

10 INTERACTIVE MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION(S) OF MEMORY IN NONFICTION FILM

THE CASE OF *DEAD BIRDS*

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TRAILER

Dead Birds, a 1964 film made by Robert Gardner about the Dani of New Guinea and their practice of ritual warfare, ends famously, universalizing,

Soon both men and birds will surrender to the night... They will rest for the life and death of days to come for each both awaits but with a difference that men, having foreknowledge of their doom, bring a special passion for their life... they will not simply wait for death, nor will they bear it lightly when it comes. Instead they will try with measured violence to fashion fate themselves. They kill to save their souls and perhaps to ease the burden of what birds will never know and what they, as men, who have forever killed each other, cannot forget.

The specter of violence stands with stubborn resistance at memory's door. And, anthropological film, too, must always grapple with a challenge it cannot forget, that its quest to capture and remember is simultaneously its participation in a process of erasure and death, otherwise known as our globalizing modernity.

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With original materials and metatexts, the exemplary film *Dead Birds* is now in a new form, released as a DVD. In this work, Robert Gardner looks forward by looking back. It is as if the questions asked years before remain unsolved; they linger in the world between the frames: in the splices and outtakes, journal notes, roundtable discussions, commentaries, and metacommentaries of this rerelease. These provide a view into a filmmaker's ongoing concerns and evolving views about the goals of anthropological filmmaking and its capacity to speak to issues of our times.

DESCRIPTION: AN ART OF MEMORY

David MacDougall (1994, 260–69), in his essay “Films of Memory,” describes the wide-ranging genres of nonfiction *films of memory* and the synesthesia of signs by which filmmakers construct impressions of the past in a cinematic present. These include films that use objects and testimonies as *signs of survival* (images of objects that have a physical link to the past as well as, presumably, eyewitness accounts), *signs of resemblance* (evocation through analogy), and *signs of absence* (by which versions of the past are shown to have limits and deceptions, often through ironic juxtapositions like those, presumably, found in the films of Marcel Ophüls or, as MacDougall [262–66] cites, *The Trials of Alger Hiss*). The signs of memory include the iconic, symbolic, and enactive, and the genres cited include histories, ethnographies, abstractions, reconstructions, and visual essays. Add to a filmmaker's repertoire of tools in the representation of memory an invention not yet known at the time of writing that essay, the DVD commentary. Layered on an existing film—often with its original sound playing lightly in the background—the new text(s) speaks to an older film. Reissues of older films with DVD commentaries incorporate several presents some of which would already have been in the original. In *Dead Birds*, these include (1) the moment of the making of the film and the raw stock recorded at that moment that is then processed back in Boston, (2) the editing and recording of the original narration and sound effects later that year, (3) the reedited release print that was widely distributed and is featured here, and (4) the DVD commentary recorded about 40 years later. Add to these several other presents embedded in the interactive world of the DVD: (1) a slide show developed during postproduction, reedited and represented with journal notes from the past; (2) outtakes of the answer print with its original narration that were cut after the filmmaker screened the work to preliminary audiences in the United States and New Guinea; (3) a section of a roundtable discussion about the film recorded in 1973 almost 10 years after *Dead Birds* was released but 30 years before the DVD; and (4) differing commentaries made at various moments in which diverse speakers discuss outtakes and other materials not included in the famous release print. In this way, the DVD offers a dialogical construction of memories that layer on and intersect with each other through the spoken thoughts, images, and sounds. Meanwhile, there remain other ways DVD structure is not explored, such as uses of hyperlinked digital data, voice recordings, response pages, and peer-to-peer linked research data. Many of these elements would further expand the ways past works are represented. As a step toward the realization of George Marcus's (1998) notion of multisite ethnography, such tools offer multiple perspectives and reveal interesting questions

about the layering of times and evolving views of the communities studied and the ethnographers who forged connections with these communities and produced works about them. The benefit of such elements may be more significant in new works, as they can be integrated in the design of projects from the moment of preproduction forward.

As an example of the use of DVD technology, *Dead Birds* is not unusual in its structure. The two-DVD set follows conventions commonplace in the short history of DVD. However, as *Dead Birds* illustrates, the model offers a unique and multilayered recontextualization that returns viewers not only to the original text—that is the film itself—but also to the layered presentation of the intellectual motivations for making such a film and the state of anthropology at the time. The layering of commentaries provided in Gardner's DVD provides insight into these artistic and ethnographic choice-making processes. A viewer sees how these choices impact research and postproduction as well as the onsite ethnography and filmmaking. Gardner's choices are shown to grow from philosophical and humanistic goals, including, first and foremost, a desire to understand something about violence in his own culture through a study of the violent acts of another.

An example of temporal layering in *Dead Birds* can be found in a segment of *Screening Room* that is included in this DVD. *Screening Room* was a television show that Gardner hosted in the 1970s in which he would invite documentary filmmakers to screen and discuss their works or other exemplary works of ethnography. In 1973, Gardner presented *Dead Birds*. The screening was followed by a short discussion between filmmaker Gardner,

SIDEBAR 2: ABOUT THE DVD

The film *Dead Birds* was the result of the Harvard-Peabody Expedition, which Robert Gardner led to Papua New Guinea in the spring of 1961. The expedition included Karl Heider, Jan Broekhuijse, Peter Matthiessen, and Michael Rockefeller. It was funded by the National Science Foundation, the government of Netherland New Guinea, and the Rockefeller family.¹ The film was cut shortly after Gardner's return to Harvard. The answer print was screened at several locations, reedited into a shorter version, and released in 1964. The DVD was published by the Film Study Center at Harvard University 40 years later in 2004 and layers together materials recorded throughout that 40-year period—materials that the viewer pieces together to better understand the project, the times, and the maker.

- **Disc One** of the DVD contains the original film with three voice tracks: the original narration by Robert Gardner, a French voice-over read by Jean Rouch, and a recently recorded commentary in which Gardner discusses the film with filmmaker Ross McElwee.
- **Disc Two** features outtakes cut from the original answer print and samples of a black-and-white version, both with original sound and a recently recorded commentary about the clips in dialogue with Lucien Taylor. In addition, there is a collection of silent outtakes, provided with little explanation, and a brief set of Gardner's journal notes, which are read by the filmmaker and supported by a digital slide show.

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poet Octavio Paz, and historian William Alfred. In this discussion of his own film, which at the time of this screening was already 10 years old, Gardner reflects on the issues that originally drew him to want to make a film about the ritual warfare of the Dani. The dialogue provides one slim view of how Gardner uses film to explore the place of violence in the cultural imaginary while also considering what roles anthropology should play given our own cultural predicaments; it is a glimpse into the life of a filmmaker that gains value in relation to the other materials of the DVD, as these same issues are revisited 30 years later in Gardner's metacommentaries to his film and in the outtakes of *Dead Birds* that are also included. Thus, through this common DVD structure, moments of history and of reflection are juxtaposed one by the other: an excerpt from *Screening Room* (1973) is used to offer reflection following the broadcast video screening of a work shot on film, and both the original film and the later conversation from the television show are recontextualized through their inclusion on a DVD. From *Screening Room*:

Robert Gardner: The film [*Dead Birds*] can be said to be about the consequences of mortality, or at least the consequences of men knowing they must die.

Octavio Paz: In this case they know they are mortal... the important thing is that with this knowledge we make symbols, metaphors, and with these metaphors we make civilizations... Culture starts with the knowledge of death.

RG: Do you think that our culture doesn't handle this very well?... We hide death.

William Alfred: Yes, and in the past 20 years there has been a cult of anger... in this society [of *Dead Birds*] it manifests itself in warfare, but in our society we have this notion that if you could really let the anger go, you would be able to purify the society; so in a sense, the ideas that are in modern society are very like that [of *Dead Birds*].

RG: At times I used to feel when I saw the picture or even when I was making it that perhaps it was a parable that would teach us something about how to cope with the violence within us or the problem of death... But there are vast differences between our way of handling our violence and their way of handling it.

WA: Yes, there are vast differences, but I was thinking that we have a tendency, because of primitivism since the 18th Century, to celebrate certain primitive things which certainly, when you look at this film, can give you pause.

OP: Well you know that anthropology is a very peculiar science, because the moment that we can see a film as your film, this society is disappearing. Even the fact that you are using the cinema as a way to know them, in this moment they are disappearing. The... object of anthropology is corroded by anthropology itself.

COMMENTARY

Gardner's vision was deliberately humanistic: a filmmaker, a novelist, a professional photographer, and an anthropologist formed the core of his group. (Heider 2001–2002, 63)

Moving between modes of inquiry—between literary, philosophical, aesthetic, and anthropological methods—is a characteristic of Gardner's education and filmmaking. The filmmaker references and quotes writers such as Philip Larkin, W. B. Yeats, and Octavio Paz, and his short films have concerned the works of artists such as Joan Miró, Alexander Calder, and Mark Tobey (Cooper 1995, 26). Gardner's interweaving of the humanities, arts, and social sciences is indicative of a view that experience cannot be embodied by a single mode of representation to produce what Ilisa Barbash (2001) calls Gardner's "aesthesodic cine-eye." Gardner draws on a range of verbal and visual artistic tools to build a synesthesia of tropic connections that are tied to cultural objects, humanities activities and the dramas that hold together individuals and their communities.

Gardner builds a lyrical and metaphorically rich world by returning continually to common visual elements in the cultural landscape, such as the birds, the river, and the watchtowers. The use of bird feathers in ritual, trips to the river, and the manning of watchtowers are all practical aspects of Dani daily life. At the same time, all these are shown to have



greater meaning in the cultural imaginary. The birds are interconnected with the narrative of life and death. The watchtower is an ominous reminder of a life of warfare. The river becomes a site of danger and death. These evocative and tropic dimensions are constructed for the viewer through repetition and frequent recontextualization so that the symbolic elements of culture take on multiple meanings. The film viewer experiences the spontaneous and intellectual process of isolating essential characteristics—that is, the characteristics of the elements that gain meaning *in relation to* other aspects of the culture (or film).

These tropic connections are built through both images and sound. Perhaps his technique, expanded greatly in later films such as *Forest of Bliss*, is a result of working with the non-sync sound recordings that were collected by Karl Heider, often with the two working separately. Gardner's editing provides a layering of audio references to the images that connect them to other aspects of the culture and landscape. His highly interconnected and referential use of sounds and images brings viewers into what Barbash (2001) describes as a "pre-linguistic mode" (379). The result of such filming and editing is the construction of worlds in which "a viewer feels propelled, caught up in the interconnectedness of it all, transfixed by the propinquity of the sacred and the profane" (379).

To create these aesthesodic cine-worlds, Gardner must find means to identify and characterize audiovisual signifiers and show how these gain meaning in a cultural realm when seen from one perspective or another in ways not always captured by simple verbal explanation. Gardner tends toward the abstract, and for this reason the filmmaker claims he first conceived of many of his film images in black and white. The uses of black and white provides for a greater emphasis on the form and movement of an object and helps establish connections between visual elements—objects, animals, gestures, expressions, and so on—that have some aspects of form or movement in common. Gardner was so convinced of this need for a black-and-white view of the Dani that, at the time of editing, he produced an entire black-and-white version of the film. In dialogue with Taylor over a brief sample of the beginning minutes¹ of this rarely screened black-and-white version of the film, Gardner explains as follows:

Robert Gardner (commenting over Dead Birds' opening image of a bird in flight): You know this scene in color because it is the beginning of the movie. Seeing the bird in black and white does sum . . . up for me all of the virtues of black & white, because for me that bird is much more a bird in black & white than it was in color—that flight was much more flight. To see it in some more lifelike way in color did not enliven the bird; it burdened the bird with data that was irrelevant to its birdness, and so taking it away . . . was the answer to arriving at its quintessential view of flight.

Lucien Taylor: [...] it is the symbolism of the bird . . . that we are now free to attend to more than we would be if we were attending to the variegated shades of green in the background. But it is not just the symbolism, it is also the physical material experience of sight and of movement . . . of watching this bird move across this treescape,

this landscape, that is actually heightened and accentuated in black and white. ... The physical sensation goes hand in hand with the symbolism.

Why, one wonders, is not more of the black-and-white version included? I can only speculate that this might reflect one of the significant limits of analog and digital video technologies, including DVD. They cannot represent the subtleties of gray and the characteristics of reflected light and shadow as well as film, and they lack essential characteristics of a work shot on film, projected through film, and watched as an indirect (reflected) rather than direct image. The potential of abstraction in black and white has much to do with the human ability to detect and discern the elements of an environment through movements of shadows, depth of shadows, curvature and perspective as indicated by shadows and so forth. As film is itself reflected, the gradations of gray are almost like shadows of shadows—they provide an element of mystery in the image that awakes the mind to the nature of that essential gap between a thing and its likeness. Understanding how to bridge this gap is especially important in understanding images of other times (and memory images). This is also important in learning to understand the audiovisual realm of other cultures, where the meanings of objects and actions are discerned by differing characteristics and read in relation to the culturally specific webs of significations—webs that are built through collective memory. While the ambiguity of black and white provides an effective tool in the construction of likenesses and difference,² the flattening of the image in video and DVD limits some of the image potential of the object.

If the DVD provides insight into Gardner's lyricism, creative vision, and philosophical interests, it also reveals how choices in the edit room limit and expand these. What emerges is a view of a filmmaker's struggle to strike a balance between the techniques of effective filmmaking, an ethnographically accurate and factual representation of the conditions of Dani culture and daily life and Gardner's personal experiences living among the Dani.

Back at Harvard, in the summer of 1961, Gardner began piecing together his film. He worked without the aid of a Steenbeck or Moviola, instead running work-print clips through projectors lined up side by side—a remarkable way to construct a film that offers such precision in its rhythms, juxtapositions, and multilayered motifs. The result was a little-viewed answer print that was much longer than the final version and of which only select (but spectacular) outtakes are included on this DVD.

The first answer print may not have been a complete success, or at least there are varying opinions about the little-viewed print from which the outtakes on the DVD are extracted.

SIDEBAR 3: METACOMMENTARY 1: E-MAIL FROM ILISA BARBASH, MARCH 28, 2005

"Aesthesodic," I used just because it points to the multi-sensory synaesthetic quality he (Gardner) aspires to, and often achieves, in his films—and how antithetical this is in most of what passes as ethnographic cinema—and the "odos," or way, as something leading directionally to that end.

Gardner recalls what was perhaps the first showing, when he screened the answer print to a group of friends including Lillian Hellman and Peter Matthiessen, who had written a book based on visits with the Dani (Matthiessen 1962). The result of that scotch-filled night was both admiration and the suggestion that Gardner trim the film to make it more compelling as a narrative, after which, Gardner explains, he then recut the film to produce a shorter version that focuses more tightly on its primary two subjects, a warrior named Weyake and a boy named Pua.

The comments Gardner received from that screening must have had a significant impact on his decision to reedit the film; not mentioned are the other screenings of the answer print during this interesting period, such as the showing in New Guinea described by Karl Heider (2001–2002) in his essay “Robert Gardner The Early Years.” Heider recalls a more chronological, multinarrative, and symbol-oriented cut:

[After filming] Gardner took his footage back to the Film Study Center at Harvard and spent the next month editing. I stayed on alone in the Grand Valley, concentrating on my own research. Then, in July 1962, Gardner returned to Netherlands New Guinea with the first cut of *Dead Birds*. A grand screening took place at the Governor’s palace in Hollandia, attended by the top officials of the Dutch colonial government. I think they had mixed feelings about the film. They appreciated its power, but were perhaps unhappy that it showed warfare in an area that had just been pacified. The first cut was long—perhaps an hour longer than the final eighty minute version now in distribution. It was a more complete account of the events during the five months in 1961 as they happened. For example, a funeral of a young warrior that is only represented now by a few shots under the opening titles was covered at length. As I remember it—I have not seen it for decades now—the most important difference was Gardner’s extensive treatment of the central symbols of life and death, the birds. That still exists in the final release print, but in this first cut it was developed at greater length and the narrative was much more explicit about it. I thought that was a more effective and satisfying film, but Gardner was finally talked into cutting it drastically. (69)

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Noting the effectiveness by which Gardner understood the symbolic world of the Dani, Heider voices his regret that some these images were cut. Heider is recognizing the emergence of an audiovisual realm—a cultural imaginary built through the visual and audio referents that surrounds and by far exceeds the narrator’s story and the film’s explicit concern with the primary characters.

One purpose of bringing the first cut back to New Guinea was to give me a chance to correct any real problems, since by then I had been living with the Dani for 15 months. I had many small comments, but then—as now—it seemed very true to Dani life. My one major concern was the symbolism, especially the birds-as-death motif that Gardner so stressed... As soon as I returned to the Grand Valley I turned to the symbols. By then, of course, I knew a great deal more Dani, and was getting a much better grasp of

the general themes of the culture. Using clues that Gardner had intuitively picked up on to incorporate in the film, I asked people about the birds and snakes and life and death and quickly came to the conclusion that I had simply missed what Gardner had worked out. The symbolism was indeed there in Dani thinking and, if anything, was underrepresented in the film. (69)

This quality is built through the intertwining of referents³ that continually point to worlds beyond the frame and place simple actions in the context of a larger theater—so appropriate for the study of ritual and performative acts, in this case of a sometimes horrific and violent nature.

ANALYSIS: CRUEL THEATERS OF HISTORY

Gardner claims that his interest in Dani warfare is a result of broader questions about the nature of violence and how humans confront the image of their own mortality. His search for an understanding of ritual violence and how it mirrors back the play of symbols in the collective imagination has a parallel with ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, who by no coincidence reads the French narration to the film. Gardner's lyrical and character-oriented filmmaking techniques have antecedents in works such as *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty) and *Song of Ceylon* (Wright) (Cooper 1995). His goal to make anthropological films that speak to issues of our times and own culture also has clear roots in the works of John Grierson (Cooper 1995) and develops also through his collaboration with John Marshall. But *Dead Birds* holds a particular affinity with the issues and filmmaking style that Jean Rouch explores in his groundbreaking documentary *Les Maîtres fous* (1957). Both works show their respective filmmaker's deep interest in the nature of violence and in the lessons that the practices of their respective subjects might provide the Western world. Indeed, both approach their subjects with a remarkable optimism; through the violent acts they record, they articulate universal questions and aspirations. Consider Rouch's dramatic flourish to *Les Maîtres fous*:

When comparing these smiles [of his subjects, who yesterday were possessed by the Hauka] with the contortions of yesterday, one really wonders whether these men of Africa have found a panacea for mental disorders, one wonders if they have found a way to absolve our inimical society.

Gardner interviewed Rouch on *Screening Room*. In that interview, one of the first to be released on DVD by Gardner's own production house, Studio 7 Arts, Rouch discusses ways that the Hauka used ritual performance to put into symbolic play the objects of colonial violence or strangeness that they witnessed in their daily life. Their dialogue is about *Les Maîtres fous*, but the conversation could be as much about his *Dead Birds*:

Robert Gardner: [Les Maîtres fous] is a film which seems to speak to a larger issue than the immediate imagery that it is showing. . . it has a kind of extensive metaphorical quality helping us as viewers of this film to understand what is going on in the minds of all

people. It isn't just the story of Ghanaians or just the story of West Africans, it seems to me it is the story of oppressed people, and most people are oppressed all over the world.

Jean Rouch: And then they have to find a way out.

RG: They invent a theater to deal with this.

This notion of theater in *Dead Birds* may be more akin to René Girard's (1979) descriptions of sacrificial violence than Rouch's *Les Maîtres fous*. In Rouch's film, the violence seems cathartic and remarkably efficient in relieving the anxiety of immigrant life in the colonial metropolis of Accra. Among the Dani, however, violence extends into daily and domestic life through further acts of aggression, the construction of heroic models, the magic given to war-related symbolic objects, and even through the war play among the children. Viewers see that the death of a warrior leads to women having their fingers severed and

SIDEBAR 4: METACOMMENTARY 2: E-MAIL FROM KARL HEIDER, MARCH 23, 2005

... Gardner's view was from the intensive five months we all spent with the Dani when their traditional warfare was going full strength. I was there then but stayed on after pacification for a total of nearly three years mainly in the early '60s, but with additional visits in '68, '70, '88, and '95.

I was impressed by the various limits on the violence of war—mainly through unspoken norms—e.g., during battles no shooting arrows in volleys (like Olivier's Henry V), no fletched arrows (making them relatively inaccurate), contained raids and ambushes—all this for what I call the ritual phase of war. Then, every decade or so a brief uncontained spurt of secular warfare breaks out, rearranges alliances, and things settle back into the paced ritual phase. This on the basis of long-term observations and also comparisons with other New Guinea highland groups. Mervyn Meggitt, working on the east side of the island, wrote about prudes and lechers—seeing the strained and violent relations between men and women as being either disgust- or rape-oriented. By these standards the Dani were neither—relations between men and women were very easy, friendly, even at times loving. (We see some of this in *Dead Birds*).

Later, when war was ended—I predicted to the Dutch that since war was obviously so rooted in Dani culture and psyche, without it things would go seriously awry. That didn't happen. Even the finger chopping of little girls was easily discarded—I accounted for that as a hold-over from a different time and incongruous in the context of the obvious fondness Dani adults have for children. But when the missionaries suggested that the Dani change, they for the first years resisted changing anything except finger chopping, which they immediately gave up—I imagined with even some relief that they were not obliged to continue that discordant trait.

And killing pigs—well, you have to get them dead somehow. Elsewhere in the highlands people club their pigs to death. On the whole an arrow to the heart is relatively less violent. But is it sacrifice?

that the pathos surrounding the death of a young boy by the river is matched with a violent scene of animal slaughter during the ritual funeral rites. Such images provide an ominous warning about how violence can manifest itself in other aspects of society; grim images of women's short and stublike fingers contrast with those of the agile, long-fingered males; a young girl with undamaged hands also knows a future that awaits her.

The desire to witness violence that runs through horror and adventure genres, news programs, and cartoons like *Roadrunner* may offer means by which to grasp through image and play what would be unbearable to experience in fact. Another kind of attraction to the representation of violence can be found in the Nazi filming of genocide or U.S. military home-movie images shot at Abu Ghraib prison during the second Iraq War. Films like *Dead Birds*, historical films such as Alain Resnais's (1955) holocaust documentary *Night and Fog*, contemporary mainstream dramas such as *Hotel Rwanda* (George 2004)—which was released a few years after the Rwandan war and during yet another genocide, this time in Ethiopia—or vanguard media arts projects such as Norman Cowie's (2001–2002) *Scenes from the Endless War* all offer approaches to using the medium to understand violence. Not unlike Rouch's interest in recording the Hauka, Gardner's motives are explained in idealistic and humanistic terms: a belief that a film about the violent practices of the Dani might offer some clues to understanding violence in Western culture. This notion is reiterated several times through the DVD's commentaries and supplemental materials. At one instance, Ross McElwee even notes how the questions being asked in the original film aren't so different from those being asked 40 years after its production in relation to the U.S. aggression in Iraq and media representations of that warring violence. Just as anthropology is charged with being inescapably implicated in the cultural forces of colonial and postcolonial cultural homogenization, one wonders if cinematic investigations into violence might not also reinforce film's cultural role as a (perhaps ritualized) forum for the expression of violence; or, inversely, does a critical use of film (or now of DVD) give us insight into Western ritual behavior of which film is itself (perhaps inevitably) a part?

The answer may lie in how film reveals as much about itself as its subject. The repeating present of a replayed moment is only a continual reminder of loss—a nostalgic recognition of time passing. Notions of time, memory, and loss are built into the form of film itself; each frame is dead and past in the very moment of its being recognized, yet it is forever also relivable. Film exposes (among others, presumably) a shock of experiencing time as something measured by machine, not nature. This witnessing of time—and, with it, mortality—from outside oneself is a feature that complements ritualized spectacles of violence; the self-reflexivity of the DVD helps draw the critical analyses of content and form together. Gardner's ethnographic investigation to understand something about “what they, as men, who have forever killed each other, cannot forget” is a cinematic one, and Gardner's very first and central question to Jean Rouch in his *Screening Room* interview of 1980 could as well be turned on himself, when he asks, “Do you consider yourself an anthropologist or a filmmaker?” For Gardner, as perhaps for Rouch, the question cannot be answered because their practices of film and anthropology cannot be separated. The layering of a

DVD gives additional perspective on these questions not only by allowing takes, cuts, and commentaries to be viewed through the lens of differing arguments but also by allowing a discourse built through diverse temporal perspectives (the commentaries recorded and constructed at differing moments) to intersect with one about the relation between form(s) and content(s). And the “texts” of this discourse are made up equally of language, image, and sound or, indeed, also of edits, links, and menus.

One view of how Gardner reveals his evolution as ethnographer-filmmaker is provided on the DVD through a sample of field notes—the ethnographer’s staple—that were apparently compiled and edited shortly after filming to accompany a slide presentation about the project (or vice versa). The brief sample offers a view into the daily difficulties of working within an unfamiliar culture. Reflecting on the changing conditions of New Guinea, Gardner wonders out loud what will become of the Dani under Indonesian rule; this is about as close as the filmmaker gets to confronting questions of colonialization and postcolonial conditions, and his return visit has not yet resulted in a film. But not all important stories make good films—a practical reality for the anthropological filmmaker or filmmaking anthropologist is that the tool must match the task. For now, the gift for the rest of us from that return visit is Susan Meiselas’s (2003) book *Encounters with the Dani*. Made with Gardner’s participation, the book charts the cultural transformation that occurs through the Dani encounters of the past century with Dutch colonial expeditions, missionaries, survivors of a plane crash in the Grand Valley and the team that came to rescue them, the Dutch administration, and the Indonesia government, following its invasion of New Guinea, in 1962. Meiselas’s book is constructed through fragments gleaned from these encounters. Her scrapbook-like approach emphasizes how twentieth-century Dani history was shaped by fragmented encounters with significantly different kinds of foreign visitors each with their own intentions, biases, methods, and worldviews. What also emerges in Meiselas’s book is another kind of violence enacted on the Dani, an overt and ritualized form of violence with another more insidious kind.

However, one can’t do it all, and that is no less true in a DVD than any other work. What is gained—and of which *Dead Birds* is an example—is a fascinating insight into a process. The layering reveals intentions, choice making, and self-reflection as well as the

SIDEBAR 5: METACOMMENTARY 3: E-MAIL FROM ROBERT GARDNER, APRIL 29, 2005

This re-visiting, which is ongoing, has been disturbing in its relentless calling up of repressed memory...

At the bottom of all representation I think there lies a struggle with “absence,” with death, if you will. I would venture further—in an effort to address your references to “violence”—and say that violence is a particularly rich arena in which to “practice,” come to grips with, death and dying.

varied voices that have been collected over time of others, in this case, of fellow filmmakers and anthropologists. Through the combination of notes, photos, outtakes, and recollections of moments that couldn't/wouldn't be filmed—when it just wasn't permissible, was too dark, or was not thought essential at the time or when simply there was no more film in the magazine—the viewer constructs at least two imaginaries, not one. There is the world of the Dani and another: that of Robert Gardner at work in the field or in his studio, edit room, screening room, or lecture hall.

Through the rescreening of *Dead Birds* and the resulting conversations about it, a past is made meaningful again, whether in the context of evaluating the role of anthropology in the face of ever-increasing globalization, of investigating why we still fight wars, or in reimagining uses for film and other new tools by which we might express what lies beyond words in the imagined worlds we construct and in which we live. In piecing together the fragments of a work scattered among the dialogues of a career of numerous important films, countless courses and students, and fascinating conversations bridging the arts, humanities, and social sciences, the viewer also learns of memory's own processes of selection and an individual's changing perspective on experiences past in the contexts of conditions present.

From the commentary to *Dead Birds*:

Robert Gardner: As soon as I heard that there was the opportunity to go to a place where ritual warfare was being practiced I said "Yes!" [...] The reason that I was so excited by the idea was because I naively thought... if I could begin to understand what this meant to them... I would chip away at least at our own concerns and our own preoccupations of killing each other. My whole notion was that anthropology was meant to be a way of curing the world of its ills, this being the biggest piece of naiveté of all...

Ross McElwee: Well, another word for naiveté is idealism. It seems as if you did have an idealist premise for making this film that was firmly situated in the time in which it was made... You did really focus on one small group of people that had for me broader implications for where the world was at that time and continued to be for 25–30 years, and, with a slight shift, still is. Why do we make war?

RG: To show how unsuccessful I was things have just gotten worse since I made this film.

RM: We don't blame you Bob, it's not your fault.

CREDITS

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NOTES

1. The black-and-white samples in the DVD include the first 4 minutes and 20 seconds or so and the final 145 seconds. These may be too short to know whether Gardner achieved this pure vision; one wonders if in making a black-and-white version he should not have edited it differently to make a film that would maximize the essential and abstracting aspects of vision.
2. A interesting introduction into the use of black-and-white imagery and its relation to memory is presented in Berger and Mohr (1982). Images used as quotes function together in the construction of story because of the way black and white forefronts abstract qualities and enables a construction of memory through the likenesses of these qualities.
3. For more on the construction of referential systems in films by Robert Gardner, see Coover (2001).

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