

CRITIC'S PICK

'Expedition Content' Review: Anthropological Maneuvers in the Dark

An engrossing documentary looks back at a 1961 expedition to New Guinea and the creation of the landmark ethnographic film that resulted.

By Manohla Dargis

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Expedition Content | NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by Ernst Karel, Veronika Kusumaryati | Documentary | 1h 18m

"But what to do with your eyes?" — this ridiculous question popped into my head early while watching "Expedition Content," though *watching* doesn't entirely describe what I was doing. I was listening, a lot. That's because for most of its 78 minutes, this startling and fascinating experimental documentary shows you only a black screen. Every so often, a shock of slate-y, steely blue fills the frame, followed by text. Late in the work, there is a cut to a brief scene that was shot from inside a cave. There, silhouetted figures carrying torches move about, faintly illuminated by light from the mouth of the cave.

The genesis of this project is 37 hours of audio, recorded in what was then called Netherlands New Guinea (the western half of New Guinea). The tapes were made by Michael C. Rockefeller for "Dead Birds" (1964), a milestone in ethnographic cinema directed by Robert Gardner, which focuses on the Dani (also known as the Hubula), tribal people living in the Baliem Valley. The Dani were apparently unknown to westerners until 1938, when an American researcher and adventurer spotted them from a plane. Two decades later, Gardner heard about "an obscure New Guinea tribe" that engaged in elaborate ritual warfare.

By that point, Gardner, a filmmaker and anthropologist (he died in 2014), had established the Film Study Center at Harvard College. He had made several shorts of his own and worked on John Marshall's "The Hunters," a documentary feature about hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari Desert. Fortified with that experience, Gardner set about finding a new film to make. Part of what drew him to the New Guinea tribe, he later wrote, was the thought that he could "carefully document a small part of the still accessible and fully functioning Indigenous life." The internet did not yet exist; the world was much larger, its people far less known.

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Gardner was aware of the region's geopolitical turmoil and the fight for control over the western half of the island of New Guinea. Indonesia had declared its independence from the Netherlands in 1945, and in the years since had been trying to wrest western New Guinea from the Dutch. (Papua New Guinea comprises the island's east half.) The dispute involved assorted international Cold War parties, including the United States, which in 1958 provided covert military aid to Indonesian anti-Communist rebels. By the time that Gardner's team arrived in New Guinea, in 1961, Indonesia's President Sukarno had threatened military and economic intervention in west New Guinea, including the expropriation of Dutch capital.

"Expedition Content" engages with that history but provides comparatively little concrete information. Instead, its creators, Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati — the credits note that it was "composed by" them — let the audio speak for itself, as it were, an optimistic approach that assumes viewers have both a firm grasp on Indonesian history (not so much, in my case) and an appreciation of cinematic experimentation (way more). Those assumptions are immediately tested when, soon after the title flashes onscreen, the movie cuts to all black and the sounds of unidentified men speaking in English.

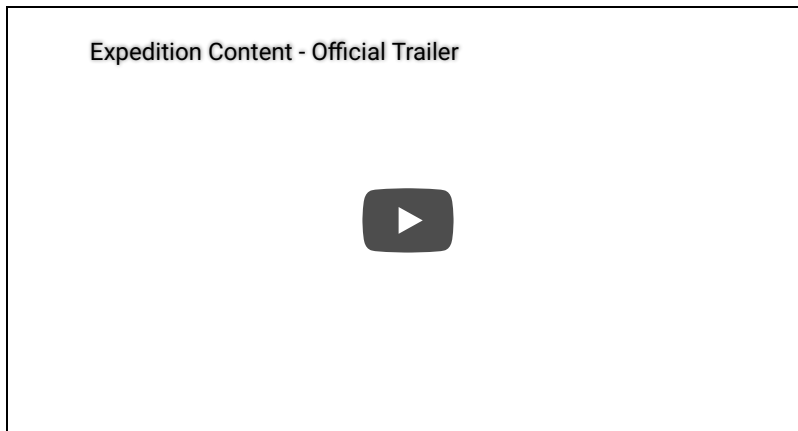
"Everything is blue, there's no filter," says one man. He adds that the "key note" of the film's photography is to achieve naturalism, asking if "Bob" agrees. "Not exactly," says a man I assumed was Gardner, who answers in the same deep voice that narrates "Dead Birds."

Six minutes later, Karel and Kusumaryati sketch in some background with text, including the year, the names and professions of the expedition's participants and the works that resulted from this venture. The composers also list some facts about the Rockefeller family, starting with a 1935 agreement between Standard Oil — which was founded by Michael's great-grandfather,

John D. Rockefeller — and Royal Dutch Shell to explore oil in New Guinea. Among the other details listed is Michael's disappearance and presumed death in New Guinea in late 1961. This brief family bio ends with a reference to Michael's father, Nelson A. Rockefeller, "who ordered the police assault on the Attica prison uprising."

The Attica detail feels like a provocation, partly because it leaves you wondering what exactly Attica has to do with a 1961 expedition across the globe or why the histories of the other participants aren't included. Be patient! As it turns out, these snippets of text are bread crumbs that help lead you — gradually, elliptically — down the movie's darkly lit path. That journey is surprisingly engaging, though I admittedly needed to chill out, get into the movie's groove and just drift along on the soundscape as I looked around the screening room, closed my eyes (briefly) and so on. The audio includes Michael Rockefeller's time stamps, descriptions ("sounds of nature") and bumbling with the equipment, as well as the beautiful music made by animals whirring, chirping and buzzing and the Dani people's singing and chanting.

The Dani also talk, murmur and yell, but not everything they say is translated, which is another provocation. The expedition participants speak in English and almost everything they say is understandable, at least if you speak the language. Whether this means that you, as an English speaker, are aligned or even implicated in the expedition is a question the movie presents without answering. Certainly, for those who don't speak Dani it is frustrating not to know what they're saying, which is presumably to the movie's point and the questions it raises about anthropology. By narrating "Dead Birds," for instance, Gardner didn't simply speak for the Dani: He *translated* them for his viewers and the greater world.



The problem of translation — who speaks for whom and why — echoes through "Expedition Content," which builds to a shattering climax during a long, boozy revel in which the expedition men joke and laugh. They're celebrating, cutting loose. And then they start talking about jazz, and their talk grows progressively squirm-inducing, upsetting, ugly. Whether the conversation serves as an indictment of Gardner's project and, by extension, the white ethnographic gaze, is left open. I found it heartbreaking, and instructive. I still love "Dead Birds" but when I reread Gardner on its making, I also lingered over his observation that anthropology could reveal "the meaning of one's own life as well as, or even better than, the meaning of the lives of 'others.'"

Expedition Content

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 18 minutes. In theaters.

Expedition Content NYT Critic's Pick

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Writers Ernst Karel, Veronika Kusumaryati

Running Time 1h 18m

Genre Documentary

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