

A filmmaker's journal

An appreciation of Robert Gardner's

The impulse to preserve: Reflections of a filmmaker

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ROBERT GARDNER

Fig. 1. Eastern Jikany Nuer living at Ciengach, southwest Ethiopia, February 1968. The child had died of smallpox.

Suppose your favourite ethnographer had kept a diary of professional development – wouldn't you wish to read it? Raymond Firth kept a field diary in Tikopia but did not publish it. Malinowski kept one; his students were against publication, and it was indeed later used to attack his work. S.F. Nadel kept a field diary, in Bida, now available on the internet; it is strictly for specialists – technical and mostly impersonal.

Robert Gardner, recent winner of the Lifetime Achievement Award from the [US] Society for Visual Anthropology, has offered us a revealing book about his life in film.¹ Some of his films have been required viewing for introductory anthropology students, but have been much criticized by visual anthropology's thought police. There were those like Jay Ruby who wanted ethnographic film to aspire to some kind of rigour in relation to real-world societies. At that time Ruby believed that anthropological films should be made with explicit theory, explicit methods and eschew fictions and models from theatrical filmmaking. Karl Heider, who was to collaborate with Gardner, sought a kind of scientific ethnographic film which would feature 'whole bodies in whole acts'. Asch and Marshall were working towards filming action sequences which would be faithful to real-time events unfolding. Scientific hypothesis-testing realism was in the ascendant. For this movement, Gardner's work was out of synch with orthodox views of 'best practice'. To some extent, the enthusiasts for cinema vérité and observational film were equally distant from Gardner. For them there was cinematic truth to reality, and it could be had through a certain mode of filmmaking, but explanatory commentary was out, whereas for Ruby and Heider it was essential. (Loizos [1993] reviews the disputes and cites the main contributors to this debate.)

Gardner stood apart from both these movements. Those who most liked his films were not realist anthropological filmmakers but poets, painters, and the kind of people who would be found in London more often at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) than the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). Gardner was clearly not sympathetic to the claims of scientific realism, nor the radical inductive empiricism of the Ruby-Heider-Asch-Marshall axis. He was sure that the most powerful and visually arresting films were image-driven, and he was forever looking for symbols which in some important sense 'summed up' what a society was about. Since Geertz was to get so much mileage from the idea that a society could be grasped through some central visible performance – such as the Balinese cockfight – Gardner's intellectual position was hardly an isolated one. And Gardner had a painter's perceptiveness – he could find arresting images in the societies he chose to film in.

Gardner now offers us a richly illustrated and frank account of his major filming expeditions. The 500 photos are often arresting. The book is not about how the films were made technically, except to mention frequent camera breakdowns and ruined film batches. Nor does Gardner start with the germ of the idea, the background reading, expedition preparations, and he says little about editing. Mostly, the diary entries are about where he was, how it was, how he felt. It's a journal which conveys the emotional difficulty of trying to shoot memorable films, far from capital cities, and the voice is intensely personal.

The films involve long trips in unreliable Land Rovers, strenuous climbs, extreme weather, obstructive officials and distracted collaborators. But the greatest difficulties are internal to Gardner, the ambition to do something outstanding and the continual sense of falling short, of difficulty, of ambivalence, of wishing he knew more, and of

Fig. 2. Gardner, Robert 2006. *The impulse to preserve: Reflections of a filmmaker*. New York: Other Press (distributed by Harvard University Press).





Fig. 3. Dani warriors, Baliem Valley, Papua, 1961. The man being carried has been slightly wounded.

great uncertainty as to whether the filming would result in anything worth watching. With appropriate substitutions, anthropologists should be able to recognize the sometimes painful experience of fieldwork.

The filmmaker's intentions

The modern anthropological strategy of long immersion, and sustained language-learning was not the road Gardner took. It has been taken by some ethnographic filmmakers – the MacDougalls, Melissa Llewelyn-Davis and Ian Dunlop come to mind. Gardner describes himself at one point as ‘a lapsed graduate student trying to invent an anthropology that used film and photography instead of words’ (Gardner 206:73). He considered becoming a professional anthropologist and was decisively put off by some of the required reading, and aspects of disciplinary training. His book contains occasional dismissive remarks about academics, although he has time for those whose work he admires. Professional anthropology, as we noted above, has been equally ambivalent towards his films, almost as if he had been contracted to make the films the academy might have wanted, and had then somehow broken his contract. This ambivalence was partly based on a misunderstanding of Gardner’s intentions, and partly on a sense of anthropology as the moral guardian of the peoples Gardner filmed, with a duty to censor representations insufficiently grounded, explicit, relativist in style.

Gardner’s films will endure because of the strength of their management of sustained images, images which transport us, take us somewhere we would otherwise never have been. They will also endure because he has had the courage to offer us films which pose questions about vio-

Fig. 4. Dani girls. They have each recently had a finger joint removed to mark the death of a male kinsman.

lence, gender relations, death and religious mysticism. His choice of title for this book (taken from poet Philip Larkin), after various other choices had been rejected during a long working life, suggests his mature sense of what he has been doing. But one of the rejected titles was ‘Creatures of pain’, which seems to be the way he viewed humanity in his early life, a view that comes through strongly in early films but is no longer dominant. In what follows, I shall quote extensively from just two of the accounts of expeditions in the book, hoping that this will give the reader a stronger sense of it than if we tried to cover them all.

Baliem Valley expedition: *Dead birds*

The first major journal section concerns the expedition which resulted in the film *Dead birds*. In the Baliem Valley in Papua, in March-August 1961, the Dutch were still notionally in charge. Gardner had with him as advisor Jan Broekhuijse, a Dutch government anthropologist who had studied the Dani, and Karl Heider, just starting his doctoral research. The expedition brought major and minor shell valuables to gain acceptance:

We tried to explain our intentions were completely unrelated to any government or religion. We told them they were entirely free to do as they wished and that we hoped they would. This included conducting their wars or stealing enemy pigs and women. They were relieved to hear this because these activities have central meaning in the Dani scheme of things. Without war they would cease being the kind of men they were supposed to be, according to the precepts of their culture. (p. 13)

Gardner’s journal is full of complex ambivalences. First, he feels the expedition will change the locals, in a way that will take the heart out of their world. He also fears that although the filming team has received a friendly welcome, their local hosts might turn dangerous at any moment. After being among them six weeks Gardner complains to himself that he has made poor progress in their language. But his observations of their ritualized fighting encounters and the still photographs he took at the time are full of power and insight. In the journal he speculates on the meaning of Dani fighting. It is much more than ludic – people were getting badly wounded, and sometimes killed. There is a religious element:

What is clear is that this is a phenomenon of enormous complexity central to their scheme of life. Fighting is what men do, even what they must do, in order to be men, in the same way toiling in the gardens is what women must do to be women.



PRESIDENT AND FELLOWS OF HARVARD COLLEGE

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Fig. 5. A Dani boy at play Baliem Valley. Boys were also occasional targets for inter-group revenge attacks.

If there were no wars, the shape of Dani society would surely change, if not cease to exist. (p. 29)

Gardner thought he had escaped from functionalism when he dropped out of graduate school, but it was still giving him a basic framework as he watched the perplexing fighting. By late April he feels relaxed with the locals, even though he is not convinced of having won their full trust.

Curiously, I feel that if there was to be a war tomorrow, I might experience some reluctance about going. Now that I know many of them, I am involved in their fates and it would be quite terrible to see one of them killed or even badly hurt. (p. 32)

These thoughts stay with him, but a day or so later he writes:

I even wonder if it may not be true, that to take a life is the most intense, possibly ultimate human experience there is. (p. 34)

If many people in the middle of a war have asked themselves this, relatively few have put it on paper, but the recent book *Jarhead*, about the US Marines, has the author regretting at the end that he had seen no action. Three days after Gardner had written the above, he saw at close quarters a badly wounded young warrior who would take 16 days to die in great pain. His feelings and perceptions shifted again. On 10 June, in a new twist, a small boy is slain in an ambush, not in face-to-face adult battle, and Gardner is brought close to Dani funeral customs:

As custom has it when someone is killed, a few of the victim's relatives are mutilated. Several joints of the fingers of three girls and part of an ear of a young boy were cut off. To accept my offering of a shell, one of the little girls extended a bloody hand she had just used to cup the elbow of her wounded limb. She and the others were wide-eyed but not undone by pain or grief over their recent losses. We, on the other hand, are more prosaically exhausted by the week just ended (p. 54).

The facing page shows two small girls who have clearly just undergone a mutilation. The small girl's mask of pain seems at odds with 'wide-eyed but not undone': she looks undone to me. I would hate her to have been one of my children feeling that pain (Fig. 4).

Sometimes, the entries are too taciturn: the Dutch anthropologist Jan is 'apprehensive about what is to happen to him when we leave' (p. 56), but we cannot guess exactly why: rebukes from his bosses? Danger from the locals? Gardner's filming starts to frustrate him. He receives an inadequate lab report, wonders about going to Tokyo to get better information and then asks himself if he is not trying to find relief from the 'discomforts and frustrations of my Highland Dani life?' (p. 56).

And always, there is the struggle, which appears in film after film, to make sense of it all:

As yet I have no storyline for the film, and no clear developmental structure either, only some motifs and a few thematic notions like the bird/man business. I feel an approach should, indeed must, come together in my mind before too long. (p. 57)

The rain continues and so there are no flights. I used the day trying to sketch the film. The coverage seems vast and sometimes the scale feels appropriately epic. But more material with a little humor and common appeal would help balance the spectacular. Pua looms more and more important as a sympathetic figure and counterweight to the heaviness of death and misfortune. I want to do closer work with pigs. Holy stones and sacred practice of all kinds. Everything is tied together somehow. (p. 57)

7 July: I wish some things were not part of this culture and cutting off joints of a little girl's fingers with a stone ax is one of them. (p. 62)

He writes on 10 July of the third funeral in ten days:

Everyone is exhausted by them and the bloodiness of it all is beginning to cloud my mind. (p. 63)

If you take the view, as well you might, that to set out to make a film about tribal fighting is a risky pact with the devil, then it is easy to guess that what Gardner had seen, filmed and felt was nearly enough to regret the deal within a few months. When the devil turned up at the crossroads, he was not the suave impresario expected – he was much nastier, something of a sadist.

I see no moral difference between a field anthropologist getting it all down into her notebooks, and a filmmaker struggling with camera jams and poor light. Gardner left feeling the expedition had contributed to the 'corruption' of the Dani – that in contrast with the previously despised missionaries, the expedition was an 'unholy enterprise'. The Dani, seduced by trinkets, became 'pitiful' to him: 'I have a horror of the pain they will someday know.'

So there is the paradox which has been felt by many who encountered such societies, from the Lévi-Strauss of *Tristes tropiques* through to current doctoral students. Some things shock and distress, others charm and fasci-



CLARK WORSWICK

Fig. 6. Dusk in the village of Ciengach, southwest Ethiopia.



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Fig. 7. Hamar people, southwest Ethiopia. Whipping of unmarried girls by boys occurs in several different contexts. One is during male initiation, where girls who are kin to the initiand are whipped; another is during social dances, when a girl encourages a boy to whip her because she is interested in him.

nate, still others puzzle deeply, but at the same time, we are troubled by the speed with which the outside world will turn these lives upside down.

Into Africa

After the Dani shoot, there is a brief account of a visit somewhere near Sokoto, northern Nigeria, in February 1965, to see a ritual called *sharo* in which young men invite each other to trade blows. He goes with a young local man studying maths at London University, who is fluent in Fulani. The trip lasts a couple of days. Some film was apparently shot, some stills taken. Gardner gives a vivid description of the encounters, and how these men take pain without showing fear or reluctance. It was part of a film which didn't get made about a Fulani group known as the Uda. Gardner explains that the film was abandoned partly because a civil war broke out in Nigeria. But his comment on his own state of mind is interesting:

Just as importantly, I was never able to find Uda in the state of simple innocence I had allowed myself to imagine them. My present view of those days is that I wandered too mindlessly in that particular desert, trusting that luck would prevail and that I would be able to attach myself to these astonishing examples of the husbanding life. In the end, the very elusiveness of the Uda that first caught my fancy was what defeated my best intentions. (p. 78)

In February 1968 Gardner was filming among a Nuer group just inside Ethiopia (Fig. 1). He was working in collaboration with a filmmaker called Hilary Harris, whom Gardner had encouraged to take on the Nuer, while Gardner himself tried to film among the Afar, another project which didn't come off. There was smallpox among the Nuer, and they were not dancing, the activity Harris was most interested in. The Americans had some vaccines, but these did not seem to stop children dying.

Gardner finds his time among the Nuer frustrating in various ways. It is 100° Fahrenheit, the insects are a drag, there is no chair or table to be had, and he can't take care of his camera properly. He films a girl making a pot, in order to calm himself down. He sees the collective adoration of cattle as producing a harmony of deep values:

I look at the orderliness of the Nuer world and find mine wanting [...] of course, I am not thinking about the larger political issues that hang over these people. The Nuer are refugees from Sudanese tyrants and from modernity itself. Maybe I, too, am a refugee. (p. 95)

Although the Afar film was not made, owing to 'Afar misanthropy', Gardner was in Ethiopia in June 1968 when he started preliminary research among the Hamar – but

to get to them required a major trek from Addis. He saw various agricultural groups on the way, and decided that while they might be interesting anthropologically, he was not interested in them pictorially:

Is this way I have of viewing appearances a result of being a purist? (p. 111)

The difficulties of the journey stir his imagination:

I have begun to think the film to make should be about this struggle, not my own necessarily but that of those who drive the Fiats. The story, if one were to join them up and see what happens, is about tearing up the countryside hauling freight from one market town to the next. Formally speaking, all the necessary narrative elements exist, including a cast of characters and an element of the chase for tension and suspense [...] Instead, I keep chasing the chimera of isolated people offering metaphors for pondering not only their isolation but my own. As a graduate student, I remember repeating to incredulous professors that what I liked about anthropology was that it would help me understand myself in more ways than the people observed. About this I have not changed my mind. (p. 112)

Reading between these lines, I infer that Gardner's professors were so full of the scientific seriousness of their anthropology that they could not make sense of what Gardner was really telling them. So they lost an anthropologist, and the world gained a filmmaker. The first piece of writing in this book, describing an 'old lady' close to death in the Kalahari, shows that had he stayed the anthropology course, Gardner might have written a powerful monograph about actually observed people. Having myself dropped out of the Harvard Social Relations Department a couple of years after Gardner, I can say that there was such a deadly seriousness in the locked-down belief in social *science* that I turned to film with a sense of relief: films were usually about people, while sociology, criminology and anthropology seemed then to be about bloodless, incorporeal abstractions – and besides, I couldn't cope with the compulsory stats course! Gardner took me in, helped me forward.

Filming the Hamar

When after many adventures, the expedition meet some Hamar, their reception is friendly, and Gardner feels he can work with them. His impatience soon starts to make him doubt if things will work out. He compares the Hamar with the Nuer – 'altogether a more compelling people'. He writes that he is too ready to dismiss the Hamar as 'inexpressive'. He tells himself he will have to be patient with them. He worries about their interest in non-local clothes:

Appearances are more important in filmmaking than they are in life, which forces one to wonder how much filmmaking has to do with life. What is clear to me is that the less the group I choose to film is influenced by modernity, the greater will be my freedom from having to explain such matters [...] My own interests are to look for that which is an apt symbol or sign and, at the same time, is distinctive in and of itself. (p. 116)

He finishes filming in late June 1968, and realizes he has got useful material, but has a lot more to learn. To that end, he makes contact with a young German doctoral student from LSE, Ivo Strecker, offering financial support in exchange for advice and interpreting on a second filming trip. Later he complains about difficulties in their working relationship – unsurprising, given the individual drive of both men.

Forty-five days into his stay, Gardner starts to feel less warmth between himself and the Hamar. He has doubts about whether they are a 'nice people'. By mid-August 1971 he writes:

The light was clear but my feelings about the Hamar male were not. I find little that is admirable in their character. Much of the time they seem exclusively absorbed in themselves as members of a dominant gender. On the other hand, I have noticed that

1. For a review of another of Robert Gardner's works see Loizos, P. 1995, 'Robert Gardner's *Rivers of sand: Towards a reappraisal*'. In: Devereaux, Leslie and Hillman, Roger (eds) *Fields of vision: Essays in film studies, visual anthropology and photography*, pp. 311-325. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fig. 8. Hamar girls' beauty preparations.

when two of them are talking, they project a sense of themselves as almost free spirits. I don't know what I'll do with these undigested thoughts when I set about editing a film. I am sure I will not romanticize these men, or portray them as stubborn individualists eking out a meagre livelihood in a jungle of thorns. (p. 157)

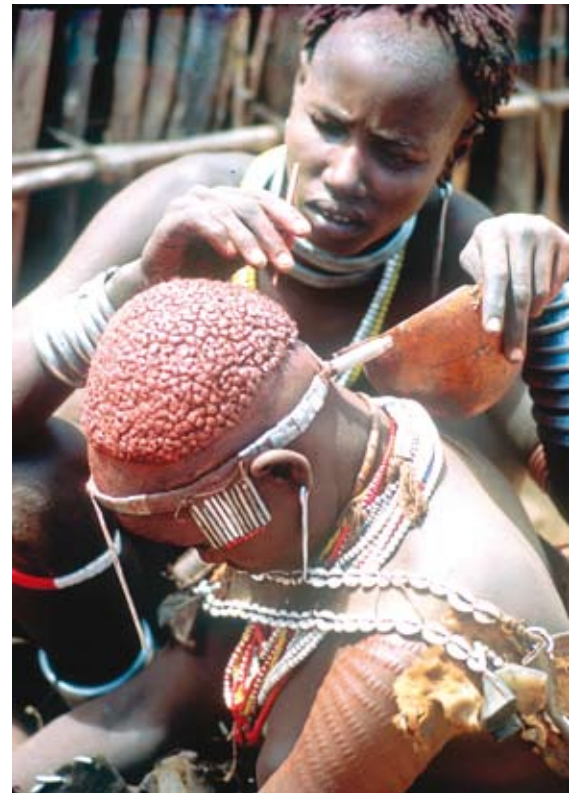
In other words, he would not follow the path of Flaherty, or of John Marshall's *The hunters*.

On the next page he is writing of 'social and domestic fascism' (p. 158). Although that actual phrase did not get into the final edited film, his unease with Hamar men came through strongly. Interestingly, this is the same man who had found the Dani warriors impressive in all kinds of ways, and was taken with the Nuer. Warrior societies with strong agnation are hard on women, full stop: there would seem to be little to choose between being a Hamar woman or a Dani woman. Gardner has implied that his own personal life – a relationship was coming to a painful end – fed into how he filmed and edited the Hamar, and this honesty about how one thing works on another illuminates the book all the way.

The book contains substantial journals for three other Gardner expedition films – *Deep hearts* (Bororo), *Forest of bliss* (Benares) and *Ika hands* (Sierra Nevada) – as well as material about his filming of painters. Similar kinds of emphases continue in the journal on the later expedition films – the need to understand, dependence on people who have presented themselves as knowledgeable, and disappointments with the quality of this field assistance in two shoots. Gardner addresses the physical difficulties of roughing it, and the humbling experience of seeing the locals coping with the conditions while you are so easily wiped out. There is also the anxiety about coherence – is there really a film? Is he finding the all-important metaphors about the society? When as happened several times, a trip fails to take flight into a film, there is remorse. After one such sojourn in Ladakh, he wrote :

N.B. I have transcribed the last of these notes in the Hotel Prinsengracht in Amsterdam where I have been invited to a retrospective of my films. I am struck by the similarity of feelings I had in Ladakh, particularly in the latter stages of that journey, and my feelings now of wanting to be on my way almost from the moment I arrived. I think it is a reluctance to engage, as

Fig. 9. Hamar men cutting up a dead ostrich. In the film *Rivers of sand the role of men as hunters is given strong emphasis, and in the ostrich scene the drinking of blood was made almost lyrical.* However, in his journal, Gardner notes that there was little to hunt locally, and generally wrote of Hamar men as idle and lacking in purpose, in contrast to the many-tasked women.



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Camus would say, that prevents me from having deeper layers of experience. New Guinea may have been a time when I was able to put aside urges to disengage, but even then I can remember moments when my craw was so full of spilled blood and the smell of death, I badly wanted to be elsewhere. (p.179)

Some of these feelings may be familiar to anthropologists whether or not they happen to make films. Those who do not like Gardner's films will find new grounds in the journal for believing they were right all along. But they would be wrong to excommunicate him from the company of 'responsible' filmmakers – not that he ever tried to join it.

In 1986 Gardner decided to sponsor a prize to be awarded in RAI film festivals, the Basil Wright Prize. Wright was an outstanding British 'poetic' documentarist who flourished from the 1930s on into the 1950s, and made an unusual film about Sri Lanka called *Song of Ceylon*. Gardner believed that when Wright looked at the world through the camera, he could make an audience see it in a different way, as some of the most powerful painters have done. Gardner described Wright's skill as 'a transforming vision'.

By choosing Wright, rather than his rival John Grierson, the agit-prop social realist, Gardner was making his peace with anthropology as a discipline. He wasn't making peace with his critics, who he thought had largely failed to see what he was trying to do. The Wright Prize is awarded 'for a film in the ethnographic tradition, in the interests of furthering a concern for humanity and in order to acknowledge the evocative faculty of film as a way of communicating that concern to others'. Thus RAI festivals can award a prize for a well-crafted film with high mainstream ethnographic fidelity, in a literalist-empiricist-observational sense, a *Womens' Olamal* kind of film, and an alternative prize, the Wright prize, for films which take different kinds of imaginative and narrative risks. Now that we have lived with the 'experimental' ethnographies of Taussig and the post-Geertzian 'free the literary spirit' auteurs, Gardner's symbolist films should make new friends. He is a filmmaker's filmmaker, who hopes his films will interest anyone who observes fellow humans, and remains a devotee of a 'larger anthropology' to which he hopes to have contributed. Like Wright, he has always had his own 'transforming vision', which is what makes his films truly distinctive. ●