

## Kao KOs Coming of Age Feature by Daniel Kremer



*The ceremonial cigarette circle from the opening of Jeff Kao's first full-length feature 'Knowing Nothing Cold'. photo: courtesy J. Kao*

Quebecois icon Claude Jutra is one of my favorite directors. As a filmmaker, film historian, and film buff, I prize his ease with what I like to call “poetic efficiency.” In masterpieces like his classic “Mon Oncle Antoine” (1971) and the under-seen “Kamouraska” (1973), he stages deceptively simple but transcendent moments that communicate so much with seemingly so little.

In “Mon Oncle Antoine”, a simple little detail like the close-up of a dead teenage boy’s bare legs in a pine-box coffin resonates better than any major dramatic scene, no matter how well written. But when films open on such a sublime note of visual poetry, most of them have nowhere to go but down. The calculus for this is simple: the audience, mesmerized by this poetic flourish, expects the rest of the film to measure up to that first, defining grace-note.

Iowa-born Jeff Kao's “Knowing Nothing Cold”, a low-budget feature-length period piece set in the Midwest of the late 1970s (but shot throughout Oakland and Berkeley), opens with the slow, almost ceremonial passing of a joint. A circle of teenage girls take the most awkward drags, their untried, fragile, suburban, lily-white hands not yet trained in the finer aspects of smoking, a “skill” that comes with both age and weather-beaten street-wisdom.

That these girls clearly lack both of these things generates both tempered comedy and unexpected lyricism. These are kids struggling—even straining—to look mature, even as they stand on the doorstep of adulthood. In some ways, it’s a prosaic image, but its beauty arrests us and we cannot avert our eyes, thanks in large part to its sharp, agile cinematography. It is that rarest of extended shots that catches everything important, rather than just empty ornament.



***Kao (left) slates a scene featuring actor Tyler Bohon. photo: courtesy J. Kao***

This is poetic efficiency. We understand Kao's aim, and he even manages to generate a certain suspense with the sequence. Its magic specificity reminded me of Maurice Pialat's brilliant "L'enfance nue" (1968) and his later "Passe ton bac d'abord" (1978). Both films test the elasticity of the coming-of-age picture, as "Knowing Nothing Cold" does.

Most will compare "Knowing Nothing Cold" to Richard Linklater's "Dazed and Confused" (1993), which assays the same era, setting and many of the same themes. Kao's film aspires more toward transcendental style, however. His background as a fine artist and carpenter is on full display when this sensibility takes center stage.

In the book "Transcendental Style in Film," Paul Schrader writes, "A film of transcendental style begins as an experience but ends as an expression." In Kao's case, "Knowing Nothing Cold" begins as a memory (the film, he says, is largely autobiographical) but ends as an expression, much like his previous film "Cutting the Pattern" (2014, 52 min), a companion piece about pre-teens inhaling their final breaths of childhood innocence one summer, before they inevitably assume the position of the angry, confused or burned-out young adults around them.

There are threads and currents that pulse through Kao's collective work: the anxiety of youth in transition. The characters of both "Cutting the Pattern" and "Knowing Nothing Cold" clearly inhabit the same universe.

Thankfully, the rest of Kao's film does nothing but measure up to (and often exceed) the initial promise made in that hypnotic opening title sequence. His young cast delivers many other similar poetic moments in considerable quantity, and the cumulative effect is stunning.



***Actor Gabe Bennett slates a take from a solo scene in 'Knowing Nothing Cold'. photo: courtesy J. Kao***

The film is never consumed with narrative or traditional filmic storytelling, and to its benefit. Instead, Kao really watches these characters like few other filmmakers do, often with conspicuously little dialogue. As an artist, he allows the time an audience needs for true observation, making for proactive viewership along the lines of French master Jacques Rivette.

Sandrine Bonnaire in Rivette's "Secret Defense" (1998) leaps to mind; in that film, the audience watches Bonnaire in silent, intense moral deliberation on a lengthy train trip. Kao's teen ensemble grapples with other crises entirely, but the effect is no less resonant. They have no sense yet that self-discovery is a potentially lifelong process, and that, as the film's press logline states, "a graceful entrance into adulthood is impossible."

Its deft use of humor is likewise worthy of commendation, expertly paced and tastefully executed. And it often lands with an illuminating character reveal, as when a daughter "steals" her crestfallen mother's racially offensive joke. Her wounded utterance, "That's my joke," is humorous, vivid, melancholic. This type of pregnant moment is difficult to render as effectively as it is here.

The same goes for its finale—the penultimate sequence in the film—which immediately follows a character's trauma (a traumatic event likewise rendered quietly, without the type of over-emphasis that would have upset the film's equilibrium). With a simple, momentarily healing gesture, Kao delivers an emotional wallop, one that is quiet and as far from overstated as possible. Such subtlety is a gift, a gift of its director, and a gift from its director to his audience.

"Knowing Nothing Cold" is essential viewing. It is downright obscene that American festivals have ignored it until now, in favor of fashionable, larger-budgeted trifles that lack the ease, control and poetic efficiency that Kao exhibits here.



*A 'Knowing Nothing Cold' publicity still featuring actress Jasmine Stade. photo: courtesy J. Kao*

Why is it that Americans let pictures like this evaporate while letting more conventional fare, that relies on easy tropes, popular songs and recognizable faces, spoonfeed them into complacency? It is another defining case study of an American film festival circuit in peril, seduced by empty Hollywood knock-off product made for market demand, immune to any effort that doesn't allow for easy, cheap, unearned thrills.

"Knowing Nothing Cold" is the very antithesis of a trifle. It embodies a substantial vision and a wholly original voice. It is one of the best films of 2016, when it was completed but couldn't find a proper premiere spot. It is one of the best films of 2017, when it is finally (thank the Lord) getting some of the play it deserves.

Certainly it deserves more, and that is where I come in here, as a fellow filmmaker saluting a brother-in-arms with admiration and near-envy at Kao's formidable talent and artistic agility. It's an estimable achievement.

*Daniel Kremer is a film writer and maker, whose most recent film is the largely improvised feature 'Ezer Kenegdo' and can be reached [here](#).* Posted on Nov 02, 2017 - 11:24 AM