

Robert Gardner

In 1961, the Harvard-Peabody Expedition traveled to research the Dani people of what is now Papua New Guinea. The expedition, led by Robert Gardner, included anthropologist Karl Heider, writer Peter Matthiessen, and photographer/sound-recordist Michael Rockefeller. It was in essence, a “salvage” anthropology expedition. The Dani were chosen because they represented an isolated and relatively “untouched” culture that had a more traceable lineage to Neolithic times. Of particular interest to Gardner was the Dani’s practice of ritualized warfare, which became the focus of his film *Dead Birds*. Each member of the expedition created work based on their research—Heider published a few key anthropological texts, Matthiessen wrote *Under the Mountain Wall* and the photographs of Rockefeller, who died in a later New Guinea river expedition, have been featured in a few posthumous monographs. But it is ultimately *Dead Birds* that has stood as the historical record of this expedition.

Even if we put aside the larger political debates about the role of Anthropology in cultural hegemony and

the specific occlusions that “salvage” anthropology creates (debates, to be fair, that *do* occur within the anthropological community), it is easy to be critical of some of the dated mannerisms of *Dead Birds*. The voice of god narration immediately jumps out to the contemporary viewer. It is remarkably eloquent, but its ubiquity and its claim to the inner thoughts of its subjects immediately challenge our current notions of documentary propriety.

Anthropologists still often teach *Dead Birds*, but they are critical of the way the film presents its research. Jay Ruby, while respectful of Gardner’s skill as a filmmaker, has been deeply critical of his approach. In a chapter devoted to Gardner in his book, *Picturing Culture*, Ruby finds that it has a troubling lack of reflexivity in favor of the illusionism inherent to commercial fiction conventions.¹ The adventures of Gardner’s subjects (who, Ruby also points out, were not aware of Gardner’s project) flow seamlessly along a plot line. These are plot points that delineate the specific knowledge that Gardner is trying to convey, but Ruby argues that they also serve to undermine the factual resonance of the work, as our tendency to suspend disbelief in a narrative project undermines the rigor

1. Ruby, Jay. *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology*. U of Chicago, 2000.



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necessary to evaluate subjectivity and truth claims. In short, Ruby finds Gardner’s work to lack the transparency necessary for ethnographic study.²

Even with his critique, Ruby is quick to point to the strengths of Gardner’s film, rightfully calling it a “stylistic tour de force.” These are the strengths that still withstand scientific and cultural debates and make the film stunning to watch. The fact that Gardner straddles the world of social scientist and filmmaker is most evident

2. Ruby in fact dismisses the anthropological value of the films Gardner made after *Dead Birds*, claiming that *Dead Birds*, despite its flaws, is the last of Gardner’s films that actually allows for scientific study.

in the fluidity of the way he presents the information he is relaying. Gardner's cinematography and editing are fantastic, especially when you consider that his Boston-based assistant Timothy Asch had to wire detailed descriptions of the processed film rushes to Gardner in the field.

Gardner is especially good at juxtaposing scale. His opening shots of the Baliem Valley are incredible visual descriptions of the Dani's lived environment after which he immediately cuts into close-ups of Weyak weaving together string for his bow. This first cut sets the stage for Gardner's continued movement from the larger context of the Valley to the detailed examinations of everyday life. The Valley is a series of claimed territories and Gardner skillfully illustrates how these territorial claims create a life and death struggle between enemy villages and how these struggles inflect personal experience. His vignettes of daily life are meticulous portraits of common activities, from the child Pua tending a pig to Weyak's wife collecting salt from a creek, each tinged, through the foreboding of storytelling, with the potential threat of an enemy raid. This foreboding culminates in the long battle sequence (pieced together from a series of battles), which in Gardner's hands is an incredibly panoramic overview of large-scale action.



photo by Michael Rockefeller

In essence, Gardner's focus on scale goes beyond the Valley itself towards a wider, more encompassing humanism. If we abandon *Dead Birds* as a work of strict anthropology and examine it as a work of factual mythopoesis, we can shift it into the welcome company of film



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artists of the time period.³ It is, after all, a product of the Cold War era and Gardner has explicitly cited the increasing engagement of the United States in Southeast Asia as an inspiration for making the film as well as a context for its reception. The Dani were chosen as subjects not just due to their more direct lineage to Neolithic agrarian culture, but also because of their practice of a ritualized

3. I'm thinking specifically of Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* (1964), Ed Emshwiller's *Relativity* (1966), and, as a film that has remarkable resonance, Jack Chamber's *Hart of London* (1970). Gardner has a long connection with experimental film—working in the 1950s with filmmaker Sidney Peterson on an

warfare that dated back thousands of years. The film thus becomes a reflection on warfare as a timeless and perhaps inevitable condition, which also serves to explain the remarkably nonjudgmental quality of the narration. The warfare of the Dani is indeed a contemporary condition, which Gardner deftly describes. He may overreach (as when he narrates Weyak and Pua's thoughts) but he does not condescend.

Ultimately, it is difficult to watch the film without a series of checks in place. The film is beautiful, but its mythologizing is politically suspect. I find that craft of the film is such that I find myself lulled into a distanced aesthetic appreciation. As a result, the moments of violence and death become particularly shocking when I am reminded that they are real. The experience of the film is a series of removals. The Dani as subjects are removed from the Neolithic and mythological moments they represent. Gardner as an author, despite his best intentions, is removed from the experience of his subjects. The voiceover

aborted film on the Kwakiutl in BC; hosting dozens of notable film artists on his Boston Television series *The Screening Room*, which ran for almost ten years; and working with Robert Fenz, Sharon Lockhart, Rebecca Meyers and Peter Hutton through his current production company, Studio 7 Arts.

removes the viewer from a more direct experience with the material. The fifty years since the expedition removes us from the context in which the film was made. And the political and cultural changes of those fifty years have the potential of removing anything but qualified appreciation from our experience of the film. In a sense, this is a “salvage” cultural project as well, to look at this film through these series of removals and discover if it still resonates.

-Chris Kennedy

Selected Filmography

Dead Birds, 16mm, 1964, USA/West Papua 85 min.

River of Sand, 16mm, 1974, USA/Ethiopia 85 min.

Deep Hearts, 16mm, 1981, USA/Niger 58 min.

Forest of Bliss, 16mm, 1986, USA/India 90 min.

Ika Hands, 16mm, 1988, USA/Columbia 58 min.

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