Dead Birds is one of the best-known ethnographic motion pictures of all time. Set in the highlands of New Guinea in 1961, the film recounts events in the lives of the Dani people, for whom revenge killing was a central tenet. The plot centres on a few key protagonists, including the warrior Weyak, who stood lookout atop a tower for an enemy appearance while women of his tribe gardened, and a small boy, Pua, who daydreamed as he watched over his family’s pigs. Against the backdrop of everyday life was the constant fear of tribal warfare (graphically depicted in the film) and payback killing. As a central metaphor for his story of violence and mortality, Gardner employed the Dani identification with birds as totems and their reference to the captured possessions and bodies of their victims as “dead birds.” The film invites viewers to ponder the nature of human aggression as it unfolds in a highly ritualized tribal cultural environment.

This well-illustrated volume chronicles the process of making the film. Phillip Lopate provides an informative overview, while Gardner furnishes the background for the extensive quotes from letters, journals, telegrams, newspaper clippings, camera notes, interviews, reviews and articles that constitute much of the text. The reader is led from the film’s conception through the extensive planning, fund-raising and securing permissions stages to the actual filming and the shaping of the picture and its story. Of historical significance is Michael Rockefeller, youngest son of then New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, the soundman and photographer for the expedition. Shortly after the shoot, Michael, on a separate expedition, was lost off the south coast of New Guinea. The volume deals with his time in New Guinea and the aftermath of his death.

Ethical dilemmas are revealed. For example, Margaret Mead cautioned Gardner against making a film about warfare. “Her point was that in photographing or even just observing hostile behaviour of this kind, we would be condoning it and thus letting down the administration, ‘making it unsafe for every white man,’ as she put it” (22). Mead’s words were prophetic, because rumours spread that Gardner and his team were provoking warfare in order to film it. Documents reveal how strongly he denied these allegations, although he did insist that police and other visitors stay out of the area so as not to interfere with the project. And in a startling revelation, Gardner admits that the crew “closely held the intelligence that Michael was grazed in the leg by an arrow in a battle…. Were it to become known…. [there would be] … unpredictable consequences for our work” (71). Another choice involved the possible theatrical allure of filming the amputation of young girls’ finger joints as part of a mourning ritual.
Anthropologists will appreciate the manifold problems of acquiring permission for research and filming, the remoteness of the place, getting supplies, equipment and research materials in and out of the field site, communicating with and gaining the trust of the Dani, assuring that the picture would be anthropologically accurate, considering the effects of the production crew on local events, and coping with the sheer physical discomforts arising from conditions that caused film stock to swell, cameras to jam, and film to be lost in a swamp.

Artistic concerns are also aired. Gardner strongly desired a humanistic, experiential anthropology that valued subjectivity and intuition. He pondered whether to impose “the burden of language” on the film with a voice-over narration (which he chose) rather than let the images and actions speak for themselves. Decisions had to be made about balancing close-ups against broader action scenes, whether to combine action shots taken at different battles, the implications of using unsynchronized sound and constructing a story line. Because Gardner had to send the film out for processing, for long intervals he never knew whether the exposures were correct, if the temperamental equipment had functioned correctly, if the film had arrived safely at its destination or if processing labs had damaged the negatives.

The book succeeds at many levels. It takes the reader inside the making of one of the most highly acclaimed ethnographic motion pictures. It chronicles the early days of visual anthropology, provides ethnographic information on a people about to experience fundamental social change and gives insights into the thoughts of a pioneering filmmaker with an extraordinarily challenging goal and noble aim: As Gardner puts it, “In Dead Birds, my fondest hope was that my camera would be a mirror for its viewers to see themselves.”

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