

**Mongrel Media
Presents**

ACT OF GOD

A feature documentary by Jennifer Baichwal

(76 mins, Canada, 2009)

Distribution



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High res stills may be downloaded from <http://www.mongrelmedia.com/press.html>

SUMMARY

Filmed in:

Canada, U.S., Cuba, Mexico, France, U.K.

Specific locations:

South River, Ontario; Las Vegas, Nevada; Brooklyn, New York; Palmira, Cuba; Marcenat, France; Santa Maria del Rio, Mexico; London, England

Languages spoken:

English
Spanish
Yoruba
French

76 minutes
35mm film
HDCAM
year of production: 2009

LOG LINE

Stories about lightning and chance

or

The metaphysical effects of being struck by lightning

TAG LINE

“What does it mean to be singled out by fate?”

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Act of God is a feature documentary about the metaphysical effects of being struck by lightning. The event represents the paradox of being singled out by randomness, and so precipitates questions about chance, fate and meaning in life. The film explores seven stories from around the world that raise and respond to these questions, while keeping the sky and what comes out of it as a central visual metaphor and thread. Paul Auster, who was struck as a teenager, philosophically anchors the film, along with Fred Frith, the improviser, who both imaginatively underpins it and personally demonstrates the ubiquity of electricity in our bodies and the universe.

Jennifer Baichwal

LONG SYNOPSIS

Act of God is a feature documentary about the metaphysical effects of being struck by lightning.

The event represents the paradox of being singled out by randomness, and so precipitates questions about chance, fate and meaning in life. The film explores seven stories from around the world that raise and respond to these questions, while keeping the sky and what comes out of it as a central visual metaphor and thread. Paul Auster, who was struck as a teenager, philosophically anchors the film, along with Fred Frith, the improviser, who both imaginatively underpins it and personally demonstrates the ubiquity of electricity in our bodies and the universe. James O' Reilly goes back for the first time to the farm in northern Ontario where he was struck and his friend was killed 28 years ago, and relives the event he was only partially able to exorcise by writing a play about it, also called *Act of God*. France's best known stormchaser, Alex Hermant, takes us on a tour of his museum in Marcenat, describing what drew him to lightning and also how he lost his soul by photographing it.

Dannion Brinkley, self-described bully and CIA assassin, had a near death experience after being struck which took him to celestial cites and changed him radically: from someone who blew up farmers in Nicaragua to someone who heads the largest association of hospice volunteers in the U.S. During the festival of Santa Cruz, in a small, deeply Catholic town in central Mexico, five children praying around a cross on top of a mountain were struck by lightning and killed. A year after this unspeakable tragedy, a vigil is held for the children in a newly built chapel at the site of the strike. Josue's mother, Salome, believes God took him to be an angel. Deysey's mother, Maria, is not so sure. Yet resolute certainty is demonstrated by the Yoruba community in Palmira, Cuba, who conduct complex rituals and make offerings to the god of lightning, Shango (a.k.a. Santa Barbara), to ensure that he will not get angry and send lightning bolts to earth, "because lightning can kill us, as simple as that".

Jennifer Baichwal

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

FRED FRITH BIOGRAPHY

Fred Frith, born in England in 1949, is perhaps the world's best known guitar improviser. 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 appears 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 BIOGRAPHY

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, NJ. 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 was 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.

JENNIFER BAICHWAL – DIRECTOR/PRODUCER FILM BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Baichwal has been directing and producing documentaries for 15 years. Her first film, *Looking You In The Back of the Head*, an enquiry 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, 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 and was picked up for theatrical release by Mongrel Media in Canada, Zeitgeist Films in the U.S., and Uplink in Japan. 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 was commissioned by TVOntario and 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. It was commissioned by TVOntario, Bravo!, SBS Australia and Discovery Germany. 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. The film was released on dvd by Docurama/New Video in October 2003.

Baichwal, along with Nick de Pencier, was commissioned in 2003-4 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, 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. It was released worldwide in 2007-8, after a prolonged and successful run in Canada.

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

NICK DE PENCIER – PRODUCER/DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY FILM BIOGRAPHY

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 1980's, 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* which received a Genie nomination in 1998, a Banff Rockie nomination in 1999 and won the International Emmy Award for Best Arts Documentary in 1999. He also produced and photographed *The Holier It Gets*, a documentary filmed in Canada and India, which won Best Cultural and Best Independent Canadian Documentary at Hot Docs, 2000, and garnered Geminis for best writing, editing, and direction in a documentary series, as well as a nomination for The Donald Brittain award for best documentary and a nomination for a Chalmers Award in 2001. In 2002 he produced and shot the documentary: *The True Meaning of Pictures* about the work and world of Kentucky photographer Shelby Lee Adams, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and then Played at the Sundance Film Festival. It was nominated for two Gemini Awards and won in the Best Arts Documentary category. 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 which 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, was picked up for distribution in Canada by Odeon Films, 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; the film's choreographer and lead, Peter Chin, won for Best Performance in a Performing Arts Program or Documentary. It was also nominated for a Banff Rockie Award.

In addition to producing the documentary *Manufactured Landscapes*, which won the Chum City Award for best Canadian feature at TIFF 2006 and the Genie Award for best Documentary, 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 FILM BIOGRAPHY

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* from 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*, the most recent feature from 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 *Manufactured Landscapes*, a documentary on acclaimed photographer, Edward Burtynsky, directed by Jennifer Baichwal and shot by Peter Mettler, which won the Toronto Film Critics Association Awards for Best Canadian Film and Best Documentary of 2006 as well a Genie for Best Documentary.

Daniel also produced Sarah Polley's debut feature *Away From Her* starring Julie Christie and Olympia Dukakis, which was released in the US by Lionsgate in 2007. Daniel acted as executive producer of *Fido*, a large budget feature by Anagram Pictures in Vancouver . In association with House of Films, Daniel is producing the feature, *The Pornographer's Poem*, and 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.

ACT OF GOD
Screen Credits

HEAD CREDITS

[single cards]

MERCURY FILMS
FOUNDRY FILMS
Present

in association with

documentary

Channel 4

ARTE France

Paul Auster

Fred Frith
Chris Frith
James O'Reilly
Jean Ivens
Alex Hermant
Dalila Hermant
Dannion Brinkley
Juan González Hernández
Maria de los Angeles Peredo
Salome Perez Morales
Nancy González

ACT OF GOD

TAIL CREDITS

[single cards:]

Director
JENNIFER BAICHWAL

Director of Photography
NICK DE PENCIER

Editor
ROLAND SCHLIMME

Produced by
NICK DE PENCIER
DANIEL IRON
JENNIFER BAICHWAL

[crawl begins]

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Visual Research ELIZABETH KLINCK

Cuba Unit Production Manager IOHAMIL NAVARRO

Mexico Unit Production Manager GRAZIA RADE

Production Coordinators NADIA TAVAZZANI
HANNA TOWER
DELPHINE ROUSSEL

Production Accountants ANDREA GREANEY
YVONNE BAYER

United Kingdom Co-ordinators MIRANDA DAVIS
NIKKI WESTON

Researchers NICOLA PULLING
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DI Project Supervisor	PAT DUCHESNE
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Audio Post TATTERSALL SOUND AND PICTURE

Dolby Sound Consultant PAUL CAPUANO

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BROKERS/
JONES BROWN AND ASSOCIATES

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Interim Financing AVER MEDIA LLP

For Foundry Films SHANA COLLIER,
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

Production executive, documentary BRUCE COWLEY
Commissioning editor, documentary MICHAEL BURNS
Commissioning Editor, Arte CHRISTOPH JORG
Commissioning Editor, Channel 4 KATIE SPEIGHT

Writers JENNIFER BAICHWAL
JAMES O' REILLY

Cast, in order of appearance:

PAUL AUSTER
FRED FRITH
CHRIS FRITH
JAMES O'REILLY
JEAN IVENS
ALEX HERMANT
DALILA HERMANT
DANNION BRINKLEY
JUAN GONZÁLEZ HERNÁNDEZ
MARIA DE LOS ANGELES PEREDO
MARIA SALOME PEREZ MORALES
NANCY GONZÁLEZ

With the participation of:

COMPASSION IN ACTION
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WALTER J. FOREMAN
OLGA LIDIA FUENTES GARCÍA
JIM KILNER
ARMANDO EMILIO GASTELL PINILLO
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Special Thanks

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PETER GREENAWAY
GRANT IVENS
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Thank You

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MARGARET DERIAZ
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FILMS Á TROIS
SUSAN FLEMING
IVAN GIROUD
DON MAXIMO GONZALEZ
LAURENCE GREEN

CAROLINE HABIB
STEVEN HALPERN, INNER PEACE MUSIC
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LARRY WEINSTEIN
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CHARLES WESSLER
WEST LOS ANGELES VETERANS' ADMINISTRATION FACILITY
DAVID WHARNSBY
SANDRA WHIPHAM
SARAH WHITEHOUSE
PABLO COMPILLO ZALAZAR

Original Music Improvised by

FRED FRITH

Original Music Composed by

MARTIN TIELLI
DAVE BIDINI
SELINA MARTIN

Performed by

MARTIN TIELLI, DAVE BIDINI, SELINA MARTIN

with DWAYNE GALE, KEVIN HEARN

Music

“No Birds”

Performed and Improvised by Fred Frith
from: *Fred Frith Guitar Solos*
Courtesy of Anthill Music

“Red Rag”

Performed and Composed by Fred Frith

“Theatre”

Performed and Improvised by Fred Frith
from: *Clearing*
Courtesy of Tzadik

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ABSOLUTELY WILD VISUALS
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RYAN MALONEY
JEREMY NEPHEW
IAIN ROBINSON
PAUL ROBINSON, JR.
PHILLIP TOKISH
OWEN WILLIAMS

The summer storms were filmed on
Georgian Bay and Lake of the Woods, Ontario

Produced in association with



documentary



arte

Unité de programme Découverte et Connaissance
Hélène Coldefy
Chargés de programmes
Christoph Jorg
Mairin Ni Eithir

Produced with the financial participation of

Produced with the participation of the



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created by the Government of Canada
and the Canadian Cable Industry

CTF: Licence Fee Program
Telefilm Canada: Equity Investment Program

with the assistance/participation of the
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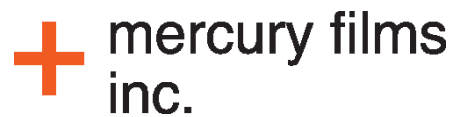
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