



## Act of God

Director: Jennifer Baichwal, Canada, 2009, 75 minutes

When writer Paul Auster was 14 years-old, he stood beside his friend Ralph as he was struck and killed by lightning. They were on a Boy Scout hike. "There's something monumental about a lightning bolt coming from the sky, it doesn't feel like an ordinary death, it has something of the divine about it," says Auster.

The human need to make sense of a random and wildly unpredictable universe flows through director Jennifer Baichwal's new documentary *Act of God*. The film explores not only the phenomena of lightning and the experiences of people who lived through being struck (and those who did not), but poses metaphysical questions that have confounded human beings since the beginning of conscious thought.

As one woman unintentionally puns, being struck by lightning is much more than 'a bad shock.' From the advent of human society, it has occupied a symbolic role as a means of transformation and the genesis of all life. In Yoruba beliefs, it is a gift to humankind from the god Shango. To an ex-marine who was declared clinically dead for twenty-eight minutes, after being struck by lightning through the telephone, it was a means of spiritual rebirth. "Lightning and change go hand in hand, and in a single moment I was changed," he says. To others, it is a far less beneficent force. A man who lived through the death of his friend Dino, who was essentially cooked from the inside out, recounts the experience in horrifying detail.

The film features a terrific soundtrack from musician Fred Frith. He wasn't actually struck by lightning, but his neurons make their own electrical storm while he plays guitar. *Act of God* is a mysterious,

discursive, and sublimely beautiful meditation on meaning and the lack thereof.

"It changed my whole way of looking at the world," says Paul Auster, who credits his experience as the reason he became a writer. "The mechanics of reality, there's no meaning to this, it's absolutely meaningless, yet this is the way the world works."

### FILMMAKER IN ATTENDANCE

#### DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Baichwal has been directing and producing documentaries for 14 years. *Let it Come Down: The Life of Paul Bowles*, her first feature documentary, won a 1999 International Emmy for Best Arts Documentary and premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1998. *The Holier It Gets* won Best Independent Canadian Film and Best Cultural Documentary at Hot Docs 2000, Geminis for Best Editing and Best Writing. *The True Meaning of Pictures* 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 played at DOXA in 2004. *Manufactured Landscapes*, about the work of artist Edward Burtynsky premiered at TIFF in September 2006 and won Best Canadian Feature Film. Her new film *Act of God* explores the metaphysical effects of being struck by lightning.

#### MAJOR PARTNER

**Knowledge:**