular objects she did? What is it about the

past that would be lost for Laura if this recreation didn't exist? What about the past might she be changing through this process, and why?

The film also passes on opportunities to understand how material objects carry meanings in addition to, and beyond, personal remembrances or nostalgic yearnings. Take for example, the continuity and conflict between past and present gender relations in the community. Doris Leitzel's sister-in-law explains that she bought several dishes at the sale as personal remembrances of Paul Leitzel's wife Orpha. The film and my own experience tells me that Mrs. Snyder's choice is not idiosyncratic. Dishes carry important meanings, primarily for women, in rural Central Pennsylvania culture (as they do elsewhere). My mother refers to certain items according to who in her family previously owned them and how they were used: "Aunt Jenny's candy dish" or "Grandma Shaffer's cold-cabbage bowl," for example. What might specific kinds of items, such as dishes, and the meanings attached to them say about the past and present social roles and values of women in this community?

One man explains that he bid on the "loafing" benches so he could recreate the atmosphere of the Leitzel's store in his home. We learn that loafing at the general store on Sundays or during winter evenings was a common, and almost exclusively male, activity. For my grandfather and the other men in Mt. Pleasant Mills, the loafing spot was the gas station. They would discuss farming and hunting, and gossip about their neighbors in a mixture of English and the local German dialect (Pennsylvania Dutch).

But the film focuses more on the benches as commodities, and on the auction as an economic activity, than on the social processes and values associated with the items for sale. Thus, interesting questions that are raised within the film are not fully examined. In one scene where a local couple comments on loafing, the ethnographer turns the discussion back to economic concerns rather than exploring their comments on loafing as a social process which reflects past and present community values and attitudes.

Woman: ...Usually I would just get my merchandise and go out. You were always welcome, but he [Paul Leitzel] was usually sitting on the bench talking to the men.

Man: That was the men's thing, this store and the

other general store in town, they'd sit around and gossip. And they would all generally speak in Pennsylvania Dutch, and you'd be at somewhat of a loss if you didn't understand it. Women didn't mix with it too much, they'd come in and do the shopping and be gone.

Filmmaker: Well, tell me are you coming here and looking for anything in particular?

Woman: No, just interested in the local memorabilia and seeing what he had.

Filmmaker: Do you think you'll be buying anything?

Woman: That's always debatable.

What might a further exploration of this couple's, and other community members', comments about loafing have revealed about past and present gender relations? My uncle tells me that the men still loaf, but now it is in the early mornings at the local coffee shop. What might this say about how rural, Central Pennsylvanians have adapted their social practices to the transition from an agricultural, to a wage labor, economy?

Perhaps addressing these kinds of questions is beyond the scope of this film. But even if I limit my critique to how community values and attitudes are manifested by the auction itself, I feel the film does not tell us much about the contemporary community, despite claims that this is an explicit goal for the filmmakers. As an economic activity, the filmmakers concentrate on the antique trade, rather than on the redistribution of goods within the local community. Nor is there a revealing analysis of the auction as a social process and funeral rite at the community level.

First, let us consider how the auction is depicted as an economic event. In the narration, the voice-over states that it is the antique dealers who invest household goods with economic value: "Antique dealers move through these ceremonies as merchants, transforming household objects into commodities." But this statement ignores the fact that it is really the family who transforms particular objects into commodities as they initially decide what to sell and what to keep. Those objects which the family keeps are heirlooms, and are highly valued for their sentimental meaning, rather than any potential exchange or use value.

Of the objects which the family decides to sell, some only have potential exchange value because of their utility and embody little, if any, sentimental meaning. These would include household items such as linens, appliances, clothing and some furniture and tools. Members of the community, especially those with limited incomes, often go to sales to buy these items for personal use. Estate sales, therefore, function as important, local, economic events which redistribute goods throughout the community. As such, the Leitzel's sale would have provided an excellent opportunity for the filmmakers to examine the class relations of the contemporary community: how they are manifested in the context of the auction; how socio-economic class affects individuals' negotiation of the tension between sentimental and economic value; and how class relations affect the values and lives of present-day, rural, Central Pennsylvanians.

Instead of examining the auction as a local economic event, the film examines the commodification of material objects within the local, and national, antique markets. This focus on the broader antique market, and the issues raised by the commodification of culture, is interesting, and perhaps reflects the interests of the filmmakers, who had worked in Juniata County for seven years by the time the film was shot in 1983. Musello was examining home decor and social identity, and Aibel was interested in amateur art. In addition, Musello, Ruby and Aibel were antique collectors, and Aibel was working as a part-time antique dealer (Aibel 1988).

Antiques are a very complex kind of commodity. They are valued, at times, for their utility. But sentimental or symbolic meanings also work to determine their economic value as well, sometimes exclusively. As the film shows, the sentimental meanings of antiques may be highly personal, as in the case of Doris Leitzel's sister-in-law. One might think that when antiques are removed from their community of origin and circulated within the broader antique market, they are also stripped of such personal, symbolic meanings and become more like utilitarian goods. This is not entirely true, however, for antiques still retain symbolic value as links to an historical past, and may often be reinvested with the personal symbolic meanings of the buyer. In the film, local antique dealer Joe Herman comments:

Today everybody has to have a round oak table because they always say their grandma had one like

that, and now they want one too.

The film spends a good deal of time with Joe Herman, and follows several of the sale items across the country, documenting their rise in value as they pass from dealer to dealer. The kitchen table, which sold for \$250 at the auction, is priced at \$800 in a New England antique shop. Two loafing benches which originally sold for \$30 each, are purchased for \$250 each by an interior designer for a University of Kansas fraternity.

The film's emphasis on this commodification of cultural artifacts, and the inflation of their value, may lead one to infer that families who hold auctions are exploited by antique dealers. Possessions *are* torn from the families and communities of origin, the sentimental and symbolic meanings *do* become altered, and the economic value *can* soar. But the perspective of community members is more pragmatic, the purpose of the sale is, after all, to raise money. Doris and Celo Leitzel have mixed feelings:

Doris: You said they're taking a part of history, you know, and putting it outside of the area, and yet for some reason they're the only one's that can afford to buy these things. And you're having a sale, usually the purpose is for the income that the sale brings, you know. I never thought about it being nasty or anything like that. We were glad Joe Herman came.

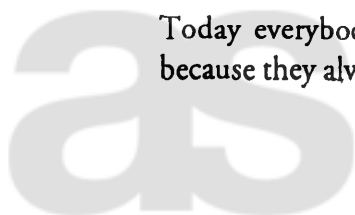
Celo: Yeah.

Doris: We needed him to buy this. But I was inside most of the time and people would come in and — people I knew who were friends and family — and they'd say "I can't afford to buy anything at this sale." It sort of gave me a guilt feeling, yet the purpose of the sale was to get some money.

My family's comments are more straightforward, and reflect my mother's view that for Pennsylvania Germans, "the number one thing is the money."

Stacy: Do you guys have any mixed feelings about your culture being commodified?

Mary: Absolutely not.



Stacy: So you don't have a problem with yuppies in New England buying your heritage.

Karen: I think it's sort of revenge, if they want to spend their money...

Donald: As long as the price is right.

Stacy: But you're not the one who's getting all the profit — someone like Joe Herman and all those other dealers...

Mom: That's free enterprise, that's the capitalist system. It doesn't bother me. Why, do you think our culture is being robbed by outsiders?

Stacy: Well... umm... I thought maybe...

Nor does *A Country Auction* show how community members participate in the auction in any way other than as consumers. If an auction is a socio-cultural process, in addition to an economic event, one would assume that people attend estate sales for reasons other than strict economic interest. Fuller attention to the various ways community members participate in a public auction would have been useful for the depiction and analysis of the auction as a social custom from which, as stated in the film, one can "learn a lot about the lives and values of the people of Central Pennsylvania."

For example, food is an important part of auctions and funerals in rural Pennsylvania culture. The same group of women, usually associated with the local church, bring food to both activities. (Food is provided free at funerals. At auctions the monies raised by the sale of food go to church and charitable activities.) Raisin pie, which is also called funeral pie, is rarely served in the home. Rather it is reserved for two social ceremonies: funerals and public sales. Attention to this aspect of the auction-as-ritual would have raised interesting questions about the present-day social structure, values and lives of the community. It would also have strengthened the filmmakers' argument that the auction is part of a funerary rite, and would have provided a specific illustration of how this aspect of a sale is symbolically expressed by Pennsylvania Germans.

The overall reaction of my family to this film was mixed. My aunts and uncle felt that it gave an accurate depiction of some aspects of a public sale. Celo Leitzel

was also pleased with the film. He said that he has shown the film widely in the community, and that it has received a positive response.¹ But my family felt that the filmmakers missed many important features of the auction as a community gathering.

Mary: First of all, it's like a happening, you go to the auction and you see people you haven't seen for ages because everybody scatters, but when they know that a certain person is having a sale, lots of times people come from out of state and everything else.

Karen: It's a curiosity thing too, you connect what people buy to them and you learn about people through what they buy.

Mary: Not only that, you know the value of some of the things you have.

Mom: But also, the main reason people go to sales is because they are very entertaining.

Mary: That's right, some people go just to eat.

Mom: They made no comment on that and that's a big part of the sale.

Karen: And that shows the community's generosity — people donate that food themselves to raise money for the church.

Mary: They didn't capture the interaction of the people in the crowd.

Mom: Right

Mary: And that's the fun, the interesting part about a sale.

Karen: That's where you learn about the culture.

Recently, many anthropologists have commented on representations of their native cultures. But a white, middle-class, Protestant, woman like myself does not often enjoy the opportunity to speak as both anthropologist and native. I feel quite fortunate, as an anthropologist, to experience the contradictions raised

by having the scrutiny of ethnographers, and their cameras, focused on my community of origin. For me, this has grounded aspects of the recent, mostly abstract, discussions of the limitations of ethnography — the partiality and bias inherent in ethnographic representations.

As a native, I have lived daily with the meanings of social life within my community. Now as an anthropologist I can reflect on this cultural minutia as something other than “just the way things are.” Rural, Central Pennsylvania culture is a complex, dynamic system of social relationships and meanings that is rooted in history and embedded within national (and global) socio-cultural, political and economic contexts. My training as an anthropologist has rendered some of these broader relationships, and their theoretical, political, economic and social implications, more transparent than perhaps they are to some members of my native community.

Ideally, the goal of an ethnographic representation is to integrate these disparate perspectives and experiences of a community under study. But the intellectual complexity of this task, and the limitations of the media available for representation, render this ideal virtually unattainable. So it seems we must come to terms with the partiality of our representations; and rather than viewing this as a constraint, we can understand that we are freed from pursuing an elusive holism. We can choose our focus, explore it as fully as possible, and use our personal interests as assets. But at the same time we must make the focus of our work clear, reveal how (as best we can) our personal perspectives affect the representation, and couch the claims for our work very

carefully. Thus, my comments on *A Country Auction* should not be interpreted as faulting the filmmakers for what they did not include, or for not making the film I might have made. Nor do I think their choice to focus on the antique trade was, in itself, problematic. My goal has been, rather, to specifically illustrate how this film does not fulfill the expectations raised by the filmmakers' own claims for the work.

NOTES

1. The filmmakers should be commended for their conscientious efforts to make the film available to the community. They held two local screenings to preview the film just after its completion. They also provided Celso with several video copies, a 16mm. print, and copies of various film reviews and articles.

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