

intense public speculation.

"Water calls out to Claude Jutra," says the eloquent narration written by Jefferson Lewis for this elegant documentary. "Its mystery, beauty, sensual quality, its deadly appeal, its secrets and shadows...characters in his movies are always jumping into water." For instance, as early as *Le Dément du lac Jean-Jeunes* (1948), a nightmarish short Jutra directed as a teenager, an insane child kidnapper plunges to a watery death. And as many point out, *À tout prendre* ends on an image of Jutra himself walking off a pier into a river dancing with light.

Baillargeon does not enlist a platoon of talking heads to analyze Jutra's fascination with water, or his other fixations and idiosyncrasies. The film presents a man who is both melancholy and fun-loving, serene and angry, introverted and bonded to longtime friends like cinematographer Michel Brault and actor Saul Rubinek. Jutra is contradictory, he's complex, he's an enigma that Baillargeon chooses to only partially unravel. She gives the audience the threads to continue the process, imagining his unspoken secrets, stormy emotions, depth of creative power and the simplicity of his yearning for love.

The film evokes the magic and the loss with evocative montages of the locales that were part of Jutra's everyday life: Carré Saint-Louis and his home at its north end, St-Denis Street cafés like Les Gâteries where he would sit by the window every morning. Moreover, Baillargeon stages images of a Jutra double in silhouette, leaning back in a rocking chair, writing the final letter, methodically putting on winter clothes the day of his suicide. The stylized shadow play gives Jutra an elusive presence that intersects fluidly with other visuals, including rare clips from *Le Dément du lac Jean-Jeunes* and recently dis-

covered home movies, much of them in colour, Jutra took of himself and his family.

The amateur footage, in excellent condition and surprisingly accomplished, reveals precocious attempts at Cocteauesque film poetry. It's all double exposures, oblique angles, a sense of the world as a fleeting place that could, at any moment, become unhinged from reality. And in some of the images, we glimpse the formidable presence of Jutra's mother Rachelle, a cigarette-smoking, overly protective sophisticate whom he once called "the only one in the world that I love deeply."

Rachelle had a passion for her son that is right out of Tennessee Williams's play, *Suddenly, Last Summer*, with its Venus flytrap mother and hypersensitive son. She tried to stop her boy from leaving home and did her best to sabotage his romantic relationships. When he lived in Paris for a couple of years, she assailed him with obsessive letters implying his absence was killing her: "My head throbbed," she once wrote, "until I was sure I had a brain tumour."

This relationship, which Baillargeon thinks probably kept Jutra in perpetual childhood, tormenting and inspiring him as an artist, is at the crux of her film. But for whatever reason, she drops it before it's fully explored. Then as the film progresses, talking heads multiply, diverse aspects of the story are conveyed more explicitly and the narrative gets a little choppy. In the end, however, Baillargeon refocuses on Jutra's fate and his sadly heroic choice to end a life that had become intolerable. He knew that his spirit was closing in on itself, and his once irrepressible creative energy was shutting down. The film tantalizes viewers with clues that hint at a solution to its mysteries and fades out on the straight-to-the-heart pathos of a unique life that, as the

film's English title—*Claude Jutra: An Unfinished Story*—implies, was snuffed out long before it reached its final act.

Maurie Alioff

Maurie Alioff teaches screenwriting at Vanier College, Montreal, and is Take One's associate editor.



The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia

2002 75m prod Mercury Films, p Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier, d Jennifer Baichwal, pb Nicholas de Pencier, ed David Wharmsby, s Jane Tattersall; with Shelby Lee Adams, the Childer family, the Nappier family, the Riddle family, Hort Collins, Dwight Billings, A.D. Coleman, Vicki Goldberg, Wendy Edward, Mary Ellen Mark.

"You photograph the natural life, but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, create an interpretation of it." John Grierson

"I'm pushing you, the viewer, and challenging you. That's why I'm in there with the camera six inches away from Selena's face. I think you need to be

Images courtesy of Mercury Films.

confronted with that. By getting in there with the camera, by creating some distortions, I'm hoping to make everyone think. What is our job here as a human being? Stop making judgments and experience life. I'm experiencing this environment. I'm trying to share with you, in an intimate way, that experience." Shelby Lee Adams

Jennifer Baichwal's *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia* is an uncompromising exploration into the controversial work of enigmatic American photographer, Shelby Lee Adams, well known for his photographs of the people of Appalachia, Kentucky. However, by way of Baichwal's structural skills, the film manages to tran-



scend the clichés of the biopic formula so that Adams emerges as a fascinating case study for issues central to the politics and ethics of ethnography. Essentially, Baichwal's film is an exploration into the process of the construction of point-of-view. This is achieved with subtlety, restraint and critical rigour.

Conventionally structured, *True Meaning* takes us through various landscapes, with Adams as our tour guide, his photographs and video archives as the main map. Baichwal's methods are traditional, presenting

us with interviews and archival footage as she gathers together differing perspectives about Adams and his work, all the while leading us further into the most isolated of "hollows" hidden in behind the misty mountains of Kentucky. In this process, multiple representations of Appalachia emerge: the Appalachia in Adams's dramatic black-and-white photographs, the Appalachia in his video archives, the Appalachia in archival newsreel footage and Baichwal's Appalachia, although she wisely avoids documenting very much of Appalachia herself. This is her strategy; to present us constructions of Appalachia, rather than represent it. She is not the ethnographer here.

We initially learn that Adams, a native of Kentucky, has photographed "hollow dwellers" for over 30 years, most of whom live in extreme poverty and isolation. Adams makes a passionate case for the style and content of his work on the foundation that his photographs are his way of expressing himself artistically. He seems very earnest when he tells the camera that his subjects are his friends. Indeed, in his

video archives we see Adams communing with the Nappiers, the Childers and the Riddles, Appalachian families he has photographed for many years; people he boldly refers to as "his people." In between photo setups in their small, cramped shanty-like homes, Adams partakes in community BBQs, family gatherings on the porch and even the controversial religious Serpent Handling rituals, all the time falling deeper into a noticeably thicker Kentucky drawl. Adams remarks: "It's far beyond documenting a family in Appalachia." Indeed.

However, even if Adams forgets he's the man behind the camera, Baichwal never does. She intercuts Adams's explanations and analysis with various differing and seemingly well-informed arguments. His supporters rally around the issue of his impressive artistry and craft as a photographer. His subjects argue Adams is only documenting the modern-day reality of Appalachia, a reality that is largely ignored by mainstream American culture. Adams's detractors have accused him of exploiting his disenfranchised subjects in his own personal staging of an Appalachian horror show, feeding into well-established negative stereotypes of the "hillbilly" as violent, uneducated and shiftless as seen in such films as John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972). Local Kentucky natives are deeply offended, claiming his work denigrates Appalachia and the South. One critic refers to Adams's subjects as "people I really would not want to meet in a dark alley at night." Another critic notes: "Is this their inner life or Shelby's inner life being reflected here? If this is presented as Shelby Lee Adams's southern-gothic poetry of Appalachia, that's one thing, but if this is presented as documentation of Appalachia, then that's something else entirely."

Although Baichwal seemingly does not push Adams to make such a distinction—even though perhaps the distinction is extremely difficult to make—he is unable or perhaps unwilling to do so. Without ever placing Adams on trial, Baichwal allows intentions and meanings to slowly reveal themselves. (Baichwal's realm is the antithesis of the Michael Moore school of documentary filmmaking). In one telling moment, Adams reveals more about his problematic role in "documenting" Appalachia than any of his video archives or passionate declarations of cultural identification. Adams tells of how his father, as a doctor, would

visit the most isolated families. "Although my father had prejudiced views, I came to know those people." Here is revealed the inner conflict in Adams, and within America in general. The distinction between "his people" and "those people" is not about regionalism or even his vocation as a photographer. It's about class.

Class divisions hover around Appalachia, thicker than any mountain mist, keeping communities segregated, isolated and poor. How could such poverty exist in America the Great? This is a harsh reality Adams seems unable to acknowledge. Baichwal does not push him on this issue, but rather subtly constructs associations and stark contrasts between what Adams says and what he does. We understand in Adams's unconscious statement about his past, minus the heavy Kentucky drawl, that Adams will never be one of them.

The true meaning of Baichwal's film is not exclusively rooted in the judgment of Adams and his work, but rather to understand what Adams imagines his work to be. He has a point of view; however, the unsettling thing is that he doesn't seem to be able to acknowledge the true nature of that point of view. "By getting in there with the camera, by creating some distortions, I'm hoping to make everyone think." That is a noble thought, but like the "dramatic lighting events" Adams creates in his work, at the expense of the dignity of his subjects, might that not just be part of the theatre? Baichwal allows Adams to represent himself as a kind of crusader for Appalachia, but through her subtle use of structure, we realize that the nature of this salvation is unclear. In the end, Adams will be the only one looking for absolution. As another critic acutely observes: "Where's the new learning? Where's the opening here for people to learn more about these folks? This is deploying so many stereotypes that

simply reaffirm that the poverty of the Appalachian is that person's own fault; after all it's got to do with centuries of violence, inbreeding, moonshining, laziness and bad genes and bad socialization. I don't have to worry about it. They're doing it to themselves."

The final shot in the film is a wide angle of a footbridge. Adams walks into frame, begins his way across the bridge in slow motion and then fades into nothing. It's a poetic moment. Our elusive guide exits Appalachia just as he entered it, through some imaginary bridge of his own creation.

Kathleen Cummins

Kathleen Cummins is a freelance writer and independent filmmaker. Her shorts have been screened and broadcast internationally. She is a frequent contributor to Take One.

Lifecycles: A Story of AIDS in Malawi

2003 52m prod Human Scale Productions, p Doug Karr, Norman Phiri, Walter Forsyth, d Doug Karr, Sierra Bellows, pb Doug Karr, s Sierra Bellows.

Lifecycles: A Story of AIDS in Malawi is an intelligent and clear-eyed look at the plague that is devastating sub-Saharan Africa. For Westerners,

whose minds have been conditioned by the 30-second sound bite, AIDS is yesterday's news. There was, it seemed, a flurry of celebrity deaths in the 1990s, a short surge of activism, a brief flirtation with miracle cures subsiding to the tedium of long-term medication and then the West moved on to other things. To watch the continual promiscuous drivel that comes out of television—*Friends*, *Sex in the City*, et al—you'd think that AIDS had never happened, or that a cure really had been found and announced while we were watching another sexual farce.

But AIDS has not gone away. In the West it is only sleeping, gone undercover as it were, or at least under the media's radar. But in Africa it is a barefaced and relentless killer, wiping out an entire generation of that continent's professional class and taking the best efforts to reduce infant mortality and increase life expectancy

