

DEAD BIRDS (1963) 83 mins.

Robert Gardner

Karl Heider (anthro)

After working on *The Hunters* with John Marshall, Gardner began making plans for another large expedition. In 1961 he led the Harvard Peabody Expedition to study the Dani, in what was then Netherlands New Guinea (now the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya). Although the Dani had first been reported in 1938 by an expedition from the American Museum of Natural History and were not “unknown” or “untouched” when the Harvard expedition arrived, many Dani were still using stone axes and carrying on warfare with bows and arrows and spears. It was a rare chance for anthros to observe firsthand these sorts of activities.

Gardner’s film was shot during the first five months of the expedition. Gardner worked closely with Jan Broekhuijse, a Dutch government anthro who had studied the Dani, he also used input from the rest of the expedition, and of course, his is a trained anthropologist himself. Gardner returned to New Guinea in 1962 to discuss the film with Karl Heider, who then went on to consult with him upon his return to Boston in 1963 (after 18 months of fieldwork with the Dani).

Dead Birds is very much like *The Hunters*, still very much Flaherty tradition. Following certain characters throughout the film, Weyak and Pua. The major events were not reconstructed or staged. Battles and funeral were going on during the filming and are shown in the film as they happened. There are persistent rumors that the Harvard Expedition instigated or encouraged warfare are untrue. They did observe the warfare and did not attempt to discourage it.)

It was made during an expedition, but not a film expedition—there were many other researchers on the trip, with three ethnographers (Broekhuijse, Gardner, and Heider), a natural historian (Peter Matthiessen), a botanist (Chris Versteegh) a professional still photographer (Eliot Elisofon) and others (Michael Rockefeller and Samuel Putnam) as well as in the 1968 and 1970 follow-ups, a psychologist (Eleanor Rosch).

Made in Western Irian during Dutch rule, it depicts the Dani people and their extremely unusual form of controlled warfare, which they indulged in at infrequent intervals. It also contains powerful material on mourning of a vividness and directness unusual until then. It is the only Harvard Peabody Expedition reports on the Dani. It is also tied into the written ethnographic reports through a lengthy ethnographic companion, or study guide. It is a watershed moment in ethnographic film. It was made without synchronous sound. In 1960, when the equipment for the expedition was being bought, synchronous sound in New Guinea was still a fantasy, by the mid sixties, reliable portable synchronous sound equipment was available.

We know the story—warring is unlike traditional warfare in Europe, but more about the identities of the men who are fighting. We meet some people, some children, see women making salt and a village as it mourns for a killed child. Weyak, the guard who was not present in the region when the boy was killed, is deeply moved by the death—and this mourning sequence takes place, in which the child is propped up in a chair to see they are mourning for him, they cover him in beads (one of three times in a person’s life they do this , birth and marriage being the others), and some of the close female relatives mutilate themselves by chopping off a knuckle or joint of their finger. The enemy rejoices, but Weyak’s group must seek revenge.

This story is bounded by Gardner's voice as he opens by telling of a myth or fable about a race between a bird and a snake. This contest would decide on whether men would be like birds and die, or be like snakes and, which shed their skin and have eternal life. "The bird won, and from that time, all men, like birds, must die."

Beginning with a statement like that is bold and it establishes one of the film's themes—how do humans confront the fact of death? Especially in that monotone voice narration—he tends to guide the viewer by identifying persons, places and meanings of actions.

The very last words of the film also invite us to remember the opening words about the origin of death. It is human foreknowledge of death which, in Gardner's view, gives human life one of its special qualities.

In his on screen statement before the film began Gardner told us that the film was "a true story composed from footage of actual events . . . no scene was directed and no role was created. The people in the film merely did what they had done before we came, and for those who are not dead, as they do now that we have left."

What does "True" mean here? It means that Gardner stands by his insights

What does "story" mean? Means the narrative shape, the connection between persons and events are his.

What does "composed" mean? In that it carries the same weight, and directs us to the conscious authorship in filming, editing, and writing the commentary, and the relation between all of these.

"Footage from actual events" refers to the normal "stuff" of ethnographic film—raw footage of actualities, which would have gone on whether the camera had been present or not. This reassures us that much of what we see happened as it appeared to happen

Some people have criticized his commentary as "omniscient". He employs three tenses—the vivid present "Today Weyak is present at his stand" and a simple past, "by sundown the boy was dead." Also employs the future tense, "soon both men and birds will surrender to the night." His switching back and forth between the tenses gives the narration a sense of total power over the story. He knows the past, he is with us in the present, and he knows what will happen in the future.

As a filmmaker he places all sorts of little tidbits of foreshadowing—like Weyak weaving the ornamental shell strands given when a death occurs and we are told a child's death is particularly mourned. He wants us to appreciate what is about to happen, as well as preparing us for the destruction of finger-joints by his female relatives and the shock of the funeral wailing.

In a sense he sets up the boy Pua, asking us to sympathize with him, the fact that he fails to catch a dragon fly and the fact that his name means the yellow clay of which people place on their faces while in mourning. Although another boy dies, we know Pua and we realize how close to death he may have been himself—he is just another bird waiting to die. Gardner could have made a film about warfare, but without these actual occurrences of death and people wounded, we learn more about the Dani, there are victims and grief.

Particularly alarming in this movie is how Gardner seems to know what the characters are thinking. For example, he states that Pua “watches, thinking of the day when he himself will be a farmer” which is similar to how *The Hunters* was made, and Gardner had a hand in that film. How did the filmmaker know what the characters were actually thinking? He may have obtained their actual thoughts later, but it is probably more accurate to say that he projected himself into their thoughts and motives, not as they were known to be as real people in the real world, but as they were as characters in the conceptual space of the film-story. These are really narrative devices rather than a transcription of reality—at no point in the film does it claim to be “real”. How could Gardner be filming and at the same time asking through an interpreter what the characters are thinking? It is doubtful that the Dani are as explicitly philosophical about death as Gardner states— but that’s OK within the realm of ethnographic film.

His narration is powerful, and because there is asynchronous sound, it is necessary for us to determine what may be going on. It is powerful as we meet particular characters and see how they are involved in everyday life in the Dani village. We are led to identify with the characters and nowhere is this seen more clearly than at the end of the cremation scene when he states “The bones are all together—the end of all the work and love it took to make a boy.”

The film is powerful, imaginative, and compelling. Nothing like it had been done before, it was quite outside the existing genres of ethnographic or general documentary film. Gardner himself clarified what he intended in the film: “My first responsibility, both to my own purposes and to the Dani, was to document with as much discernment as possible the most telling and important aspects of their life.” (recognition) “I seized the opportunity of speaking to certain fundamental issues in human life. The Dani were less important to me than those issues. Do you remember similar testimonies by Flaherty?! Flaherty once said, “One often has to distort a thing in order to catch its true spirit (1948).

On a less inclusive level, the film contains one or more shorter activity sequences. Edited throughout *Dead Birds* is a complete sequence of woman producing salt, and another of a man knitting a shell funeral band. The overall story of *Dead Birds* is the accident of the sequence of events during five months in 1961. If Gardner had not had the overall storyline, he would have still had the film of several reasonable complete shorter event sequences

Robert Gardner—the filmmaker

At the start of Gardner’s career we should probably use the terms “non-literal” or “experimental” to suggest his preoccupations. In his youth he was an admirer of *avant-garde* films. His insight into culture is not merely observational, but creative and expressive. For Gardner making films is about the “impulse to preserve”, particularly to preserve something striking in another culture, and about making the apparently familiar into the extraordinary by experiments with style which compel the viewer’s attention.

Some people feel that Gardner will be heralded like Flaherty in years to come, as a visionary filmmaker. But that would not be the realists. For those committed to realism and observational filming with social science goals, Gardner was the Recording Angel who fell, a man of extraordinary creative ability who simply would not make films the way scholarly community needed them. Maybe it was more that he refused to explain the cultures he had filmed, or to allow anthropologists their voices in his major films, which was wrong-headed. Actually,

Gardner flirted with realism and sometimes worked with conventionally ethnographic terms of reference. He continually distanced himself from realism, and in all of his four major films showed a desire to transcend it in a manner reminiscent of the Symbolists, a movement in French painting and literature in the late 19th century. “Symbolism can be thought of as part of a philosophical idealism in revolt against a positivist, scientific attitude that affected (or infected) not only painting but literature as well.”

The essence of symbolism is the belief that a complex reality can be appreciated through metaphors, or symbols, isolated from the flux of events and particulars, and given emphasis by the observer. So, who are anthropologists to decide how cultures should be represented? Although an ethnographer, is it OK for him to use symbolism to talk about Dani culture, although that is not in line with traditional ethnography? I believe one of the strengths of anthropology is that it does not adhere to strict guidelines about what is and isn't culture, or expression, it engages with history a diverse perspective of worldviews and is willing to experiment with the representations of that diversity. Gardner takes on tough and difficult subjects for his films and he does this with an attraction to presenting the material in an unorthodox manner.

Gardner is a creative ethnographer who has a few traits throughout his films:

1. Language problem—he has never mastered the language of the people he has filmed, Dani, Nuer, Hamar.
2. Collaboration—his best work has been made with an equal partner, usually a sovereign anthropologist, not as a collaboration of researchers. We see this in the way each of his films are signed “. . . a film by Robert Gardner.” Here he takes full authoritative responsibility for what follows, even while acknowledging assistance of various kinds from others.
3. Titles — how he presents the films to the audience. It is not a traditional ethnographic title, rather he uses short, enigmatic phrases, more like poems. This is a clear signal of his intentions, but the implications have not yet been pondered by his critics.

For more info on Gardner and his films see:

Loizos, Peter. 1993. Innovation in ethnographic film: From innocence to self-consciousness 1955-1985. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

Heider, Karl. 1976. Ethnographic Film. University of Texas Press: Austin.