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RAMBO'S WIFE SAVES THE DAY:

SUBJUGATING THE GAZE AND SUBVERTING THE NARRATIVE IN A PAPUA NEW GUINEAN SWAMP

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most central and enduring concerns in film and communications theory has been the relationship between "audience," or those who watch a film, and the projected image and sound of the film itself. This relationship was initially explored in terms of the effect of the film upon a viewer, or of the film working as an active agent upon a re-active and submissively passive audience. Feminist film discourse, beginning with Laura Mulvey's pioneering article "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" (1971), is renowned for its analysis of this active/passive relationship in terms of filmic gaze. In the early literature inspired by this approach, dominant cinematic forms were characterized as male, white, heterosexist, and active; female spectatorship was Other and passive: females could position themselves either as alienated, temporarily masculinized consumers, or as masochistic/narcissistic spectators who are compelled by the filmic narrative to identify with the masculine objectifying fantasy constructed within the narrative.

Current feminist film theory is fragmenting these earlier models of female passive subjectivity by positing and exploring multiple spectator positions, by highlighting the fluidity of and self-contradictory tensions in film, and by emphasizing the female spectator's ability to respond to, rather than just consume, the film gaze (Clover 1992; Doane 1982; de Lauretis 1984, 1987; Gamman and Marshment 1989; Mulvey 1975; Roof 1991). In pursuing such explorations, feminist scholars have come to share many of the same concerns that guide the research of those involved with commu-

nication and British cultural studies. Indeed, throughout media studies as a whole, there has been a firm and steady shift away from texts as a privileged site of meaning, towards a view of texts as "dynamic sites of struggle over representation, and complex spaces in which subjectivities are constructed and identities contested" (Spitulnik 1993:296).

The emphasis has thus shifted, as Livingstone (1989:287) has recently noted, "from an analysis of meaning 'in' the text...to an analysis of the process of reading a text." Most of this newer research has been with Euroamerican audiences, but a number of scholars have begun to look at audience reception to film in non-Euroamerican contexts. Some of these studies continue to focus on the 'effect' of television on audiences (Kottak 1990, 1991), while others interpret alternative readings as resistance and empowerment (Hodge and Trippe 1986; Mattelart 1980).

A problem we see in these studies, however, and to which we wish to draw attention here, is that even though it is nowadays widely recognized that the production of meaning involves active spectatorship, and even though analysts commonly employ terms such as the "negotiation" of meaning between spectator and film, viewers' interpretations are still commonly evaluated against what is taken to be the "reality" of the filmic text. This text is presented and analyzed as what Nichols (1981:74) has called "a closed system"—an entity bounded by space and time which actively guides and structures interpretation and which, therefore, is subject to *mis*interpretation. An example of this is Tamar Liebes' study on how Israelis of Moroccan origin negotiate meaning while watching the American

television show *Dallas* (Liebes 1984). Here, sensitive observations about how viewers construct meaning out of their own experience, their conversations with other viewers, and their understanding of the filmic narrative, are constrained and subtly displaced by authorial pronouncements by Liebes on whether the viewers have correctly understood the plot and the situational contexts that she sees encoded in the narrative (see also Liebes and Katz 1990). The filmic narrative, in studies such as this, remains squarely in the center of analysis. The narratives may allow for relatively more 'open' or 'closed' readings (Fiske 1987), but they are accorded an *a priori* status as bounded, discrete objects.

In this article, we want to show how an audience, through an alternative reading of cinematic signifiers and of the "meaning" of the medium itself, can not only subvert the cinematic gaze, but also destabilize the notion of a bounded filmic narrative. The audience we will be exploring lies in a remote jungle swamp in northern Papua New Guinea. It is thus a very different kind of audience than the ones that feminist film critics and most others have in mind when they write about the power and constraints of gazes and filmic narratives. We will demonstrate, however, how this very differently constituted group of spectators speaks to the same sorts of issues that these critics are addressing, even as they direct us to examine other, related, issues of cultural processes of interpretation and colonial discourses about the Other.

As far as the latter topic is concerned, we find it striking and predictable that in the sparse and sketchy literature that discusses non-Western, and particularly non-urban and non-literate, interpretations of Western-made films, the same kinds of arguments and assumptions as those mentioned above in relation to gendered spectators demonstrate any analysis. Just as females, because they are not males, have been interpreted as signifying a lack in relation to the cinematic object, so are non-Western, non-literate spectators commonly portrayed as also lacking: their reactions to Western films are said to be based on their lack of Western knowledge; on their lack of familiarity with cinematic signifiers and conventions; on their lack of understand-

ing, education, "sophistication" (Wilson 1983:31), and so on (e.g., Carpenter 1975; KVB 1956). What we hope to show here is that deficiency analyses which emphasize what these non-Western viewers lack are really only a prop for Western self-imagery that capture nothing about spectators' engagement with film. Furthermore, what becomes very clear in examining the ways in which these Papua New Guinea villagers have interpreted cinematic images is that they—in sharp distinction to many Western film theorists—do not see film as a closed system imbued with an inherent intentionality and truth. For these spectators, filmic narrative is inherently open, temporally unchained, and replete with possibilities. For the villagers we will be discussing here, as for other non-Western viewers of film (See Fiske 1991 and the recent literature on "indigenous media," e.g., Ginsburg 1991), filmic narrative does not so much "inhabit a space and time of its own" (Nichols 1981:81), as it exists with and becomes embedded within the space-time of social relationships and cultural imaginings.

TELLING STORIES

Gapun is a small village located in northern Papua New Guinea, about ten kilometers from the coast. The village is difficult to get to from most places. Getting there from Angoram, the largest town in the area, involves a six hour trip down the Sepik river by motor-powered canoe, then a two-to-four hour journey through clotted waterways and swamps often swollen with chest-deep mud. The hundred or so villagers who live in Gapun are largely self-supporting through a combination of swidden agriculture, sago-processing, and hunting.

Gapun villagers spend a great deal of time in each others' company, and much of that time is spent exchanging news about one another and about people and places they hear about from others. The villagers do not own radios, read newspapers, or have access to other depersonalized sources of information, so whatever they know about other people and other places, they know through their own experiences or through the

stories of others. In this way, information is always contextualized, and it is always tightly bound up with whomever passes it on. Villagers' talk is not taken up with discussions of issues like politics, religion, or economy abstracted from social relations. ~~For~~ Gapun occasionally talk about the Papally-bestowed "power" of Michael Somare, Papua New Guinea's first Prime Minister; about miraculous happenings linked to a statue of the Virgin Mary in a Ramu village; or they may discuss why the price they get paid for their coffee beans keeps going up and down for no discernible reason; but these topics are never discussed apart from the fact that someone has seen or experienced them him/herself, or has heard about them from someone else. Talk about anything in Gapun is ultimately anchored in the talkers, and the social contexts in and about which they speak.

Men and women in the village spend a tremendous amount of time and energy observing and gathering information about the activities of others. Most homes are built so that villagers can survey large sections of the village from their verandahs or through small peep-holes poked through the thatch of their walls. Acoustics in the village are good, and Gapuners have sharp ears, so most conversations inside a house are readily audible to one's nearest neighbors and to anyone happening to stroll by. In addition to more surreptitious means of getting news, villagers constantly ask each other questions about their destinations and purposes, and they depend heavily on their children, who up to about age fifteen are free to come and go in a large number of village houses, to provide them with information about others.

The information that villagers gather about one another is most commonly dispersed throughout the village by means of a verbal genre known in Gapun as *stori*. A *stori* is a narrative account, in the words of one villager, of "where you went and what you saw." *Storis* offer accounts of events which the teller has either experienced himself or has heard about in a *stori* from someone else. The content of *storis* ranges from telling about that morning's hunting trip, to retelling what one woman said that another woman did with the sago grubs that a third woman had announced were for herself, to explaining what one of the young men in the neighboring village of Wongan claimed to have heard on the radio about the imminent second coming of Christ. *Stori*ing occurs in any size group, from between two to

several dozen people. Gapunders feel uncomfortable with silence between people, which they interpret as a sign of conflict or hostility. So whenever members of a gathering suddenly run out of things to say, it is not long before somebody launches into a new *stori*, or anxiously begins urging others to *stori*.

Villagers in Gapun *stori* to inform, entertain, and to pass the time. *Storis* are highly participatory events, and listeners are invited to draw on their past experiences and their knowledge of particular people and settings and to contribute to both the telling of the *stori* and the subsequent evaluation of the action described in the *stori*. Listeners are expected to freely interrupt the *stori*-teller, questioning facts or challenging detail. They are also expected to decenter and imagine themselves as part of the *stori*, facing the same situation or predicament as the characters in the *stori*. Listeners pepper the telling of a *stori* with short evaluatory comments such as "*mi les/#a mnda*" (how awful; literally, I'm sick of that) whenever the protagonist of the *stori* finds him/herself in a sticky situation, such as meeting up with a spirit in the rainforest or being clawed up with a cassowary, or "*em nau/gum%ang*" (that's right), when the protagonist acts in a way the listeners agree with and approve of. The active role that an audience is expected to assume in the course of a *stori*-telling episode means that in the course of the telling, *storis* become retold and reworked, sometimes so dramatically that the version of an event that is discursively negotiated by speakers often bears little resemblance to the event which prompted the *stori* in the first place.

Once, in 1987, when a baby in the village was so sick that everybody was convinced that the child was about to die, the baby's aunt and her husband left Gapun with him and his mother, saying that they were going to the Sepik village of Singrin (about a seven hour journey from Gapun by paddle canoe), where they would pay a renowned old diviner to reveal the cause of the baby's illness. Before they came back, an old man named Agrana arrived in Gapun, returning from a short trip he had made to the neighboring village of Wongan. He brought with him the *stori* of what the diviner in Singrin had said about the baby. Agrana *storied*, in a characteristic Gapun way which made it impossible to know whether or not he had actually been present at the divining session, (it later turned out that he had been in another village at the time). He said that the diviner had disclosed that the baby's mother, Jari, had had sex with

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a man from the far-off Ramu village of Tarengi several months previous to her baby's illness and that she had laid her baby at the base of a tree while engaged in intercourse. During the time the baby was on the ground, Agrana recounted, a tree spirit (*devil bilong diwai/kandap*) had stolen the child's spirit, and the illness was a result of this loss.

Upon hearing this explanation, Agrana and the people to whom he *storied* began to discuss the details of Jari's indiscretion. Everyone present began to think back and retrace all happenings that they had seen during the past few months that might shed light on this event. When had Jari left her baby alone long enough for her to rendezvous with a visitor from Tarengi? One woman remembered that one evening she heard Jari's older sister shouting at her because she wasn't around to feed her baby. This woman recalled that Jari's sister had shouted at Jari through the village: "Is it my baby that I should be carrying him around?!" Where could the couple have had sex? Another woman present at this telling thought that they must have done it "in the cemetery by the trunk of the tree there," but then suddenly realized that the diviner "was speaking in riddles" (*tok bokis*) and that the two must have had intercourse not at the base of a tree, as he had said, but near a patch of a particular kind of grass that the woman speaking had long maintained was used by sorcerers to kill people.

A collaborative reconstruction of this event continued as each person present dredged their memory and contributed observations that gradually became connected and crystallized into an account of Jari's encounter with the Tarengi man and the theft of her child's spirit. Of course, it was agreed, Jari's sister's shouts at Jari occurred when Jari was away having sex². And yes, wasn't that when John, the man from Tarengi, was in Gapun? And no, "he never sat down a little bit in the men's house," someone recalled meaningfully at this point: "He was always going and coming, going and coming. Going and coming from what?"

As it turned out in the end, Jari and the others never even went to the old diviner since the baby had begun to get better as soon as it left Gapun. This fact, although it became known after Jari's return to Gapun a few weeks later, became unimportant in face of the collectively-constructed account that had crystallized in her absence. Today, seven years later, ask Jari or her sister

if they went to the diviner. "No," they will answer. Ask anybody else the same question. "Yes," they will respond, and proceed to tell you exactly what the diviner divined.

Episodes like this occur continually in village life, and they underscore the fact that villagers do not merely describe events in their narratives; they actively *produce* them. Events get authored in the telling, and it is in this authoring that meaning emerges. Once villagers decided that the cause of Jari's child's illness was her sexual indiscretion near a patch of magical grass with a visitor from another village, for example, several meanings emerged. Not only was the "meaning" of the child's illness suddenly revealed—the long-suspected nature of the grass and the Tarengi man's frequent absences from the men's house also all became mutually illuminating and illuminated. Meaning in Gapun thus emerges as events are contextualized and embedded in the ongoing flow of social life. Meaning does not exist in decontextualized isolation. Events are, in effect, meaningless until the contextualizing voice of village narrative negotiates their structure and their significance.

RAMBO IN THE BUSH

In June 1991, we transported video equipment into Gapun. With the video equipment, we showed the villagers a video of themselves that had been made several years previously by a tourist acquaintance of Kulick's who visited him briefly in Gapun during his final week of fieldwork there (see Kulick and Willson 1992). The video screening provided us with an opportunity to talk to the villagers about film, and before we showed the video, we conducted a survey by going from household to household asking people whether they had ever seen a "moving picture" (*mubin piksa*) before. While the majority of the villagers had "heard stories" of moving pictures, many had never actually seen one. A total of 45 villagers—32 males, 13 females (of 44 males and 40 females interviewed)—had seen, in various settings away from the Gapun, one or more moving pictures, which for most of them meant either a movie (sometimes specifically called *mubi*, *mubin piksa*), video (*wideo*), or slide presentation (*ol slait*).

Whenever a villager had seen a moving picture, we asked him or her to tell us the details surrounding it;

where they saw it, who had shown it, who had seen it with them, and why they had gone to see it. We also asked people if the images had a "story" (*i gat stori tu?*). We collected seventeen of these stories on audio tape.

In analyzing the villagers' stories, we discovered that whenever villagers talk about the films they have seen, they treat them as they treat real-life events, and they rework them, just as they rework real-life happenings. Just as the descriptions and evaluations of events in their lives that Gapuners construct are shaped more by their interaction with their interlocutors and the prevailing mood of the village than by what, on some level, "really" happened (e.g., Jari's aborted trip to the diviner), so are their descriptions of the films they have seen cheerfully independent of the cinematic gaze. Despite the claims that film critics may make about spectator positions, there is no passivity here: villagers effectively author the films they watch. They decline to take up a particular position in relation to the film—they are not enmeshed by anyone's gaze. Instead, it is *they* who do the structuring. When a villager sees a *Rambo* film, he does not become positioned by a gaze structured through overwrought masculine signifiers and racist stereotypes of Vietnamese. Instead, his look reframes the film as being about rascals (the Papua New Guinean name for violent young bandits who do great damage but who are becoming steeped in a kind of heroic lore throughout the country), and about how a tough old woman rescues her limp and ineffectual husband (Rambo) from imprisonment by sneaking into rascal encampments and blasting their helicopters out of the sky:

Mangai: Rambo fights with rascals.

He was sitting and rascals came and held him up.

5 They held his legs and hands and took him away.

Took him away to a place in the jungle where the rascals lived.

Put him there/

And Rambo has a wife too.

10 His wife was looking for him, they were watching, after a long time they knocked out one of [his? her?] teeth (*tit bilong en*).

DK: One [what?]

15 Mangai: Rambo's tooth.

They knocked it out, his wife was looking for him, his wife/ his wife she was old, she got her husband, the two of them ran away. 20 Ran away onto the road where rascals had/they came in a car. Came, the two of them found their car, fire broke out. The rascals. The rascals bombed Rambo's. 25 Bombed it/the wife didn't die, just her husband died. And [she? they?] turned back and got an airplane, OK it blew up, they came. Looked for her—the woman shot, they shot. They went on [like that], the woman blasted this helicopter and it crashed. Blew up on top of them (all). The rascals didn't die, they scattered about (*kalap nambaut*). 35 () the woman walked around in the jungle () went, held this woman and killed her dead.

When villagers recount film narratives, they embed them in local concerns and everyday understandings. Mangai's *Rambo* story is typical of the narratives about film that we recorded in the village, and several discursive features, present in all our examples, stand out in this telling.

One of these features is the way in which this narrative focuses on action. With the single exception of Mangai's parenthetical description of Rambo's wife (line 18—she is old [*wanpela hap meri*]), his narrative contains no description of people or places. Neither does it contain any discussion of affective states or the motivational concerns of protagonists. The narrative focuses very tightly on actions, and it describes these as an observer watching them might. This narrative style is characteristic of the way villagers talk to one another about events they have seen or heard about. In the *stori* genre, speakers present their listeners with a series of events and descriptions of actions, which are later collectively evaluated and interpreted. When telling a *stori*, speakers tend to use minimum description and speculation about the thoughts, feelings, and motives of others. These speculations follow a *stori*, as the teller and his/her listeners together discuss and evaluate the

behavior of the protagonists in the *stori* (Kulick 1992:234-47).

The other feature to notice in this narrative is the way in which its form works to embed it in village concerns. Mangai's *stori* is patterned on a type of narrative that is becoming increasingly common in Gapun, and which is referred to by the villagers as a *stori bilong ol raskol*—a rascal tale. These stories, most frequently told by young men to impress and disquiet others, recount the exploits of famous rascals as they steal, murder, and pillage. Typical of these stories are assertions or hints that the rascals have access to virtually unlimited resources and weaponry, that they shoot and kill people for no reason, and that they are rarely captured or killed (Kulick 1993). In Mangai's telling of the Rambo film, all of these features are present: the rascals have seemingly inexhaustible supplies of cars, airplanes, and helicopters; they capture Rambo for no other reason than he "fights with" them; and at the end of the carnage wreaked on them by Rambo's wife, the rascals emerge completely unscathed. Both Rambo and his much more resilient wife get killed by the rascals. The rascals, on the other hand, do not seem to suffer any losses, and they survive even when a helicopter crashes on top of them. In characteristic form, the rascals do not die. The most that happens to them is they get "scattered about" (only, so the assumption goes, to regroup later).

In describing films they have seen, villagers talk about the things that interest and compel them. Narratives about the Papua New Guinean-made film *Tukana*, for example, focus dramatically on a sequence in which a man performs sorcery on a young woman. A young woman named Akwaria describes the film like this:

Tukana married two women. The first didn't like him and the second wanted to live with him. He(?) didn't want the first to stay with the second. And his father told him/he asked him: "Do you want the second to stay with the first, or what?" And Tukana said: "It's up to the two women." And the two women got up and/the second one got up and went to the house of the first one. And he father of the first went and made magic on her. Like sorcery magic. He worked magic, put her dirty things into the fire. He made a huge fire and chanted on the side of the fire. Time went and the father of the first,

he came and speared the second's/the second wife's father. He speared him and he died at the side of the fire. And they took his body and buried it.

A second narrative, from another young woman named Awpa, sums up the film this way:

One it's/a man whose name is Tukana, it was all black people who acted³. I don't know where he's from, what place/it must be Madang province, a man from there.

He acted/his child married a man. And she said/her husband was away at work. when he comes I'm gonna marry him. And another [woman] said "I'm gonna marry him." Time went and another man married her and another boyfriend of hers was mad. The father of her boyfriend. He just went and did sorcery the child/this woman. Josefin. Tukana's wife. () worked sorcery on her.

Josefin and her mother went to work in the garden. They went to work in the garden, but that man had already worked sorcery. He covered his buttocks with leaves, went and got flowers to cover his buttocks with, he made a huge fire and was heating up the sorcery magic. He was heating up the sorcery magic, he wanted to kill Tukana's wife. He was talking; "Tukana's wife has to die, Tukana's wife has to die." He made a fire and was singing like that. Fanned the fire. His ass was going round and round the fire. When he was doing like that, Tukana's wife's mother and her (his?) mother went back to the house. When they were going to the house, a car sped by, hit the woman, the woman fell down and died. She didn't live. The car didn't hit her, it just went by her quickly, but this [sorcery-generated] wind got her and the woman died.

Tukana came and saw his wife, and he cried really hard. He's black, when he cried, white came up/tears gushed out, his mouth was wide open. Tukana finished crying over his wife, he went and buried her. And he thought that he has to find another woman and marry her. And he went and/Tukana's father, he went, he saw the man who was heating up the sorcery magic for the woman. He

asked: "What are you doing?" He said: "Nothing. My skin is cold and I'm warming it up by the fire." He lied to him.

After this, the talk became known that the man had worked sorcery. They took the man to court, and the police took him away.

In *Tukana*, which is a film over two hours long, the sorcery sequence described in these narratives lasts exactly 63 seconds. Despite its brevity, in the villagers' telling of the film, this scene becomes central. The numerous other messages intended by the film⁴ become displaced by the villagers' looks and *Tukana* emerges as a film about sorcery and about what happens to sorcerers. This foregrounding of the sorcerer as what *Tukana* is about is similar to Wilson's account of how an African audience responded to a film about malaria prevention:

We showed this film to an audience and asked them what they had seen, and they said they had seen a chicken, a fowl, and we didn't know that there was a fowl in it: So we carefully scanned the frames one for one for this fowl, and, sure enough, for about a second, a fowl went over the corner of the frame. Someone had frightened the fowl, and it had taken flight through the righthand, bottom segment of the frame. This was all they had seen. The other things we hoped that they would pick up from the film they had not picked up at all, and they had picked up something which we didn't know was in the film until we inspected it minutely (1983:31).

Wilson's explanation for this look is a deficiency analysis: seeing the film with an "unsophisticated, untutored eye" (1983:31), the audience of "primitive African[s]" (ibid.) was able to take in only part of the picture, not the whole.

In many ways, Gapuners go well beyond what Wilson describes his African viewers as doing. In their engagement with film, as in their engagement with real-life, villagers, in their narratives, freely alter, expand, substitute, transform, and add characters, actions, sounds, plots, and moral implications to those that are present in the event itself. The sorcery sequence in *Tukana* is an exceptionally powerful one for villagers,

because even though everybody in Gapun knows that sorcery exists and exerts an unrelenting influence on their lives (all serious sickness and all deaths in Gapun are attributed to sorcery, for example), few viewers of *Tukana* would ever have seen a sorcerer actually at work. In the village discourse on sorcery, it is evil, and sorcerers should be punished (traditionally they were often the targets of retaliatory raids). And so, in the film, the sorcerer, we are told, is indeed punished—in one version he is speared to death; in the other he is taken away by the police. The fact that in the film itself none of this happens and the sorcerer lives on happily untouched is unimportant—just as the fact that Jari did not take her baby to the diviner became unimportant after it had become decided that she did. Films in Gapun, like real-life events, constitute only the raw material of their own existence. The filmic narrative is only one element of the constructed narrative; it is only one element of what becomes, for the individual spectators, the narrative. Films become discursively embedded into village life through the telling, and unlike Wilson, we do not interpret the villagers of Gapun, in their tellings, as lacking sophistication; we interpret them, instead, as deftly subverting the narrative gaze by encompassing it with their contextualizing voice.

"PIKSA I NO SAVE KAMAP NATING"

Cinematic narratives are thus embedded into village life through the contextualizing voice of village narrative—in their telling, the cinematic narrative becomes transformed and reconfigured as commentaries on village life and village ideas. Through this absorption and transformation, film in Gapun is multiply embedded into the community. Not only the narratives constructed through film, but the technology of film itself is swept up into the contextualizing voice and impressed into village discourse in a very particular way.

Gapuners tell one another that cinematic technology is an eye (*ai/gin&*). It is an opening, an elaborate mechanism of voyeurism to other countries, other spaces, and other times. Villagers believe that anyone in possession of a *draivisen* (television), for example, can direct it to see anything they want to. When Kuluck first arrived in Gapun in 1985, villagers wondered if the people in "the countries" were watching him on their

television sets. One villager told others in an authoritative voice that "when the Pope came to see us [i.e. came to Papua New Guinea in 1984], all the countries used these things [television] to watch him." Another recounted that once in the town of Madang, he and others had seen "the Queen in the flesh" (*mipela lukim skinbilong Kwin*) on a *draivisen*.

It is taken for granted that *draivisen* can penetrate the space of death and see into it. One reason why villagers assume this is because they believe that white people inhabit that space. Gapun is a community of quiet but exuberant millenarian ideas, and the villagers spend a great deal of time trying to be fervent Catholics, in the hope that this will one day bring on the millennium and transform them all into white people (Kulick 1992). Pictures of white people in their native countries are therefore in reality pictures of the space that villagers themselves will inhabit after the millennium or after they die (whichever comes first). Before we showed the video we brought to Gapun to the villagers, they steeled themselves, with these ideas in mind, to see pictures of their dead ancestors. We were repeatedly asked about specific family members—long dead mothers and fathers, recently deceased children—would they appear on the video screen? Would they speak to their descendants/parents from the afterlife? Mothers prepared their small children to see their ancestors, telling them in excited voices, "Oo, you're gonna see your ancestor now. She's gonna appear and talk to you." Just prior to the screening of the video there was a spate of dreams in the village about ancestors with white skin, and near a waterhole on the edge of the village, two villagers claimed to have seen the spirit of a woman who died in the 1960s, and who, it was hoped, would be making an appearance in the video.

One important consequence of seeing cinematic technology in terms of an organ of vision is the idea that what is pictured is actually seen, and therefore actually exists somewhere. "Pictures aren't just invented" (*Piksa i no save kamap nating*), villagers tell one another: pictures exist because what they picture exists. Sitting in his men's house one evening, Old Kruni and a group of adolescent boys were talking about rascals:

Kruni: They pray to Satan and Satan gives them power.
Jim: Man, Satan is nearby.

Kak: They can see him.
Kruni: Eh heh.
Kak: He talks to them.
Kruni: Mm.
Wake: You're the big man [addressing Satan as rascals would].
Kruni: He's the big man. True. (...) I saw him in Marienberg [mission station].
Man, he was really close. He had really good decorations on his body. Good decorations, but he had wings like flying fox.
Mangai: Good looking man but wings just like a flying fox.
Kruni: Mm.
Kak: Nice.
Kruni: You'll see him and think he's a king. Big man, you'll see him and think he's a king. But he has wings like a flying fox.
Kak: Two horns.
Kruni: Two horns, a spear. Man, to plunge into people.
Mangai: A barbed spear.
Kak: It's a fork.
Kruni: His spear, it's a fork. Moving pictures don't lie. Things are there and they photograph them.
Wake: Pictures aren't just invented. They photograph something, they put it/
Kruni: We'll look at this and be afraid. And so we'll have good ways.

"Moving pictures don't lie. Things are there and they photograph them." For villagers, what is shown with film technology is unquestionably authentic. Satan, resplendent with his fork, his horns, and his big black bats' wings, is pictured in the movie in Marienberg because Satan, like other Christian exists to be pictured. Some villagers, like Kruni, take this idea even further, and they seem to consider that film technology bodily materializes the image that it reveals. In this conceptualization, the screen (which in Tok Pisin is called *banis*—a word commonly used to denote a fence or partition, carrying with it strong connotations of concealment and prohibition) appears to be not so much a surface onto which images are projected as it is a

barrier blocking entrance to and direct contact with the actions and people who are understood as existing immediately behind or beyond the screen. This is what we interpret Kruni to mean when he tells the boys listening to him that Satan "was really close" when he appeared in Marienberg, conjured up by the power of the missionaries.

Kruni returned to this theme of the physical proximity of filmic images in a later conversation with Kulick about the same film, when he explained about another sequence that, "...Jesus appeared. All right, Satan told him to go up a really big mountain. Jesus went to the top. We saw this. But I saw the picture sitting like where you are and here [Kruni taps the floor in front of him], the screen was like here. Now you're there. And I'm like Jesus, where I'm [sitting] now."

The villagers' looks do not acknowledge cinematic images to be "just pictures," in content or in form. And neither do they allow film and the technology which produces it to exist in a socially-bounded, "closed" space. Instead, film becomes a site of convergence where many of the phenomena that are absolutely central in village life, such as Christian teachings, ancestral beings, modernity (those who have not seen videos referred to themselves only half-jokingly in our interviews as "*bus kanaka*," i.e., country bumpkins), missionaries, white colonialists, and the government all coalesce into commentaries about one another. Because film technology is controlled by white people, for example, and because it routinely peers into Biblical lands and presents the villagers with images of deities like Satan and Jesus, villagers continue to believe that white men and women can travel to places like Heaven and Hell, and that they have more or less direct access to the Christian pantheon. One story linking most of these things together was that told by an old village man named Raia, as he pointed to the black and white painting of a fair-skinned Madonna and child, portrayed in a kind of mist, that appears on the last page of the Catholic hymn book *Niu Laip* (New Life). "A *masta* (a white man) in an airplane snapped that picture," Raia explained:

He was flying in his airplane and he snapped a picture of the sky. All right, he took it home, washed it, and the picture [of the Virgin and child] appeared. The government wouldn't let him go (*holim pasim em*) and they asked him about it—

where did he get it. He said he didn't know. All right, they bought it from him for lots of money, and now the missions bought it off the government and put it in this book.

Conceived of as an eye, film and cinematic technology becomes for the villagers an instrument of knowledge and revelation whose narratives interweave with and comment upon the present, the past, and what is to come. Film technology permits the villagers access to spaces from which they are normally firmly interdicted. In doing so, the technology presents the villagers with a whole new range of possibilities and opportunities, and the people of Gapun imagine themselves in a vigorously active subject position in relation to it: villagers anticipate being able to use film technology to communicate with their dead, and one villager who explained to others that *draivisen* "is used to look at things that are far away and see what is happening" wanted to obtain a television set and use it to spy on sorcerers.

This subject position into which the villagers comfortably settle in relation to film is also apparent in the way that the villagers appropriate filmic narratives and rework them into commentaries on village life. It is now clearer why they should do this. Because for the villagers what is seen in moving pictures constitutes real-life events, the images are treated in the same way as are actions observed in real-life. And because film is life, it is freely available for reauthoring. Just as events that occur in the village get continually reworked until some consensus is established about them, so do filmic narratives become reworked. As such, film blends with life and shapes it, even as it is shaped by it. One of old Kruni's most memorable experiences was a cinematic one that occurred at the government station of Angoram in the late 1950s. A moving picture that he saw there was about a big bucket:

...A big round bucket with white medicine in it. It was going round and round. Round and round. It was going around and they put the carvings, the *kandibwan*, they put the *kandibwan* inside this bucket. All right, they weren't *kandibwan* anymore. The *kandibwan* had become like you. A white man. White skin. It became/they all got out of this water, and they took a knife like a razor. All right, put it in the chest of one. They cut into [the chest], but they were talking. They were talking,

walking around, and the long traditional hat (*kawt*), the kind like we make, it turned into a cap. I saw it with my own eyes.....White skinned people. They were talking, laughing. Men/white men (*ol masta*) held the hand of white women (*ol misis*), they walked around. I saw it with my own eyes.

Haunted by the image of traditional carvings emerging from a machine as living white men and women, Kruni has been pondering them for over three decades, convinced that they have revelatory meaning that he should somehow be able to decipher and utilize. One of Kruni's earliest conversations with Kulick, in 1985, was a secretive and hushed summary of this film followed by the hopeful questions: "Do you know about this machine?" and, most importantly, "If I went into this machine, would my skin turn white too? Would I become a *masta*?" This film, and others like the one in which Satan appears that he discusses with the youths in his men's house, have informed and profoundly affected his understanding of his own life, the afterlife, and the look of what is to come. In this way, film in Gapun folds back upon itself—pulled loose of its decontextualized, bounded space by the power of the villagers' contextualizing voice, film narratives and film technology become absorbed into village life as events that have occurred somewhere. And because these events co-exist with what goes on in Gapun, they contain within themselves the potential to reveal new meanings and establish new connections—just as new meanings emerged when the story of Jari's baby's illness was constructed—for any villager attentive enough to put the pieces together and assemble them.

CONCLUSION

Like other technology that has been introduced into Papua New Guinea by white people⁵, film technology is understood by the villagers of Gapun to present them with novel possibilities for which they can think of all sorts of practical uses. The technology does emphatically not make them passive. Villagers position themselves in a subject relationship to film, and they are very articulate about how they would like to get it to work for them. In addition, because they have understood film in the ways they have, the technology does not overwhelm them either. On the contrary. One of the more unexpected findings of our video survey was that people

were not especially excited about film. Many villagers who had had various opportunities to see a video in the past in various mission stations or towns told us they didn't go, simply because they just couldn't be bothered (cf. KVB 1956, which documents a similar lack of interest for filming among New Guineans living in the town of Jayapura). Since what the villagers consider they see in moving pictures are scenes from life, they do not appear to experience themselves as doing anything particularly unusual when they watch a film. While the technology allows them to peep into other time-spaces and see things that they normally would be unable to see, they are not unduly surprised by the images they see there, since they have, in an important sense, already authored them.

In interpreting the films they see and embedding them in village life, villagers actively subvert the cinematic gaze. Narrative, as the constructed fiber of a film, is integral to the filmic gaze. The camera and director of a film create a narrative, but what Gapun villagers demonstrate so clearly is that this narrative certainly does not preclude other narratives from existing simultaneously in the same collection of images. Gapuners fail to acknowledge the intended narrative in films like *Rambo*, *Tukana*, or whatever film it was that Kruni may have seen at the Angoram government station. They dislodge the filmic narrative with parallel narratives of their own, fragmenting and then reassembling the film to satisfy *their* desire and *their* gaze. While this kind of narrative subversion will readily and quite clearly occur when spectators watch films produced for an unfamiliar audience, the process is an integral part of every film experience, because the intertextual resonances of film imagery are differently constrained and differently generative for different audiences and different spectators. The question that our analysis of Gapun viewers' engagement with film leads us to pose, then, is not so much, How are people positioned by meaningful structured narratives?, as it is, How do people *make meaning* from the chaos of cinematic images and voices?

This question, of course, is far from new, and those involved in film and communication studies cited at the beginning of this paper are currently formulating answers to it as they explore the dimensions and possibilities of active spectatorship. What concerns us as anthropologists, however, is that analyses of non-Western audience reception often are not grounded in in-

depth ethnographic research. Information on people's interpretations of film in many of these studies is gathered mostly through decentertextualized interviews or discussions between people that have been arranged and set up by the researcher. While the data gathered in these kinds of settings are interesting, they tell us very little about how people actually talk about films with one another and how their understandings of film are shaped through situated interaction with others. We agree with Spitulnik (1993) that despite a great number of studies that focus on the consumption of media representations, we still know very little about the "everyday life" of such representations. We also agree with her that much more attention needs to be paid to the local practices and discourses of reception in which envelop media and embed them into local life. We hope that this paper contributes to that endeavor. We found the villagers' talk about film—both in response to our questions, but more importantly, in their talk about film to one another (e.g., during quiet gatherings in the men's house or on household verandahs after nightfall)—to be an excellent source of primary data about their assumptions about film and the interpretations they make of it. We hope that future research pays more attention to people's talk; that is, how individuals use talk to construct, together with others, narratives from cinematic images, and how that talk is bound up with other discursive events in their community.

Of course, the question which may arise sooner or later in the minds of some readers on the basis of the ethnography and analysis we have presented here is, Haven't the villagers, on some level, simply misunderstood film? That is the question we would now be hastening to answer if we accepted the assumptions that underlie most of the literature on the topic of how non-Western groups interpret Western cinema. If we privileged the filmic narrative as the sole source and site of meaning, and if we disregarded the active and assertive role that the villagers assume in their engagement with film, then it would be possible—indeed, it would be inevitable—to answer yes: Gapuners' lack of experience, sophistication, education, viewing skills, and understanding condemn them to misunderstanding the films they see.

The shallowness and hardly disguised ethnocentrism underlying this kind of approach is remarkable, however, and we are disturbed that scholars who have dealt with this topic in the (recent) past seem more

interested in smugly dishing up stereotypes of bug-eyed savages cowered in awe before the marvel of modern technological wizardry, than they are in trying to discover what these people actually are doing when they watch and discuss Western films. Thus, we read Carpenter's (1975) observations on the "terror" and "trauma" that Papua New Guineans are supposed to feel when they see film (or themselves!) for the first time as telling us much more about Carpenter's desire for wildmen than about what the Papua New Guineans he writes about (who are described relentlessly in his paper as "totally innocent tribesmen," "bedecked in barbaric splendor," who have "no private consciousness, no private point of view," and so on) are doing. And Wilson's explanations of "primitive African[s]" who are "confused" and not "sophisticated" enough to watch the whole screen (they supposedly only "scan the picture" and see unimportant details, not what Wilson feels they are supposed to see [1987:32]) sound to us more like colonial paternalism than satisfactory accounts of what his Ghanaian spectators were watching, and why. Eyeing supposedly "primitive" people through vision clouded by colonialist and racist stereotypes, analyses like these serve no other purpose than to bolster Western images of itself. It is this kind of analysis, more than the films themselves, that creates specific spectator positions for non-Western viewers of Western-made films. What we neglect to notice when we accept the assumptions that lie behind these kinds of analysis is that the gaze we attribute to others is in fact our own.

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NOTES

1. The people of Gapun are multilingual, but two languages, Tok Pisin (a creole language spoken throughout the country) and Taiap (the village vernacular—a Papuan language spoken only in Gapun) predominate. Throughout this paper, non-English words in italics are words in Tok Pisin, and underlined italicized words are words in Taiap. In the translations, which are in roman script, underlining signifies that the words were spoken in Taiap. Non-underlining means that the words were spoken in Tok Pisin. The video interviews discussed in this paper were conducted in Tok Pisin. In the transcribed narratives and conversations appearing here, a slash after a word indicates interruption by another speaker or self interruption, segments of text joined by vertical lines indicates overlapping talk, parentheses indicate unintelligible talk, and square brackets contain our comments or information that is not explicitly stated but known to both speaker and hearers.

2. The contradiction here between the observation that Jari's sister shouted at Jari about being burdened by her baby when Jari was off having sex and the contention that the baby's spirit was stolen by a *kandap* when Jari lay the child at the base of a tree during sex, was not considered by anybody at this gathering.

3. This young woman, who is unusual in Gapun in that she is one of the very few villagers who has spent a year in high school, is the only one who uses the word "act" (*aktim*), when she describes film. From this and other narratives we collected from her, it is clear that what she means by "act" is not "play a role" or "pretend," but rather "appear in a film".

4. See *Bikmaus* (1983) for a number of reviews of the film *Tukana* (written by Albert Toro, directed and photographed by Chris Owen in 1982). It is interesting in this context to note that out of eight reviews of the film in this collection, only one of them mentions the fact that sorcery occurs in the film. Most reviewers seem to have read *Tukana* as being "about" traditional versus modern values. Graeme Kemelfield's review is typical. He states that "*Tuakana* deals with conflicts between youth and older people in the community, and between modern and traditional life style: problems of

marriage, and alcohol abuse, and the impact of towns and industry on people's lives."

5. Other examples are literacy, which villagers perceive to represent a link between white people and the Christian gods; planes and ships, which are believed to regularly travel to Heaven; and radio technology, which represents a direct line of communication with God. The Pope, it is said in Gapun, is connected up to Heaven and hears the voices of God and Jesus through loud-speakers in his house in Rome (Kulick 1992, Kulick and Stroud 1990).

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