

Robert Gardner in the 1950s and 1960s

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The films, photographs and considerable writings that were Robert Gardner's gifts to the world—to this list I should add the Film Study Center he founded at Harvard in the 1950s and *Screening Room*, the weekly television show he created and hosted in the 1970s to promote the work and ideas of independent film and video artists—were underwritten by his lifelong commitment to looking at himself by looking at other people. He viewed each society he filmed, in all its otherness, as a reflection of his—our—own.

Ever since his breakthrough film *Dead Birds* (1963), Robert Gardner's films have been well-known but controversial among anthropologists. As I wrote in the Introduction to *Looking with Robert Gardner*, “Too often, Gardner has been pigeon-holed as an ethnographic filmmaker, then pilloried for failing to conform to the constricting conventions some take that term to imply”.¹ In the 1950s and 1960s, Gardner's first films bucked the main current of the emerging field of visual anthropology, which privileged, as Kathryn Ramey puts it, ‘a positivist realism with wide framing, long unbroken shots and spare editing, summarized by Karl Heider's dictum to show ‘whole people, whole bodies, whole lives’.’²

Gardner has been harshly criticized, most notably by Jay Ruby³, for allegedly privileging visual aesthetics over upholding the conventions of anthropological research. Ruby argued, as Kathryn Ramey paraphrases him, that “if we accept this of Gardner we must open the door to all film and literature and doing so would completely dilute the meaning of anthropology as a discipline.” Kathryn Ramey goes on,

Here is the real crux of the argument, a contrast between the rigors of a discipline-based methodology and the interpretive strategies of the artist. For Ruby and others these realms cannot be reconciled. Ruby asks [...], ‘If someone’s artistic vision is at odds with a body of ethnographically derived evidence, is it defensible to argue that the accuracy of information conveyed about a culture is less important than the artist’s vision?’”⁴

I am not an anthropologist. My doctorate is in philosophy—Stanley Cavell was my dissertation advisor and mentor—but for forty-five years film study has been my chosen discipline. In the early 1970s, I witnessed with dismay as the fledgling field made the mistake—the same mistake anthropology made much earlier—of staking its legitimacy on its aspiration to the condition of an objective, value-free science no different in principle from physics or chemistry. To Jay Ruby’s question, I have no hesitation in answering “Yes”—if the artist is Robert Gardner, and if the supposed “body of ethnographically derived evidence” is as meager, as ambiguous, and as tangential to the artist’s concerns as that Ruby and others have marshaled in condemning Gardner’s films. In fact, as Charles Warren puts it, Gardner’s films and writings make clear “that he had always seen himself as scrupulously trying to render the world as he found it, to keep faithful to it—and at the same time as making, fashioning, working poetically, from a basis in his own sensibility.”⁵

Gardner studied anthropology at the graduate level at Harvard, but did not complete the PhD. He had no interest in writing a doctoral dissertation that conformed to academic anthropology’s dominant practice, at the time, of rationalizing what was observed and de-personalizing the observer in the name of “neutrality” or “objectivity.” As drawn as he was to

anthropology, he had the soul of an artist. Indeed, as he observed in a 2008 interview in Mexico City, it was through literature that he became interested in anthropology in the first place.

When I was on the Northwest coast of North America I read a book by a very fine anthropologist, now deceased, named Ruth Benedict, who was also a poet. She was not only poetic in her writing but she also wrote poetry. In her book *Patterns of Culture* (1934) there is a chapter about the Kwakiutl, a remnant North West Coast American group of Indians. I became interested in what she was saying about the pattern of their culture and specifically about the life that they used to have, because when I was reading the book of course much of that life had passed into history and was no longer functioning. But there were small groups of Kwakiutl people who were still living in small villages in British Columbia, and I found a group and I went and made two little films. That was really my start in what you are calling Visual Anthropology. I tried to be not only respectful but also factual. I mean, I didn't impose a story. These were the films *Blunden Harbour* (1951) and *Dances of the Kwakiutl* (1951).⁶

Gardner wanted his work to be poetic, like Ruth Benedict's writing, which achieved a happy marriage *between* literature and anthropology, *between* art and science. And, like his older contemporary Jean Rouch, Gardner found in film the ideal medium—at least, ideal for him—for creating works of art that might contribute to anthropology and provoke it to change—as to a degree it has. Because human beings are free to think, to change, to become other than we had been, it is impossible for us to know ourselves objectively. To deny this is to deny something about being human—the most important thing, in Gardner's view. As he understood full well, we cannot know others without knowing ourselves, but neither can we know ourselves without

knowing others. The kind of knowledge Gardner pursued in his work is also self-knowledge—the kind of self-knowledge that art pursues. This does not mean that anthropology cannot be a science. What it means is that for anthropology to be science, it must also be art.

In the Mexico City interview, Carlos Fuentes commented, “Jean Rouch said once that filmmakers regarded him as an anthropologist, while anthropologists regarded him as a filmmaker,” and asked Gardner, “Does this happen to you as well? Or where would you locate your work?” Gardner responded,

I think that is very true of Rouch, an old pal. He was definitely both, although I feel some of his work is more distinctly on the side of anthropology. I think that he felt film was more a tool for anthropology, than anthropology was a tool for film. And so, if I were to make any distinction *between* us, it might be that I regarded anthropology more as a tool for my filmmaking. I always wanted to use what I could of anthropology’s methods and intentions to further my filmmaking, to give me a context to work within.⁷

Gardner, like Rouch, counted Robert Flaherty as one of his “cinematic ancestors.” Gardner and Rouch also shared a profound admiration for Luis Buñuel—but, in Gardner’s case, only for the Buñuel of *Land without Bread* (1933) and *Los Olvidados* (1950), for although Rouch’s deepest roots as an artist were in surrealism, this was not the case for Gardner. Nor were the films and writings of Dziga Vertov formative for Gardner, as they were for Rouch. What was formative for Gardner, but not for Rouch, was the pioneering work of Maya Deren and the filmmakers of the emerging American avant-garde cinema she helped inspire. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Kathryn Ramey writes,

Gardner co-owned a production company, Orbit films, with avant-garde film pioneer Sidney Peterson, who at that time had already made *Potted Psalm* (1946) and *The Cage* (1947) among other films. Peterson was, for Gardner, a direct connection to the emerging American avant-garde of the period and though their partnership didn't last for long, it happened at a foundational moment in Gardner's development as a filmmaker and he has maintained a strong interest in experimental cinema throughout his career. This interest in the cinematic avant-garde was something Gardner explored in his 1970s television series *Screening Room*, with such guests as Stan Brakhage, Hollis Frampton, James Broughton, and Sidney Peterson. In his dialogues with filmmakers and anthropologists it is possible to see his great interest in a variety of filmmaking strategies from documentary, to experimental, to animation and to understand even further how this wide interest might have influenced him to try a variety of techniques in his own work.⁸

Richard Deming observes that "Gardner's world was an art world." Rouch was trained as an engineer, like his father, and expected to follow in his father's footsteps before he turned to anthropology and film. Gardner's background, to say the least, was different. Deming writes, Gardner's father was the favorite nephew of Isabella Stewart Gardner, "one of the preeminent collectors in the history of American art, who left her house and collection as a museum in Boston"—a *great* museum, I would add—where Robert Gardner grew up. Furthermore, beginning in 1949, before turning so resolutely to the practice of making films, Gardner spent time teaching medieval art and history at the College of Puget Sound. As a young man, he worked restoring mosaics at the Chora Church in Istanbul.⁹

Thus, it is not surprising that Gardner's "very mode of perception was that of an artist," as Deming argues. "The world he lived in was determined by its capability to be art, and was thus constituted by his aesthetic responses." Questions about artistic representation, and an overriding faith in the powers of art, were, in Deming's words, "part of his cultural DNA." Deming goes on:

Moreover—and this is important—such artistic perception is predicated on the sense that the phenomenal world makes moral claims upon our attention. "I propose that in film's very nature," Gardner has written, "somewhere embedded in its formal attributes as a mediator of the phenomenal world, there arises a capacity for evoking moral responses in those who come in contact with it." Such a formulation suggests that in his role as filmmaker, he is the shaper of a moral possibility occurring in response to—indeed, as part of—aesthetic experience.¹⁰

To treat human beings as if they can be known objectively is to deny their humanity. It is literally to *objectify* them—an act that is problematic morally, as well as intellectually. Gardner fervently believed—this is a belief he and Rouch passionately shared—that the fusion of art and anthropology was not only possible; it was necessary—necessary intellectually, aesthetically and, most important, *morally*. He expressed this belief by creating sublime and beautiful works that grant us knowledge about ourselves and our fellow human beings by moving us beyond words. Such was Gardner's faith in the capacity of art to make us mindful of something of value about being human. For Gardner, the capacity to create art, which is inseparable from the capacity to be moved by art, is what is *most* to be valued about our humanity. The intersection of art and the human form of life is the abiding subject of all his work.

That Gardner's films are works of art does not mean, however, that they are unconcerned with attaining, and communicating, knowledge of the kind that moves anthropology closer to its

goal—or what he believed *should* be its goal. “If the goal of anthropology is to try to reveal the meanings of our behavior,” Gardner observed in the Mexico City interview, “how can it dispense with the aesthetic dimension? I sometimes feel as though critics on warring sides of these matters make the mistake of thinking science is opposed to or incompatible with art and vice versa. In my view, they coexist with no difficulty. I would submit my own work as examples.”¹¹

Being works of art, Gardner’s films cannot but be concerned with aesthetic matters (and with moral matters as well). But so must they be concerned with aesthetic and moral matters, he believed, if they were to contribute meaningfully to anthropology. To reveal the meanings of the behavior of the people he filmed, Gardner understood that his filmmaking had to be, as he put it, “of a kind that makes the humanity of others accessible,” a kind that “depends as much on empathy as craft.”¹² How to achieve such empathy was an ongoing challenge he embraced from his first film to his last.

Gardner did not shoot his first film, *Blunden Harbour* (1951)—it was shot by William Heick—but he was the film’s director and editor and he wrote the voice-over, although uniquely for a Gardner film, it is not spoken by him. Pointedly forgoing the conventional “voice of God” narration, Gardner has his narrator speak—in a more sonorous and mysterious voice than the young filmmaker himself could have mustered—the village’s foundational myth.

Now, I think of Helestes, my master, my dear one, our Chief at the beginning of the world. Helestes went spouting around our world, and he went ashore, from his traveling canoe, Killer Whale Mask. [...] And now my ancestors head to their chief Helestes. When he had finished his house, a canoe came in sight, and my ancestor called his four visitors ashore. [...] “I am Helestes and I go starting

around the world, but I wish to become a real man in this place, so I've built my house in Blunden Harbour".

This narration is written in the first person. But who is this "I"? Not the whale-man who grew so tired of endlessly wandering the seas that he wanted to become a real man and settled in this place. Nor is the narrator the young filmmaker, just beginning his life of wandering—not a "whale-man," to be sure, but a "Camera-Man," another way of being outside the human circle. (I think of Jean Rouch referring himself, or what he becomes, when he is filming and in the grip of a "cine-trance" as "Rouch-the-Camera," a being straddling the visible and the invisible.). Rhetorically, the narration is spoken by a man, for whom Blunden Harbour is home, who calls the whale-man his "ancestor" (as well as his "Master," his "Dear One," his "Chief at the beginning of the world"). The website of Documentary Educational Resources, the film's distributor, quotes Gardner's description of *Blunden Harbour*, written more than sixty years after he made the film:

Blunden Harbour was a small village on the coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia inhabited by a handful of impoverished Kwakiutl Indians who gained their meagre livelihood from fishing and gathering.

To the narrator, though, Blunden Harbour is anything but "impoverished," the lives of the villagers anything but "meager." "This sliver of humanity has done well by the judgment of a whale," the narrator says, endorsing this judgment—as does the entire film.

On the DER website, Gardner called this wonderful little film, too modestly, "a beginner's attempt to impart the rhythm and atmosphere of a place and a people." Crucially, I would add, the filmmaker's way of trying to impart this was by imparting—as if from the inside—how these people looked at their world. This is a strategy Gardner would employ in all

his ostensibly ethnographic films. *Blenden Harbour* stands apart from those films, however, by characterizing the form of life it portrays as ideal or exemplary. As if concerned to distinguish this from Flaherty's films like *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1934), the narrator intones, "No struggle for survival. No encroaching jungle. No men against the sea." In saying this, the narrator seems no longer to be speaking as a man—a descendant of the whale-man who founded the village—who calls Blunden Harbour home. He is speaking for the film, speaking for Robert Gardner, when he goes on to say, "These ones"—these ones!—"have an ancient formula for success."

Ancient and simple. From the water, food. From the woods, a way of life. Every day a little different from the next. Gathering, cooking, eating, sleeping. There is time and place for everyone. The old, the young, the dead, the quick. There is as much to look back upon as there is ahead.

When the narrator adds, "A way of dreams" and, finally, "a way to remember," this last, as Kathryn Ramey observes, "introduces the most dramatic sequence of the film, in which the villagers dance in elaborate costumes and play music and sing"¹³—an artistic spectacle that will be the focus of his third film, *Dances of the Kwakiutl*, made later the same year.

The implication of the narrator's words is that, for the Kwakiutl of this village, their art—their stories, their songs, the masks they carve and paint, their spectacular dances—serves as "a way of dreams" and "a way to remember"—a way to remember who they are, how they look at the world, how they live, and what it *means* that they live the way they do. Again: in Gardner's view, the goal of anthropology—to reveal the meaning of our behavior—has the same goal as art—the art of the people he films or his own art, it makes no difference.

Repeatedly, in interviews and in writings over the years, Gardner identified the driving force of all his work as “the impulse to preserve” (taking the phrase, Charles Warren points out, from Philip Larkin: “The impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art”¹⁴). Warren writes, “Thanks to art, thanks to film with its distinctive resources, something is not simply lost to the past.”¹⁵ Gardner’s goal, in creating *Blunden Harbour*, was to find a way, in the medium of film, to “remember,” to “preserve,” to keep from being altogether lost, how the people of Blunden Harbour lived their lives. To this end, the film presents itself, rhetorically, as an expression of *their* way of looking at the world. Gardner shaped the film—as he would shape every one of his films—so that it climaxes, emotionally and cinematically, with a passage that highlights the art of the people in the film and the role their art plays in their lives. The art of the Kwakiutl, which expresses their way of looking at the world, serves them as a “way of dreams” and a “way to remember”—a way to remember their dreams, remember who they are and what gives meaning to their lives.

At the end of the climactic dance sequence, Kathryn Ramey writes, “we return to the man painting masks, then cut to a child swinging, women gossiping, a man in a boat in the harbor, and then the scooping of water out of a rain barrel—and the movie ends.” This final montage, she points out, “is almost identical to a sequence that precedes the mask painting/performance segment, and creates what I have come to think of as a ‘stanza,’ with opening and concluding ‘lines’ that have the same meter and in a sense rhyme with each other, creating a kind of poetic logic.” Kathryn Ramey concludes that the effect of the editing, the sound collages and the poetic voice-over is to turn the film into “a kind of song that is to be experienced rather than an informational film that is telling you something specific.”¹⁶

I would add—and this is crucial—that Gardner strove to make the “song” that is the film, as we experience it, resonate with the way the people in the film experience *their* art. The old man painstakingly carving the mask the dancer will wear, and painting its wide-open eyes, is, for Gardner, an exemplary artist; as such, he is a figure for Gardner himself, the artist who painstakingly crafted this film. And the masked dance, too, is a figure for the filmmaker. In filming and editing this sequence, Gardner employs two complementary strategies to engender a sense that the art of the people in the film merges, or fuses, with his own art. First, in filming the dance the camera moves rhythmically and gracefully, as if in a *pas de deux* with the dancer. Second, the sequence includes close shots of the dancer’s mask that the camera frames so as to accord special prominence to its eyes, creating a sense that the mask—the mythical being it represents, not the dancer wearing it—possesses a gaze; just as the camera does. Each time Gardner cuts away from the mask, the shot that follows “feels” like a shot from the mask’s point of view, as if it is not only seeing what we see; it is the *source* of our view, as if the mask and the camera have fused, become one.

Gardner’s second film, *Mark Tobey* (1951) is an “experimental portrait” (to borrow from the description he wrote for the DER website) of the well-known painter. Gardner endeavors to engender a sense that the painter’s art, expressive of Tobey’s way of looking at the world, resonates with the filmmaker’s own art. As Gardner puts it, *Mark Tobey* “tries to show in cinematic language how this man looked at the world.” As this suggests, Gardner’s commitment to showing how the people he filmed looked at the world went hand in hand with a commitment to “cinematic language”—the formal tools and techniques needed to tap into film’s singular expressive powers. In his early films, he undertook to master “cinematic language” the only way

it *can* be mastered: by finding something one had it at heart to say that one can only say, or can say best, in this language, and by saying it. *Mark Tobey* could not reveal how *Tobey* looked at the world unless it expressed, in cinematic language, how *Gardner* looked at the world. And vice versa.

Throughout *Mark Tobey*, Kathryn Ramey writes, “Gardner and Tobey exchange speaking parts. Their words poetically philosophize about art, the role of the artist in society, the artist’s vision and other topics.” The film seems, as she puts it, “a manifesto about the unique vision of the artist.”¹⁷ The vision of *which* artist? The painter *and* the filmmaker. After an opening gallery sequence, the camera follows Tobey through the city of Seattle, the Pike Place market, and back home to his studio. By intercutting these passages with close-ups of Tobey’s paintings, Gardner enables us to experience for ourselves how shapes and patterns and motifs that appear in Tobey’s paintings resonate intimately with sights that anyone in Seattle is free to see; to see them, all it takes is to look at the world the way Tobey does. And to see how Tobey’s art expresses how he looks at the world, all it takes is to look at the world the way Gardner does. By intercutting close-ups of Tobey’s eyes with close-ups of the eyes of Kwakiutl masks, Gardner highlights at once what Tobey’s art has in common with his and what separates them. Who is looking at whom? And the film ends, and climaxes, with Tobey viewed *through* the eye of a Kwakiutl mask as Gardner says, offscreen, “A picture, a poem, a symphony”—or, of course, a film—“is made to be entered by all who chance upon it. It is an opening through which it is possible to reach an experience which is art.”

What Stanley Cavell said about *Forest of Bliss* (1986), when he introduced its premiere screening at Harvard’s Carpenter Center, can be said about *Mark Tobey* and, indeed, about every Gardner film, that it is “answerable for, and to, the medium of film itself.” A Gardner film acts

“to burst its form, as if its maker is challenging its origins, taking his work into its own exploration of the conditions of art and of life that make it possible”.¹⁸ I expanded on Cavell’s point in the Introduction to *Looking with Robert Gardner*. Every Gardner film, in its own way, “aspires to discover its roots in reality—its roots in the reality of its subjects’ lives, and its roots in the reality, the ontological conditions, of the medium of film—but also to break free from those roots, at once discovering and challenging the conditions of art (the art of the people he filmed, and the filmmaker’s own art) and of life (the lives he filmed, and his own life)”.¹⁹

Every Gardner film strives to vindicate, or validate, his faith in art, in the art of film, in his own art. Gardner’s respect for the particularity of the people he films, for their otherness, hence his commonality with them, as they perform the rituals around which their lives revolve, also manifests his respect for the particularity of the shots and tracks of sound by which each film expresses Gardner’s way of looking at the world—for their mysterious ability to communicate what *they* wish known, we might say. Then again, as Cavell argued in *The World Viewed*²⁰, it is a defining feature of film’s ontological condition that the world recreated in its own image on film *is* the world, the one existing world, albeit transformed or transfigured by being “captured” by a camera and projected onto a screen. In a Gardner film, the projected world is at once the film’s *material* and its *subject*.

In the countless hours I spent with Gardner’s work during the long gestation period of *Looking with Robert Gardner*, the most astonishing discovery I made is that every one of Gardner’s films, and not just *Blunden Harbour* and *Mark Tobey*, can be seen to take a form that enables our way of *experiencing* the film to resonate with the way the people he films experience their art. And every Gardner film can be seen to climax, as his earliest films do, with a passage in which the art of the film’s subjects merges, or fuses, with the filmmaker’s art.

In *Deep Hearts* (1980), for example, Gardner's art fuses with the performance art, as we might think of it, of the men who are participating in the "beauty contest" with which the film climaxes. In *Ika Hands* (1988), it is the chanting of the man named Mama Marco as he walks into the clouds, the culmination of his meditation, the fusing of song and nothingness, at once captured and effected, cinematically, by the camera, leaving us nowhere, with no way back, no way to return. *Forest of Bliss* climaxes not with the sequence in which we finally watch a dead body being cremated, but with the subsequent performance of the healer, whose ecstatic chanting at once seems to possess, and be possessed by, Gardner's rapturous camera. In *Dead Birds* (1963), as in *Blunden Harbour*, Gardner's art fuses with a dance, as will also be the case in *Rivers of Sand* (1972).

After Gardner's experiments of the 1950s came his first feature-length film, *Dead Birds* (1963), shot among the Dani of Papua New Guinea. By this time, Gardner, more committed to filmmaking than to academic anthropology, had moved his base of operations at Harvard from the Peabody Museum to the Film Study Center he helped endow, which was housed in the new Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts.

In the celebrated opening shot of *Dead Birds*, the camera follows the soaring flight of a bird. On the sound-track, the screeching of a bird is followed by the beginning of the film's nearly ubiquitous voice-over narration, spoken as well as written by Gardner:

There is a fable told by a mountain people living in the ancient highlands of New Guinea about a race *between* a snake and a bird. It tells of a contest to decide whether men would be like birds and die, or be like snakes, which shed their skins and have eternal life. The bird won, and from that time all men, like birds, must die.

In *Dead Birds*, unlike *Blunden Harbour*, Gardner himself speaks the film's narration, but words it entirely in the third person. He invokes the telling of this fable by "mountain people," rather than telling it himself, the way *Blunden Harbour*'s narrator tells the story of the whale-man who becomes a real man. Nor does Gardner, in his narration for *Dead Birds*, imply that he has a special connection with the people who tell this "fable"—no connection, that is, other than that he, being a man, must die. But that is all the connection needed for this narrator to find words of his own that express, as if from the inside, how the people in the film look at the world.

In *Dead Birds*, Gardner's narration passes continually back and forth between what is typical for the Dani people and what is particular to the film's two main characters, eight-year-old Pua and Weyak. When Gardner, referring to Pua, speaks of "the work and love" it takes "to make a boy," he is speaking as a man, not as a scientist. And he means his words to apply not only to *this* boy, but to boys in general—including Gardner, who was already father of two boys, and was once a boy himself. But not every Dani boy spends so much time alone with the pigs he tends that Gardner can characterize him as having nothing on his mind except "waiting for manhood."

And when Gardner tells us that Weyak always pauses on the way to his watchtower, his heart gladdened by the natural beauty of this valley, there is no implication that all or most Dani men possess Weyak's soulful appreciation of beauty—a trait that binds him to the filmmaker, whose appreciation of the beauty of nature is expressed in the film's every shot. Nor do Gardner's words suggest that the burden of sorrow would weigh as heavily on all Dani men as it does on Weyak, so Gardner tells us, when a boy falls victim to the enemy close to his watchtower. (What Gardner doesn't tell us is that—this is another bond *between* himself and Weyak—Gardner, too, bore a heavy burden of sorrow, in his case for the death of young Michael

Rockefeller, who took sound for the film.) In *Dead Birds*, Gardner repeatedly tells us what the people he filmed are thinking. In later films, he refrains from telling us the thoughts of his camera's subjects.

Kathryn Ramey suggests that in including such a narration Gardner was conforming to expectations for ethnographic films of the time. She faults the voice-over for dominating the film “and working against the poetry and sensuality of the images because it moves the viewer toward a specific meaning.”²¹ But I'm inclined to agree with Charles Warren's more appreciative, and deeper, view of the film's voice-over. He finds that it neither dominates *Dead Birds* nor works against the film's visual poetry. Everything we see feels endlessly “ponderable,” to use Warren's apt word: dense, ambiguous, asking to be read—to an extent we cannot keep up with as we watch. “This is the essence,” Warren astutely suggests, “of Gardner's often remarked-on ‘artistic’ or ‘poetic’ quality.”²² But our experience of the film is dominated not by the voice-over but, rather, by the tension between what Gardner's words say and what they consign to silence—what the film's images and sounds say in cinematic language. As Warren nicely puts it, “The commentary seems a great effort to approach a reality it knows is bigger than itself.” This tension conveys a sense that “a fiction—let us say a true fiction, summarizing what is not put into direct evidence, or speculating in good faith—comes up against a broader reality”—a reality “larger than the film, messier and more complex than the film's shapings, a reality impossible to encompass fully—the reality of these people's lives, and the reality of what they have in common with all of us—the reality of their typicality and ours where the two merge in what might be called the mythical.”²³

Late in *Dead Birds*, we see Weyak with his back to the camera, looking into the depths of the frame toward the distant mountain—a viewer, like us. “Today, Weyak is especially alert,”

Gardner says, “because it is already two weeks since he and all the others of his group celebrated their killing of an enemy warrior.” The following shot, representing Weyak’s point of view, moves Gardner to describe it poetically in his voice-over as a view of “the emptying fields and the twilight which fills with the shapes and sounds of swallows. The sight never fails to please him even when his thoughts concern the enemy and what they must be planning.” Gardner’s wording, here links Weyak’s appreciation of the beauty of nature, epitomized for him—and for Gardner—by “the shapes and sounds of swallows” in the twilight, to Weyak’s status in the film as one who tells the myth that explains why men, like birds, must die.

As *Dead Birds* approaches its ending, we see Weyak at the river, removed from the dancers celebrating the killing of an enemy, although we can hear their chanting in the distance. As dusk deepens into night, there is a cut to the pulsating dancers, silhouetted against the Prussian blue sky, the mood unbroken by narration in what is by far the longest passage in the film in which Gardner remains silent. Gardner’s silence grants these images and sounds full freedom to speak for themselves, to cast their own mood by capturing the mood cast by the dancers, Gardner’s own art fusing with theirs. The entire film climaxes with a breathtakingly beautiful shot of dancers with spears and feathers silhouetted against the sky, all but abstract figures as they pass through the frame. At the same time, Gardner breaks his long silence with the words, “Soon, both men and birds will surrender to the night”—they will surrender to *this* night, to awaken in the morning; they will surrender to death, never to awaken. “...They’ll rest for the life and death of days to come. For each, both await, but with the difference that men”—on the word “men,” Gardner cuts to an extreme closeup of Weyak, bearer of the knowledge that all men must die, looking up to the sky on the words “... having foreknowledge of their doom...” On this last word, there is a cut to the twilight sky filled with so many birds, so high in the sky

they are so many dots, so many stars in the firmament, but also so many grains of a film stock pushed to its limits by the gathering darkness.

Over this extraordinary shot, a vision at once of the infinite and the infinitesimal, expressing at once how Weyak's and Gardner's look at the world, the filmmaker speaks the words "... bring a special passion to their life. They will not simply wait for death, nor will they bear it lightly when it comes." Instead of cutting back to a closeup of Weyak, Gardner ends the film with shots of the flowing river. On the far side we can make out, in the twilight, Weyak, a tiny figure silhouetted against the sky, barely visible as he walks away at the top of the ridge on the far shore. The rhythmic yelping of dancers mingles with the squawking of birds as Gardner concludes his voice-over.

Instead, they will try with measured violence to fashion fate themselves. They kill to save their souls and, perhaps, to ease the burden of knowing what birds will never know and what they, as men, who have forever killed each other cannot forget.

In *Dead Birds*, this river, like the Ganges in *Forest of Bliss*, is a place of renewal and a place of death. The film presents its penultimate shot, of the twilight sky filled with the sights and sounds of sparrows, as from the point of view of Weyak, whose attunement to nature's beauty is inseparable, within the film, from his solitude and from his status as one who tells why men must die. We take Weyak, looking up at the sky, to be contemplating the dark mysteries of life and death, of permanence and transience. This ending confirms that this man is the film's exemplar of humanity, accepting but haunted by the knowledge that he must die—as all men must.

Twenty-eight years after shooting *Dead Birds*, Gardner returned to the Dani villages where he had filmed to see what had become of the people he had met and to show them *Dead Birds*. The DER website has this quote from Gardner:

I have been told by people who know better that it is a risky business returning to a place where you have enjoyed some remarkable experience. But I will say that going back to the Highlands of Western New Guinea (aka West Papua) was enormously engaging. I saw people I cared for deeply and who became part of my life wherever I lived. Making a film about all this was not at all difficult.

And yet, for reasons I explore in “*Dead Birds Re-Encountered: A Journey of Return*,” the essay I wrote for *Looking with Robert Gardner*, it took Gardner another twenty-five years before he felt ready to complete that film.

In *Dead Birds Re-Encountered* (2013), the shot of the twilight sky filled with the sights and sounds of sparrows *ends* the film and takes on an altered meaning. We read it as Gardner’s own vision, not as Weyak’s. “The shot itself, with the volume of the bird sounds ratcheted way up, has, as I put it, such visceral force that we feel assaulted. Our sense is that Gardner, at this moment, feels ambushed, that he sees in this vision an uncanny anticipation of his own death.” At the age of eighty-seven, as he was when he completed the film, the anticipation of death with which Gardner ends *Dead Birds Re-Encountered* was a far more imminent prospect than it was at the time he made *Dead Bird*, when he was sprightly of step. One year after completing the film, he died.

When in *Dead Birds Re-Encountered* Gardner films the Dani men viewing *Dead Birds* on a small television screen, our attention is divided between watching what they are watching, and watching them watching. The sequence is so edited that we can always distinguish the film-

within-the-film from the film that contains it. Some of these shots from *Dead Birds* were taken from the monitor the men were watching. Others were taken from the DVD of the film, but given a black border to underscore that they are shots from the film they were watching. But the final shot of *Dead Birds Re-Encountered* forgoes the black border. The entirety of the film lead to this shot, the film's emotional and cinematic climax, in which the world of *Dead Birds*, Gardner's first major film, and the world of *Dead Birds Re- Encountered*, his last, merge or fuse, closing a circle. We might say that Gardner's art comes full circle. We might also say that *Dead Birds Re- Encountered* transcends *Dead Birds*, that it draws a circle around the circle the earlier film had drawn, to invoke Emerson's metaphor. To invoke the film's own metaphor, we might say that the artist sheds the skin that is *Dead Birds* to enable *Dead Birds Re-Encountered* to be born.

Robert Gardner is dead. His art lives on.

¹ Rebecca Myers, Charles Warren and William Rothman (eds.), *Looking with Robert Gardner*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2016, p. IX.

² Kathryn Ramey, "Ethno-Cine-Poet: Robert Gardner and Experimental Film," in *Looking with Robert Gardner, op. cit.*, p. 98. See Karl G. Heider, "Whole Bodies, Whole Interactions, and Whole People in Whole Acts", *Ethnographic Film*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2006 [first edition: 1976], p. 114.

³ Jay Ruby, "An Anthropological Critique of the Films of Robert Gardner", *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 43, n° 4 (Winter 1991), pp. 3-17.

⁴ Kathryn Ramey, “Ethno-Cine-Poet: Robert Gardner and Experimental Film,” *op. cit.*, p. 95. See Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 109.

⁵ Charles Warren, “Robert Gardner’s Reality,” in *Looking with Robert Gardner*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁶ Carlos Y. Flores and Antonio Ziri6n, “On Shamanism and Other Encounters: A Conversation with Robert Gardner in Mexico,” in *Looking with Robert Gardner*, p. 126.

⁷ *Idem*, p. 127

⁸ Kathryn Ramey, “Ethno-Cine-Poet,” *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁹ Richard Deming, “Hand Eye Coordination: Robert Gardner’s Artist Films,” in *Looking with Robert Gardner*, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* See Robert Gardner, “The Moral Nature of Film” [1980], in Charles Warren (ed.), *Just Representations / Robert Gardner*, Cambridge, Mass., Studio7Arts/Peabody Museum Press, 2010, p. 243.

¹¹ Carlos Y. Flores and Antonio Ziri6n, “On Shamanism and Other Encounters,” *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹² *Idem*, p. 134

¹³ Kathryn Ramey, “Ethno-Cine-Poet,” *op. cit.*, p. 97.

¹⁴ See Philip Larkin, *Required Writing. Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1983, p. 79.

¹⁵ Robert Gardner, “The Impulse to Preserve,” in Charles Warren (ed.), *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, Hanover, NH, Wesleyan University Press, 1996, pp. 169-80.

¹⁶ Kathryn Ramey, “Ethno-Cine-Poet,” *op. cit.*, p. 98.

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 99.

¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, “Words of Welcome,” in Charles Warren (ed.), *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, *op. cit.*, p. XXVII.

¹⁹ Rebecca Myers, Charles Warren and William Rothman (eds.), *Looking with Robert Gardner*, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.

²⁰ See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971.

²¹ Kathryn Ramey, “Ethno-Cine-Poet,” *op. cit.*, p. 101.

²² Charles Warren, “Robert Gardner’s Reality,” *op. cit.*, p. 77

²³ *Idem*, p. 78.