



**Theatrical Booking
Contact:**

Clemence Taillandier / Zeitgeist Films
212-274-1989 x18
clemence@zeitgeistfilms.com

**Festival Booking and
Publicity Contact:**

Nadja Tennstedt / Zeitgeist Films
212-274-1989 x15
nadja@zeitgeistfilms.com

a zeitgeist films release

act of god

a film by Jennifer Baichwal

Is being hit by lightning a random natural occurrence or a predestined event? Accidents, chance, fate and the elusive quest to make sense out of tragedy underpin director Jennifer Baichwal's (*Manufactured Landscapes*) captivating new work, an elegant cinematic meditation on the metaphysical effects of being struck by lightning. To explore these profound questions, Baichwal sought out riveting personal stories from around the world—from a former CIA assassin and a French storm chaser, to writer Paul Auster and improvisational musician Fred Frith. The philosophical anchor of the film, Auster was caught in a terrifying and deadly storm as a teenager, and it has deeply affected both his life and art: "It opened up a whole realm of speculation that I've continued to live with ever since." In his doctor brother's laboratory, Frith experiments with his guitar to demonstrate the ubiquity of electricity in our bodies and the universe. Visually dazzling and aurally seductive, *Act of God* singularly captures the harsh beauty of the skies and the lives of those who have been forever touched by their fury.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

I studied philosophy and theology before turning to documentary and, in some ways, the questions I was drawn to then are the ones I still grapple with now, although in a different context. Two of these, which specifically inform this film, are the relationship between meaning and randomness and the classical problem of evil.

Five children were struck by lightning and killed while praying under a cross on top of a mountain. This is an unspeakable tragedy, something unimaginable, and any external attempts to make sense of it would be obscene. And yet in the deeply Catholic community where it happened, with a worldview that includes a God who is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent, can such an event be made sense of? Does a tragedy like this destroy faith? Or strengthen it?

Being struck by lightning is the quintessential example of being singled out by randomness. This is a paradox. But we found making this film that for someone who has experienced this and survived, or been in proximity to someone who has experienced this and not survived, it is almost impossible not to see it as some kind of sign, a radical message, an event to be pondered and divined. And if we don't do this in an explicit way—take it as a literal act of god—then it seems we most often do it by turning to narrative.

Paul Auster, whose body of work is saturated with the idea of coincidence and chance, has resisted attributing extraneous meaning to the fact that he was in a violent lightning storm as an adolescent. And yet he admits that all his writing has proceeded in some way from the fact that if the bolt had struck a few seconds later, he would have died, rather than the friend who was right in front of him. James O'Reilly waited 20 years to write about being struck because before then he could not “resist the temptation to intentionalize this violent, random act.” He may not have intentionalized when he finally did write, but he did put the experience into coherent narrative. As did Auster. So is telling stories about our experiences, especially the ones we can't understand, the most fundamental way we give life meaning?

I haven't made a film like this before, where a number of stories around the same theme are collected. We spent an inordinate amount of time trying to interweave these stories in a way that was more satisfying than the primarily consecutive alternative. But after months and months of this, it occurred to me that the very thesis we were pointing to in the content, we were resisting in the form. We were trying to deconstruct narratives in order to be formally interesting. And by doing this, we were compromising the stories: making them serve the form, rather than suggest it. For me it was a revelation—a lesson I thought I had already learned—that form for its own sake, instead of form that proceeds organically from content, is always a failure.

There was also an attempt in this film to make the form/content relationship more explicit, especially with music, but in a way that deepened rather than exposed the connection.

So often sound design and music in film (like visual language in conventional documentary) is subordinate; it reacts to something already determined, and therefore the relationship is compromised from the beginning. The immediacy of Fred Frith's brilliant improvisation, particularly in the last sequence, is self-explanatory. We tried to do the same thing with Martin Tielli, Dave Bidini and Selina Martin's score in the opposite way: by having them start writing music at the same time we started making the film. So a dialogue, instead of a monologue, unfolded in both cases.

Finally, it was a challenge to approach a subject that normally would only be treated—often poorly—in a scientific context. The idea was to resist addressing the “how” as a way of avoiding the “why.” This documentary is about the “why,” the unanswerable nature of it, and how we humans respond to this. As usual, it took a few years to film and edit, pushed everyone involved to various limits, and finally became the thing it was meant to be. It was, as always, a deeply collaborative effort: both with those who shared their stories, and with those who helped me translate them into the medium of film.

—Jennifer Baichwal

SELECTED SUBJECT BIOS

FRED FRITH

Fred Frith, born in England in 1949, is perhaps the world's best known improvisational guitarist. He is also a multi-instrumentalist and composer.

Frith first came to attention as one of the founding members of the English avant-garde rock group Henry Cow. He was also a member of Art Bears, Massacre and Skeleton Crew, and has collaborated with a number of prominent musicians, including Robert Wyatt, Brian Eno, Lars Hollmer, The Residents, Lol Coxhill, John Zorn, Bill Laswell, Derek Bailey, Iva Bittová and Bob Ostertag. He has also composed several long works, including *Traffic Continues* and *Freedom in Fragments*.

His career spans over three decades and he has appeared on over 400 albums. He still performs actively throughout the world. Currently Frith is Professor of Composition in the Music Department at Mills College in Oakland, California. He lives in the United States with his wife, German photographer Heike Liss, and their children, Finn and Lucia. Frith is the brother of Simon Frith, a well-known music critic and sociologist; and Chris Frith, the eminent neuro-psychologist, who also appears in *Act of God*.

PAUL AUSTER

Paul Auster is a world-renowned author, known for works that function as metaphysical detective stories, exploring issues of coincidence and meaning.

He was born February 3, 1947, in Newark, New Jersey. After graduating from Columbia University in 1970, he moved to Paris where he made his living translating the works of French authors. He returned to the states in 1974 to begin writing essays, poems and novels of his own.

Auster's debut was a highly acclaimed memoir, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), in which he wrote about the death of his father in one part, and in the other, explored the notions of chance and fate—themes that would continue through his novels and non-fiction work.

He has since written numerous novels, poems, screenplays, and works of nonfiction. His 1987 meta-detective series, *The New York Trilogy*, was an existential collection of linked stories. *City of Glass*, the first of the three books, was adapted into a graphic novel in 2004. In his later works, such as *Oracle Night* and *The Brooklyn Follies*, he continued to probe the nature of being.

Paul's most recent work is the novel *Man in the Dark*. He currently lives in Brooklyn with his wife, writer Siri Hustvedt, and their daughter, singer and actress Sophie Auster. He was in a lightning storm at the age of fourteen, in which a friend was killed, and claims that this event was definitive in the subsequent direction of his life and work.

FILMMAKERS

JENNIFER BAICHWAL – DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Jennifer Baichwal has been directing and producing documentaries for fifteen years. Her first film, *Looking You in the Back of the Head*, an inquiry into the problem of personal identity, asked thirteen women to try to describe themselves and was first broadcast, to critical acclaim, on TVOntario's *From the Heart*. It subsequently sold for broadcast across Canada.

Let it Come Down: The Life of Paul Bowles, her first feature documentary (also distributed by Zeitgeist), won a 1999 International Emmy for Best Arts Documentary. It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1998 and was nominated that year for a Best Feature Documentary Genie Award. It won Best Biography at Hot Docs in 1999. The film was sold for broadcast all over the world, and selected for a number of international film and television festivals, including Jerusalem, Buenos Aires, FIPA, Banff (where it received a Rockie nomination), Istanbul and Edinburgh.

The Holier It Gets documents a trek Baichwal took with her brother and two sisters to the source of the Ganges river with her father's ashes. The film won Best Independent Canadian Film and Best Cultural Documentary at Hot Docs 2000, Geminis for Best Editing and Best Writing and was nominated for the Donald Brittain Award and the Chalmers Documentarian Award. It features music by Ravi Shankar and John McLaughlin.

The True Meaning of Pictures is a feature length film on the work of Appalachian photographer Shelby Lee Adams. The film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2002 and was invited to the Sundance International Film Festival in January 2003. It won a Gemini award for Best Arts Documentary in 2003 and has played at numerous international festivals.

Baichwal, along with Nick de Pencier, was commissioned in 2003-2004 to make 40 short films on artists who have been supported over the past four decades by the Ontario Arts Council. These include writer Michael Ondaatje, artist Michael Snow, pianist Eve Egoyan and playwright Judith Thompson, and are in periodic rotation on TVOntario. The collection received a 2006 Gemini nomination for Best Direction in a Performing Arts Program or Series.

Manufactured Landscapes, a feature documentary about the work of artist Edward Burtynsky (also distributed by Zeitgeist), was a co-production between Mercury Films, Foundry Films and the National Film Board. It premiered at TIFF in September 2006 and won Best Canadian Feature Film, and has since received a number of other awards, notably a Genie for Best Documentary, Al Gore's Reel Current Award and the 2006 Toronto Film Critics' Award for Best Canadian Feature and Best Documentary 2006.

Baichwal founded Mercury Films Inc. with de Pencier in 1998.

NICK DE PENCIER – PRODUCER/DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Nick de Pencier is a director, producer, and director of photography working in performing arts, documentary, and dramatic film. He is President of Mercury Films Inc., which he co-founded with Jennifer Baichwal.

After making short films while at McGill University in the late 1980s, he moved to New York City and was a researcher for a number of documentaries for PBS. Back in his native Toronto, he spent several years working in production on feature films. He produced and directed the video segments and interviews for the CD ROM *Understanding McLuhan*, published by Southam/Voyager.

In documentary, he produced and photographed the documentary feature *Let It Come Down: The Life of Paul Bowles*. He also produced and photographed *The Holier It Gets*. In 2002 he produced and shot the documentary: *The True Meaning of Pictures* about the work and world of Kentucky photographer

Shelby Lee Adams. This was followed in 2003 by *Hockey Nomad* (based on Dave Bidini's best-selling book *Tropic of Hockey*) about hockey in unlikely places around the globe. It was nominated for a Banff Rockie Award, as well as three Geminis, and won the Best Sports Documentary Gemini. He has also recently co-directed, produced and photographed for the TVOntario a series of 40 short profiles on artists who have received Ontario Arts Council grants over the past 40 years.

De Pencier was a producer resident in the Canadian Film Centre's 1997 Producers' Lab, and produced one of four Short Dramatic Films, *Cold Feet*, which was selected for the Toronto International Film Festival and the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival, among others. He then produced *The Uncles* for the Feature Film Project, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2000, and named one of year's top ten Canadian films by the Toronto International Film Festival Group. He was then Executive Overseeing Production on the successful feature film, *Khaled*.

As a cinematographer, de Pencier regularly shoots TV segments, modern dance, rock videos (Gord Downie, Skydiggers, Bob Wiseman), and documentaries. He has also directed, produced and photographed eight modern dance performance films which have received national and international broadcasts and won awards at Canadian and international festivals. The latest of these, *Streetcar*, was nominated in 2004 for a Performing Arts Best Direction Gemini. It was also nominated for a Banff Rockie Award.

In addition to producing the documentary *Manufactured Landscapes*, he has recently directed the High Definition feature documentary *Four Wings and a Prayer*, about the migration of the Monarch butterfly, which won the Grand Prix Pariscience, and the Banff Rockie Award for best Wildlife and Natural History Program.

DANIEL IRON - PRODUCER

After graduating from Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto in 1987, Daniel Iron was legal counsel at Telefilm Canada for five years after which he joined and eventually became a partner at Rhombus Media. At Rhombus, Iron produced the acclaimed feature film, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, directed by David Wellington, co-produced the Oscar-winning *The Red Violin* by Francois Girard, and produced the award-winning *Last Night*, directed by Don McKellar. For television he produced, among numerous others programs, *The Four Seasons* and *Don Giovanni Unmasked*, two performing arts films, as well as the Gemini-nominated *Foreign Objects*, written and directed by Ken Finkleman. Other producing credits include the feature *Perfect Pie*, directed by Barbara Willis Sweete; *Stormy Weather: The Music of Harold Arlen*, a performance/documentary directed by Larry Weinstein; *Elizabeth Rex*, a television film based on Timothy Findley's play; Guy Maddin's *The Saddest Music in the World*; *Slings and Arrows*, a six-part comedic television series; and *Beethoven's Hair*, a documentary directed by Larry Weinstein. More recently Iron produced Don McKellar's *Childstar* and co-produced *Clean* by Olivier Assayas.

Independently, Iron executive-produced Jennifer Baichwal's acclaimed documentary, *Let it Come Down; the Life of Paul Bowles*; *Luck*, Peter Wellington's second feature film, which won Best Fiction Feature at Austin's 2004 SXSW Festival and *Death and the Maiden*, a performance film by Laura Taler.

In January 2004, Daniel left Rhombus to create his own production company, Foundry Films Inc. Foundry has produced *Northern Town*, a CBC series; and *It's Me Gerald*, a six half-hour series for Showcase; and in 2005 *Last Exit*, a TV movie with CTV directed by John Fawcett. In 2006 he produced Jennifer Baichwal's *Manufactured Landscapes*.

Daniel also produced Sarah Polley's debut feature *Away From Her* starring Julie Christie and Olympia Dukakis. Daniel acted as executive producer of *Fido*. In association with House of Films, Daniel is producing the feature, *The Pornographer's Poem*; with Barna Alper Productions, the feature, *The Bang Bang Club*; and with Showcase a seven part series entitled *The Selkirk Foundation*, written by Mike Dowse (*Fubar, It's All Gone Pete Tong*). Daniel is currently producing Ruba Nadda's (*Sabah*) second feature film entitled *Cairo Time*. On the slate for the upcoming months are *Spa Talk*, an original screenplay by Barbara Gowdy and Marni Jackson; and *Fruit*, a thirteen part series for Showcase.

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SALOME PEREZ MORALES
NANCY GONZÁLEZ

Director
JENNIFER BAICHWAL

Director of Photography
NICK DE PENCIER

Editor
ROLAND SCHLIMME

Produced by
NICK DE PENCIER
DANIEL IRON
JENNIFER BAICHWAL

Original Music Improvised by
FRED FRITH

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MARTIN TIELLI
DAVE BIDINI
SELINA MARTIN

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press materials are available at www.zeitgeistfilms.com/actofgod

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE
247 CENTRE ST • 2ND FL • NEW YORK • NY 10013
www.zeitgeistfilms.com • mail@zeitgeistfilms.com
(212) 274-1989 • FAX (212) 274-1644