

Dead Birds

Directed by Robert Gardner, 2004 [1964], 84 minutes, color, remastered on DVD. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02472, www.der.org

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Robert Gardner's many contributions to ethnographic documentary film production are undeniable and problematic. The historical and critical discussions that have surrounded Robert Gardner, and *Dead Birds* in particular, are numerous and range from dissections of the film's authenticity to larger ethical debates concerning the use of constructed voice-over. At the start of the 21st century, the question that must be asked is "what is the value of *Dead Birds* pedagogically and as a representation of visual anthropology?"

With the stunning remastered release of *Dead Birds* on DVD, Gardner provides both a reflexive window on the original production of this landmark film and fills in some of the previously absent academic context of this film. As Gardner alludes, the film is a product of its time, both technically and intellectually. *Dead Birds* emerged out of an era in visual anthropology, (and anthropology in general) that was predominantly concerned with questions about the conduct of comparative anthropological work. To this end, *Dead Birds*, considered a classic in ethnographic film production, has been used in countless courses to demonstrate comparative agricultural practices, kinship structures and symbolic culture. Yet, Gardner's intention with the film was to understand Dani warfare in order to critically examine global attitudes toward conflict at the time of the film's production. Although the film is still used to teach elements of Dani culture in New Guinea, particularly the cultural underpinnings of warfare and funeral rites, one of its best pedagogical uses in the current era of globalization is to show rapid cultural change among indigenous populations. The possible danger is that audiences are presented *Dead Birds* without contemporary context.

To fully appreciate *Dead Birds* I have learned to suspend my concerns as an anthropologist and look at it solely for its aesthetic virtues and its dependence upon structural mythical elements. Having seen the original film at least 20 times on 16mm film and VHS video, I continue to utilize *Dead Birds* in 2006 to teach about ethical dilemmas in visual anthropology and I am continually drawn to the film's aesthetic qualities despite these ethical issues. The digital remastering only increases its visual brilliance and simultaneously opens *Dead Birds* up to further critical discussion. Alongside Karl Heider's well-known contextual ethnographic material available on the Dani (*The Dugum Dani*, Aldine Publishing Company, 1970; *Grand Valley Dani: Peaceful Warriors*, Wadsworth Publishers, 1996), the DVD release of *Dead Birds* solidifies its standing in visual anthropology, not primarily to introduce Dani culture to students, but to demonstrate the pitfalls associated with anthropological fieldwork and ethnographic media production. The utility of the DVD for teaching ethnographic media production and the ethical issues that accompany this undertaking are bountiful.

There are several commentaries on the DVD, including a discussion between Gardner, Mexican poet and Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz, and playwright William Alfred, that provide additional context concerning the production of the film and other issues that confronted Gardner in the field. In addition, the inclusion of black- and-white sequences from the original film accompanied by a discussion between Gardner and Lucien Taylor is illuminating. In recent years, Taylor has facilitated and introduced the work of established ethnographic filmmakers like Robert Gardner and David MacDougall (*Transcultural Cinema*, Princeton University Press, 1998; *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R. 1990-1994*, Lucien Taylor, ed. Routledge, 1994). The option of viewing *Dead Birds* while listening to Robert Gardner's commentary on the original full-length film is especially thought-provoking. One gains insight into Gardner's thinking at the time of production, his reflections over the past 40 years since the film's release and, especially, into his antagonism toward ethnography. While this commentary with the documentary filmmaker Ross McElwee often concentrates on form over substance, evidence of Gardner's disdain for anthropology and social scientists is humorous if not revealing. As he states while pondering his own original voice-over, "This is just ethnographic talk...it is of less interest than most of what I am saying." These commentaries, discussions and interviews add layers to the film and should be of interest to those seeking further interpretive context for *Dead Birds* and Gardner's filmmaking process.

Nonetheless, *Dead Birds* and the standing of Robert Gardner in visual anthropology present a dilemma. Making *Dead Birds* available in a new technological format does not necessarily solve the intellectual problems that surrounded the film in its previous manifestations. As Craig Mishler has stated, "My judgment is that *Dead Birds* has been colored by so many subtle fictional pre-tensions and artistic ornamentations that it has surrendered most of its usefulness as a socially scientific document" ("Narrativity and Metaphor in Ethnographic Film: A Critique of Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds*," *American Anthropologist* 1985:87(3):669). Gardner and his corpus of work remain in the midst of a classic debate in visual anthropology on whether ethnographic media production should be primarily aesthetically pleasing or if it should, first of all, satisfy the rigors of anthropological method (*Picturing Culture*, Jay Ruby, University of Chicago Press, 2000). In fact, few media satisfy both criteria. Like many other landmark films from the history of visual anthropology, *Dead Birds* has become a means of teaching what not to do in ethnographic media production despite its aesthetic achievements. In other words, teaching by concentrating on form over substance, or choosing aesthetics over

ethnographic relevancy.

Yet, this argument is moot for all intents and purposes. Robert Gardner has operated free of the methodological and ethical parameters of anthropology throughout his career, despite the predominant anthropological audience for his productions ("On the Making of *Dead Birds*," In *The Dani of West Irian: An Ethno-graphic Companion to Dead Birds*. Karl Heider, ed., Warner Modulation Publications Module 2, 1972:31–35). He never intended his films to become the focus of academic fodder and critique, and he should not necessarily be held accountable for it as he has in the past. It is those of us who have taken *Dead Birds* and his other films into anthropology and chosen to show them who bear the weight of that endeavor. Hence, it is the role of the instructor who uses *Dead Birds*, or films like *Forest of Bliss*, to insure that students walk away acknowledging the film's technical achievements without its aberrant cultural readings.

The specific questions about this remastered film give rise to a larger set of issues that surround ethno-graphic media production and technology in the 21st century. Are we approaching the possibilities of DVD and other non-linear hypermedia in general with the same wonder that we approached the advent of sync sound or videotape as methodological shifting devices? One of the historical challenges presented to ethnographic media producers has been to present fieldwork methodology and cultural topics in a unified narrative. Do new technological media demand a new way of constructing visual anthropological knowledge leaving the standard linear development and production of a film to the scrap heap of intellectual history? Or, do the DVD format and other hypermedia finally solve certain dilemmas like reflexivity by allowing the filmmaker's intentions to be read alongside, rather than within, the film itself? The standard linear film format is still the production method in which most students are trained and the format that the viewing audience demands, but the contextual possibilities exemplified by the DVD release of *Dead Birds* and other hypermedia projects continue to be exciting and promising. They present more background for our look into the past and provide the possibility of new "ways of knowing" (*Transcultural Cinema*, David MacDougall, Princeton University Press, 1998) for the development of future anthropological projects.

Finally, in the director's commentary, Gardner states that he hopes to write a full-length manuscript at some point about the entire experience of filming *Dead Birds*. I eagerly await this intellectual product as it would provide yet one more layer of interpretive context for this landmark film in visual anthropology, possibly giving the project even more critical value for future ethno-graphic filmmakers and anthropological audiences.