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## VISUAL MEDIA REVIEWS

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*Taking Pictures*. 1996. Video, 56 min., color. Written, produced, and directed by Les McLaren and Annie Stivan. Distributed by First Run/Icarus Films (32 Court St., Brooklyn, NY 11201; fax: 718-488-8642; <info@frif.com>; <http://www.frif.com>).

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*TAKING PICTURES* BEGINS with the visually haunting and compelling footage of fearful and awestruck highland New Guineans seeing white men—Australian gold miners—for the first time in the early 1930s. This black-and-white footage, with its grainy and dreamlike quality, is immediately juxtaposed with sharp color footage of present-day Papua New Guineans at an outdoor market in Port Moresby. The connecting link is that both sets of images of New Guineans were taken by Australians. In the sixty or so years that have transpired between the two incidents, Papua New Guinea (PNG) has become independent from Australia, filmmakers have become more self-conscious and reflexive about their practice, and Papua New Guineans have become savvy about cameras and television. “*Rambo*,” the children at the market call out in response to the interviewer’s question of what is their favorite film, while a young woman with them, shy at being filmed, laughs and turns away from the camera.

This seemingly benign interaction is suddenly interrupted by the voice of an irate man addressing the filmmaker, Les McLaren, in Tok Pisin and demanding to see McLaren’s “license” to film. We hear McLaren respond that he has a permit but that he is not carrying it with him. “No,” the man replies, “show me your permit to film us. You take these pictures home with you and

you portray us as ignorant, as if we were worthless. . . . Turn the camera off or I'll smash it"—and suddenly the screen goes blank.

The next thing we see is the film's title, *Taking Pictures*, and we quickly realize the double entendre implied.

The film that follows is a reflection upon both meanings of the title. It presents us with a brief overview and visual history of the corpus of films made by a small group of Australian filmmakers who have worked in Papua New Guinea since the early 1970s making documentary films about the indigenous cultures and the processes of cultural change they have undergone. It is also a film about filmmaking, about, as the liner notes to the video state, "the issues and pitfalls of filming across a cultural boundary." Through interviews with the filmmakers and the voice-over commentary of McLaren himself, the film also comments on the issue of documentary filmmaking as a practice that entails the taking of one group's image for the edification and enjoyment of another.

Both the film history and the references to issues concerning representation are punctuated and made more complex by the inclusion of the voices and work of indigenous Papua New Guinean filmmakers who, like their Australian counterparts, feel strongly about the value of film, especially documentary film, as a means of preserving the past—as well as a present that is rapidly changing.

In addition to Les McLaren, the seven other Australian filmmakers interviewed in the film include Gary Kildea (*Trobriand Cricket, Ileksen*), Dennis O'Rourke (*Ileksen, Yumi Yet, Shark Callers of Kontu, Cannibal Tours*), Chris Owen (*The Red Bowmen, Gogodala, Malangan Labadama, Man Without Pigs, Amb Kor*), Steve McMillan (*Kama Wosi, Pikizjaa*), Ian Dunlop (*Toward Baruya Manhood, Baruya Muka*), and the husband and wife team Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson (*First Contact, Joe Leahy's Neighbors, Black Harvest*).

The Papua New Guinea filmmakers interviewed are Martin Maden (*Stolat, Tin Pis Run*) and Kumain Kolain (*Sinnia*), while Chris Owen discusses the film he made in collaboration with PNG historian John Waiko (*Man Without Pigs*).

The film begins with McLaren's reflections on the period of the early 1970s when he, along with Kildea, O'Rourke, McMillan and Owen, first went up to New Guinea. It was, he says, "a period of social and cultural experimentation and a time of optimism." New Guinea was on the verge of independence, which came in 1975, and McLaren and his fellow Australian filmmakers were "naïve and idealistic . . . questions about representation didn't exist."

As Gary Kildea goes on to say, he and his cohorts saw themselves as "agents

of antiracism” fueled by “‘60s ideology and the idea of the equivalence of all cultures.” Filmmaking and learning to make documentaries were “tied up with learning about other people and [learning] new ways of looking at other people.” Voicing a similar sentiment, O’Rourke says that their films helped to reveal that the poetry and thoughts of Papua New Guineans were as complex and sophisticated as those of Westerners.

O’Rourke also points out that in the early 1970s film was still a very new phenomenon for most New Guinea villagers. It was exciting for them when he and Kildea would come to screen movies at night by setting up a makeshift movie theater on the beach or a village ceremonial ground. More specifically, documentary film was a way to help shape people’s understanding of the notion of a national identity. In films like *Yumi Yet* and *Ileksen* “hundreds of people,” O’Rourke says, “were seeing themselves on film for the first time.” The films they made were also meant to help people see themselves in the context of being members of a larger social entity—of being Papua New Guineans as well as villagers or residents of a particular province or region.

In addition to the theme of political education that characterizes their early films, a second theme that runs through these filmmakers’ work is that of cultural heritage. Films such as *Malangan Labadama*, *The Red Bowmen*, *Amb Kor*, *Kama Wosi*, the Baruya films, and *Shark Callers of Kontu* were a means of preserving a record of these cultures and aspects of their unique cultural practices for future generations. There was a sense, as Chris Owen points out while discussing *The Red Bowmen*, that the events being filmed were on the verge of being lost forever in the face of dislocation and other factors contributing to cultural change.

With *Shark Callers of Kontu*, however, filmmaker Dennis O’Rourke describes a new twist in his experience of trying to make a traditional ethnographic film. On the one hand, he was unsuccessful in filming the central activity—men catching sharks by means of calling them with the aid of magic and then capturing them bare-handed—until he was willing to jettison his modern technology (a rubber motor-powered dingy) and risk ruining his expensive movie camera by paddling out to sea in a dugout canoe. On the other hand, his film became more than simply a record of the traditional practice of Kontu fishermen catching sharks. Instead, the film focused on the conflict he saw dramatized before him between the traditional Kontu way of life, symbolized by the practice of the shark callers, and the new desires and experiences inspired by Christianity, alcohol, and money.

Thus, *Shark Callers of Kontu* is also representative of a third theme depicted by these Australian filmmakers, that of the impact of colonialism and cultural change on indigenous PNG cultures. In different ways this theme is

central to *Trobriand Cricket*, *First Contact*, *Joe Leahy's Neighbors*, *Black Harvest*, *Cowboy and Maria in Town*, and *Cannibal Tours*. Kildea, in reflecting upon *Trobriand Cricket* and its long-lasting success among Western audiences, suggests that perhaps the film "assuages our guilt about colonialism in the past" with its message of cultural resilience and resistance to colonial domination. Speaking also about the Western reception of the film *Black Harvest*, Bob Connolly speaks scornfully of the ethnocentrism of Hollywood, represented by the members of the Academy of Motion Pictures, who, when confronted with the chilling footage of the resurgence of tribal fighting in *Black Harvest*, had the gall to question its authenticity. What hubris, Connolly suggests, to believe that it would have been possible to stage the fighting and the resulting deaths.

The notion of cultural resistance and resilience central to *Trobriand Cricket* is a fourth theme, also explored by several other films such as *Gogodala*, Owen's film about the revival of traditional arts among the Gogodala people, and *A Man Without Pigs*, made in collaboration with historian John Waiko. The occasion of making this film in Waiko's home village prompted the staging of a traditional dance that had not been performed for several generations. The process of preparing for the dance and the event itself was used by Waiko as an opportunity to engage villagers in a discussion of their past and a dialogue about the future, especially about environmental concerns regarding logging in the area.

Finally, with O'Rourke's well-known *Cannibal Tours*, a degree of reflexivity about the filmmaking process enters directly into the subject matter of the film. In focusing on "adventure tourism" in the Sepik area, O'Rourke talks with villagers in an attempt to present their perspectives on tourism and on being the subject of the touristic gaze (Lutkehaus 1989; Silverman n.d.). He also states that the film questions not only the voyeurism of the tourist and the film viewer, but also of himself as the man behind the camera filming both the tourists and the villagers (MacCannell 1990).

The wonderful footage of Martin Maden and his colleagues Pingau Nau and Bike Johnston filming their documentary *Stolat* while studying filmmaking in France is a hilarious and touching commentary on the aspiring filmmakers' realization of what an intrusion into the lives of others filmmaking can be, as well as an appreciation of the trust and goodwill inherent in those who agree to be filmed. Indeed, this footage and the interview with Baruya filmmaker Kumain Kolain about the fear he and his Baruya elders felt upon first seeing Ian Dunlop's footage of their initiation ceremonies provide *Taking Pictures* with much-needed insight into the reactions of some of the subjects of the Australians' films to being filmed, and on the personal dynamics of the filmmaking process itself.

The film ends with O'Rourke's discussion of *Cannibal Tours*. McLaren then returns with his voice-over narration to tell us that he sympathizes with the irate man at the market we heard at the beginning of the film because, he says, there are problems and dilemmas involved with making films about others. But, he continues, "there is still reason to be optimistic about the power of film to capture moments and stories about the complex encounter between other cultures."

What we have just seen in the preceding clips and interviews, the film seems to imply, is the argument for continuing to "take pictures," despite the sticky issues of representation—of the power relations inherent in who is holding the camera versus who is on the other side having their picture taken, of how to insure that images of others do not do them injustice, that images that are supposed to be restricted do not reach audiences they should not, and so forth.

As an anthropologist who uses many of the films McLaren discusses in *Taking Pictures* in the courses I teach, as well as someone who is involved in training visual anthropologists who aspire to become documentary filmmakers, it would be difficult for me to say that I do not agree with McLaren's final comment. Moreover, I think that these particular films represent some of the most interesting films we have to date about one country at a very important moment in its history of transformation from colony to independent state.

One strength of *Taking Pictures* is that it led me to reflect upon the particular bit of film history McLaren has identified by focusing on the work of this group of Australian filmmakers. While other films were made about Papua New Guinea during the same period, these Australian films are by far the most outstanding, both in terms of content and style. There was a fortunate conjuncture between the coming of age of this group of young filmmakers, several of whom, such as Kildea, O'Rourke and McMillan, went on to make documentaries in other parts of the world, and the coming of age of Papua New Guinea as a new nation. Both the world of documentary film viewers and the people of Papua New Guinea are fortunate to have this fine corpus of films.

It is also invaluable to hear indigenous PNG filmmakers talk about their experiences making films and about what they consider to be the importance of filmmaking, as well as fascinating to see clips from some of their work, which is otherwise difficult to come by. The fact that they are present in the film also serves implicitly to suggest that the "taking of pictures" has not been unidirectional and that the value of film as a cultural record is also recognized by Papua New Guineans as well as by outsiders.

Because this is primarily a film about making films, with tantalizing clips

of the films being presented (sometimes without identifying titles), prior knowledge of the films being discussed by the filmmakers is advantageous. Thus, the ideal audience for the film includes students and scholars of visual anthropology or documentary film interested in the history of ethnographic film, Melanesian and Pacific scholars already familiar with the films, or individuals interested in a brief introductory overview of the films and some insight into the filmmakers who made them.

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