

# AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM LAUGHING AT *FIRST CONTACT*

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*This paper examines student perceptions of humor in the film First Contact. Based on previous critiques of cultural representations—namely, charges that some ethnographic films replicate stereotypes and that images of deified European explorers instantiate a “myth model”—the paper considers the possibility that laughter evoked by First Contact derives from the viewers’ sense of cultural superiority. For the most part, this interpretation is not confirmed. Instead, audience laughter is found to be based on incongruities in the interactions captured in the film. Using notions of incongruity, connections are drawn between humor, wonder, intellectual discovery, and cultural contact. [Key words: first contact, humor, ethnographic film, audience reception, education]*

Although many authors have exposed the problems with filmic representations of other cultures, few have ethnographically investigated the way such representations are actually received by specific audiences. As a contribution to this potentially rich field, audience reception studies of ethnographic film, this paper investigates undergraduate perceptions of Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson’s film about Australian gold miners in Papua New Guinea, *First Contact* (1983).

Reliance on text-internal interpretations of cultural representations is partly due to disciplinary specialization: many critiques have come from literary scholars (e.g., Barker, Hulme, and Iversen 1993; Said 1978; Torgovnick 1997), who do not necessarily place a premium on ethnographic investigation, reader-response theory notwithstanding. Yet in anthropological circles as well, a similar situation prevails, especially when it comes to filmic representations. As Jay Ruby (2000:181) notes, “The current state of knowledge about how viewers respond to ethnographic film (or any film, for that matter) is limited.”

Wilton Martínez, one of the few anthropologists to take ethnographic film reception seriously, showed how revealing such studies can be. Examining student responses to films shown in an introductory anthropology class in the late 1980s, Martínez (1990, 1992, 1995) demonstrated that many anthropological films confirmed rather than challenged students’ preconceptions of “primitive” Others—that the films did more harm than good by perpetuating stereotypes.

Martínez’ studies have served as important cautionary tales, but they remain almost the only studies of their kind. To be sure, recently scholars have begun to pay attention to what audiences make of anthropological representations, especially in museum and tourism studies (Brettell 1993; Crick 1989; Garland and Gordon 1999; Jones 1993; Meisch 2002; Tomaselli 1999, 2002). Yet despite this research and all the concerns about audience reception of mass media texts, in both anthropology and media studies (see Spitulnik 1993; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002), few researchers have sought to replicate or extend Martínez’ studies of “ethnographic” or “anthropologically intended” films.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, Martínez’ studies remain what they were almost ten years ago: “the only sustained theoretical work on the audiences of ethnographic films” (Banks 1996:121). This is not to overlook other studies in this area, such as a book chapter by Jayasinhji Jhala (1994); conference papers or unpublished manuscripts by Thomas Hearne and Paul DeVore, Sam Pack, and Naomi Offler (see Ruby 2000:190–191); excellent theoretical work by Peter Crawford and his associates (Crawford 1996; Crawford and Hafsteinsson 1996); and, more recently, Sam Pack’s excellent ethnographic work with the Navajo (2000). But certainly among this handful of studies, many of them unpublished, Martínez’ work remains “the most extensive study of the reception of ethnographic film by college students...” (Ruby 2000:183, 190–191).

This is unfortunate because, as Ruby points out, a chasm remains between the intentions of instructors who use ethnographic film (to reduce ethnocentrism) and the folk models of the audience viewing the films (students' stereotypes of other cultures) (2000:186). For this and other reasons, Ruby has called for research on the reception of ethnographic films:

It seems only logical to suggest that if anthropologists wish to use film to convey their knowledge to others, they must learn more about the audience's construction of meaning—that is, conduct ethnographic studies of film reception. [2000:181]

To answer Ruby's call for research, in this article I will investigate undergraduate perceptions of Connolly and Anderson's film *First Contact* (*FC* hereafter). There are several reasons why I chose to investigate this particular film, and why doing so promises to tell us something we do not already know. First, this award-winning film is often shown in undergraduate anthropology classrooms, which, as relatively controlled environments, constitute "an ideal place to ethnographically explore the reception of films" (Ruby 2000:190).<sup>2</sup> Second, *FC* is complex. This film offers contrasting viewpoints, lacks a heavy-handed narrator's voice-over, and encourages the reader to form his or her own conclusions, so viewer responses are not necessarily predictable. In fact, *FC* has already received clashing interpretations in print: some scholars see it as a liberal critique (Ruby 1995), while others see it as a text open to racist interpretations (MacBean 1994, 1995); and the director hotly disputes all such charges (Connolly 1996). As these exchanges indicate, this film is ripe for a study of viewer response. Finally, *FC* offers a good test case of Gananath Obeyesekere's charge that Westerners have created a "myth model" of European explorers who become deified by natives upon first contact. This charge, which initiated an intense debate with Marshall Sahlins, shows that even more is at stake here than the validity of Martínez' findings: fundamental questions are raised about how and whether anthropologists can ever know cultural others.

According to Obeyesekere, Sahlins' account (1992, 1995) of Captain Cook instantiates a "myth model" of deified European conquerors: "To put it bluntly, I doubt that the natives created their European god; the Europeans created him for them. This 'European god' is a myth of conquest, imperialism, and civilization"... (Obeyesekere 1992:3).

While commentators have expressed greater confidence in Sahlins' handling of the historical data, they agree that this heated debate raises crucial issues in anthropology (e.g., Borofsky 1997, Geertz 1995). The debate is animated by two major, opposing schools of thought: Obeyesekere argues for a pragmatic, calculating, universalistic mentality, whereas Sahlins argues for distinctive cultural logics. Although Sahlins seemed to have put this debate to rest in *Culture and Practical Reason* (1974), such silencing turns out to have been only a temporary solution; contrary to Sahlins' winner-takes-all claim to victory for cultural analysis, Obeyesekere insists that practical reason cannot be dismissed so easily.

Also at stake here is the entire postcolonial critique of anthropological representations and knowledge—"whether we are not so imprisoned in our own modes of thought and perception as to be incapable of grasping, much less crediting, those of others" (Geertz 1995:5). Clifford Geertz does not offer much detail on this critique because he does not have to: it has become part of the anthropological predicament ever since Edward Said (1978) and others began to interrogate the connections between colonialism, power, and representations of other cultures. And these two critiques are related: the representations that Obeyesekere is criticizing, the ones supposedly imprisoning our modes of thought, are images of prelogical, nonpragmatic natives.

*FC* may well fit Obeyesekere's myth model. Australian whites, while making first contact with Papua New Guineans in the 1930s, are shown in the film as the "harbingers of civilization," especially in the repeated scenes of native awe at Australian technology, such as gramophones, airplanes, and even tin lids. The

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Australians are also initially viewed by the Papua New Guineans as powerful supernatural beings, the returning dead ancestors, and the natives seem to be, at least in one reading, ruled by irrational beliefs. *FC* therefore offers a good test case of Obeyesekere's myth model, especially since Obeyesekere believes that myth model is still in force today: hence he speaks of the Prospero myth model as "one of the most enduring ideas in Western culture" (1992:11); and, summarizing almost the entire history of anthropology, from Lévy-Bruhl to Sahlins, Obeyesekere says that "The idea of the prelogical or childlike native... is the social scientists' myth of the Other" (1992:16). It is not only fair but important, then, to investigate whether this charge accurately explains a contemporary anthropological representation like "FC."

#### THE STUDY

This study was carried out with two of the classes that I taught during the 2004 spring semester in the College of Liberal Arts at Willamette University, a selective private college in Salem, Oregon. The first class, "Controversies and Issues in Cultural Anthropology," was an introductory, 100-level course limited to first and second year students. Only one of the 18 students in the class was an Anthropology major; for all the others, this was their first anthropology course. Many students took the class because it met a college distribution requirement, but various other courses were available to meet that requirement, so presumably most students had at least some interest in the topic of cultural anthropology. The second class, "Warfare, Violence, and Peace," on the other hand, was for more advanced students: it was 300-level, and had a prerequisite of one completed course in anthropology. Most of the students in the course were juniors or seniors; 11 were Anthropology majors, and the other eight were not. The students in both classes were predominantly from white, middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds, so I do not explore ethnic and class variations here, as important as such social positions can be in other communities (see Jhala 1996, Pack 1998). To examine those distinctions in this case, based on samples of one or two students, would risk reifying and essentializing them.

The same format was used in "surveying" the two courses. Without any prior explanation other than a promise to explain my interests in the next class,

I gave the students the survey, which, in addition to an informed consent question, contained the following directions and questions (repeated for scenes #1-8, on two double-side pages with room on the back for further comments):

Directions:

While watching this film in class, please jot down answers to "A," about the scenes you found funny. (After watching the film, answer the other questions.)

- A) Scene # 1 Description (briefly state what happened in the scene that you found funny):
- B) What specific aspect of the scene was funny? Why?
- C) Any comparisons (with similar funny things from other movies, books - anywhere)?

Overall Questions:

- 1) Please place a double asterisk (\*\*) next to the two scenes that you thought were the funniest.
- 2) What do you think the film's overall message was?
- 3) Any other comments on the film's humor or message? Other?

I then showed the film in its entirety, with students noting on their individual surveys any scenes they found funny (per the survey directions), and then asked everyone to use the remaining 30 minutes of class time to fill out the rest of the survey. I read the students' written surveys after that class, and then in the next class session I asked a few follow-up questions (which the students answered in writing), such as, "How many of you have seen *The Gods Must Be Crazy* before?" We then had a brief class-wide discussion, and I also continued talking about the film in email and out-of-class conversations with individual students.

The students had been made aware, then, of my interest in the topic of humor prior to viewing the film, an approach that some could say unduly influenced the responses. However, in previous screenings with other classes, this film *always* provoked laughter, so I did not feel that my questions corrupted the students' reactions: it was still entirely up to each student to decide which scenes were funny and why. I told them verbally that if they did not find anything funny in the film, they did not have to take down any notes.<sup>3</sup> And on a pragmatic level, had I not steered the answers, I probably

would not have had enough answers specifically about humor to be able to verify any patterns.

I should acknowledge from the outset that the number of respondents is still relatively small. On the other hand, I have the advantage of knowing each of these students quite well: these classes had less than twenty students; roughly half of the 300-level class had taken at least one course with me previously; and in both cases the survey was given three months into the semester, after I had come to know all the students through written assignments and intense class discussions. My sense of these students' attitudes therefore is often based as much on "backstage" background and observations of what students actually do as what they said on the survey.

My analysis draws on a combination of this qualitative and quantitative data. Below I provide exact numbers (i.e., number of students who found a scene funny), not because I think they provide highly scientific evidence, but because I think it is important to let the reader know whether a given comment or reaction is an anomaly or fairly representative of the class in question. I also specify whether there were any major differences between the two classes, and aside from first-name-only pseudonyms, all students are cited by their actual names (with permission in both cases). The introductory classes studied by Martínez are more comparable to my 100-level class than my 300-level class.

#### CAUSES FOR ALARM

There was a fair degree of consistency in what the two classes identified as funny in "FC," perhaps for predictable reasons. Both classes were especially amused by the scenes in which a Papua New Guinea man wore a headdress made with a tin can, as well as a similar, immediately-subsequent shot in which a man is wearing a headdress made with a box that says "Kellogg's Whole Wheat Biscuit." 94.4% (17/18) of the students in the 100-level class independently marked those images—treated here as one "headdress scene," since they appear together—as funny, and 68.4% (13/19) of the students in the 300-level class did the same, making it the single most commonly-cited funny scene. Apparently the film's distributors also see this as a noteworthy scene, for a still image of the man with this biscuit-box headdress appears in promotional materials for *FC* (see Figure 1).

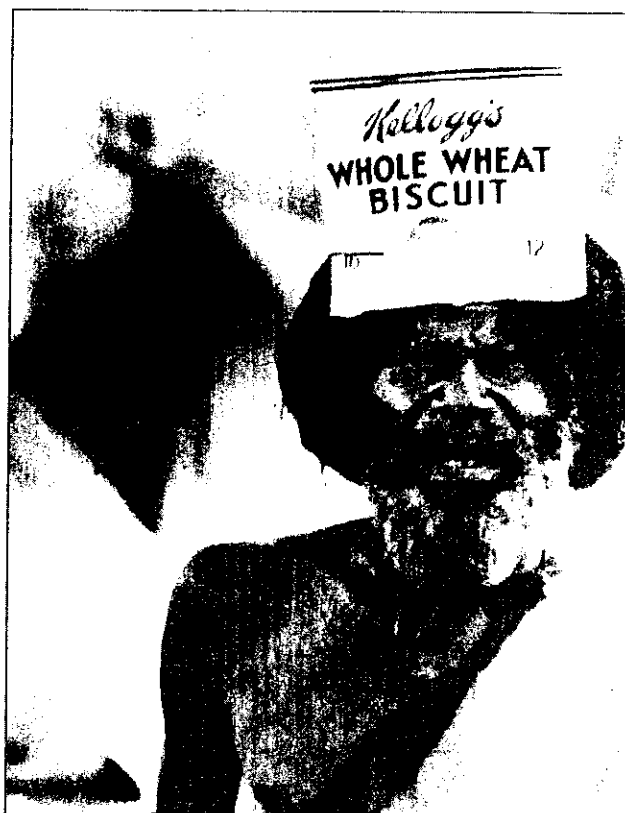


Figure 1. This promotional still photo for "FC," the only one of its kind on the film distributor's web site, can be viewed at <http://www.filmakers.com/indivs/FirstContact.htm>.

Moreover, some student comments seemed to confirm Obeyesekere's worries about ingrained Western views of irrational natives. For example, some students (4/17 in the 100-level course) saw the natives as "child-like, a common paternalistic term in stereotypes of nonWestern cultures" (Springer 1987):

- 1) Comparison: "Other kids movies where they put the metal spaghetti strainer on their head"—Ashley San Blise.
- 2) Comparison: "It's like seeing a baby wearing a grown-up shoe: something that's totally familiar and therefore 'disproportionate' to the culture of the baby"—Renee Koenig.
- 3) Why funny: "It seemed childish somehow." Comparison: "Not sure of what book, but in a children's literature book [there was] a boy with a raccoon who absolutely loved shiny objects and would stop at nothing to get his paws on them"—John.

- 4) Why funny: "The general innocence and wonderment of the PNG people when they saw these new things was funny to see, especially the story about the tin lid and the kids laughing about it now." Comparison: "My one year old niece loves playing with the wrappers of candy bars, or any sort of 'plastic, shiny, crackling noise thing.' It's just funny to see her so fascinated with something we hold no value to" – Rita.

Given these comparisons with children, it would be easy to claim that this scene's humor is rooted in a self-congratulatory Western sense of superiority to the innocent, if not ignorant, Papua New Guineans. Such an interpretation would employ the well-known superiority theory of humor, which is most commonly traced back to Thomas Hobbes' claim that laughter is a "sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (Morreall 1983:4-14). Other scenes deemed funny would seem consistent with this view of PNG inferiority, such as when the New Guineans thought that perhaps the Australians' wives were packed in their bags (marked funny by 8/19 in the 300-level course, 11/18 in the 100-level course), and seeing the gramophone as a box of dead ancestral spirits (6/19 in 300-level course, 3/18 in 100-level course).

The gramophone scene, in particular, disturbed film critic James Roy MacBean, who had similar concerns about the portrayal of superior Western technology in this film. Comparing this scene with the amazed Eskimo reactions to a gramophone in *Nanook of the North* (1922), MacBean writes:

Surely, there is something emblematic about these documents of indigenous peoples reacting with amazement to the technology of the white man. A whole set of relations is here represented, especially the way western civilization likes to dazzle nonWestern peoples with demonstrations of its technological superiority. In this kind of encounter, an eminently colonial one, the white man is represented as the active agent making the demonstration happen, while the Other is represented as the passive spectator, if not the "butt," so to speak, of the joke over how this "primitive" would respond. [1994:59]

MacBean sees these technological displays as "performances of mastery, of dominance," even more clearly revealed by the firing of guns:

the demonstration of what a rifle can do by shooting a pig is a performance of dominance, the explicit intent of which, as the Leahy brothers acknowledge, was to intimidate (and thereby dominate) their New Guinea audience. [1994:60]

Like most critics of representations, MacBean does not question the veracity of such scenes so much as the consistency with which they are represented:

Whether Nanook was acting spontaneously, was staged by Flaherty, or had internalized Flaherty's agenda, what is at stake is the same – Flaherty's *mise-en-scene* of how a 'primitive' responds to the white man's technology. The same issue is a stake in Michael Leahy's *mise-en-scene*... of the New Guinea highlanders' response to the gramophone played at the airstrip. [1994:59]<sup>4</sup>

Although Flaherty's place in ethnographic film remains a matter of dispute (see Ruby 2000:67–94), various scholars would agree with MacBean that there is something symbolic and troubling about recurring images of natives reacting with amazement at Westerners' (usually Western males') technology. For example, Michael Taussig (1993:208) refers to gramophone scenes in various 20th century films (including *FC*) as "frontier rituals of technological supremacy." Fatimah Tobing Rony similarly sees the gramophone scene in *Nanook of the North* as a demonstration of technological superiority (1996:113), as well as highlighting Nanook's identity as an authentic primitive man of an earlier epoch (1996:103, 112).

Moreover, similar "techno-dramas" appear throughout Western history, from early-modern travel accounts to contemporary fiction films. Michael Adas (1989) shows that ever since the 14th century Western writers have been pointing to their technological achievements as proof of their cultural superiority. Even when religion was a primary distinguishing factor in such evaluations in the 14–17th centuries, technology was often celebrated as the most tangible proof of Western superiority, until it became viewed as the single most reliable gauge of human achievement at the height of industrialization

in the 19th century, before melding with anatomical, racist measures in the 20th century. If we included alphabetic writing (a “technology” that, to this day, is used to distinguish Western from “nonliterate” peoples), such classifications would have an even deeper history (Adas 1989:53–59; Certeau 1988; Mignolo 1995; Wogan 1994, 2004c). But perhaps the closest counterparts to “FC’s” Leahy brothers are the many European travelers who, like the following French traveler of the late 1700s, have amused themselves by overawing African natives with simple technological devices:

He [Francois Le Vaillant] grew fond of amusing himself and dazzling the “natives” with demonstrations of relatively simple European contraptions. Le Vaillant delighted in the open-mouthed awe shown by some “Hottentots” for a mouth harp that he drew out of a box with the “art and mystery of a quack.” He conceded that they rather quickly mastered the “ridiculous instrument,” but he never seemed to tire of describing the Africans’ fascination with the shining buttons on his coat or the hatchets and axes in his wagon. [Adas 1989:114]

Even in the 1800s, we find that:

Nowhere was the technological gap that grew ever wider between 19th century Europeans and Africans more graphically depicted than in the hundreds of incidents in which travelers, settlers, and missionaries reported the awestruck responses of Africans to even the simplest mechanical devices. [Adas 1989:159]

Such technologies, especially firearms, were expected to create fear and obedience (Adas 1989:162).

Despite the centuries and continents separating them, these European-African interactions seem of a piece with the Leahy brothers’ delight and amusement in *FC* over Papua New Guineans’ awe in the face of Australian technology. As Marilyn Strathern noted:

For their part, the Australians seem to have been rather taken with themselves as ‘spirits,’ and kept up what they regarded as the appropriate charade, producing a gramophone, for instance, to play to an open-mouthed crowd—showing off the technological marvel. [1992:252, n. 2]

In their book, *First Contact*, Connolly and Anderson make a similar observation: “Michael Leahy was fascinated by the Hageners’ response to Western-made items—gadgets, guns, mirrors, record players...” (1987:228). Michael Taussig concurs, pointing to Leahy’s aggressive insistence, as captured in “FC,” on Papua New Guineans’ awe at his gramophone:

It’s as if he’s more obsessed with white man’s magic than the natives are, and this obsession demands showing. First he has to capture the phonograph in action to Them. Then he has to capture the phonograph-display on film. [1993:206–207]

Moreover, Taussig goes on to note that the directors of *FC* capitalize on the ongoing fascination in the late 20th century with such technology scenes:

Then years later, correctly anticipating the late 20th century Euro-American hunger for such revelation, Connolly and Anderson display the display for us—and repeat it more than once, notably and lengthily at the very end of the film *First Contact*, as the credits roll to the dazzling incongruity-effect of “Looking on the Bright Side of Life.” [1993:207]

Ruby (1995) also argues that *FC* aggressively and consistently employs manipulative editing techniques in both the assembly of the historical footage and the creation of a soundtrack. For example, the Leahy footage is spliced together in order to create technology reaction shots where none existed originally (e.g., PNG reactions to the airplane and the pig being shot), and the soundtrack supplanted over the Leahy’s original, silent-film footage—such as the sound of the airplane landing—is a post-facto invention. Ruby points out that the only reason most academic viewers do not notice or object to such “manipulative devices” is that the film complies with their own liberal sentiments: “As the old cliché goes, it is educational when we agree and propaganda when we don’t” (1995:143).

MacBean (1995) and Connolly (1996) contest Ruby’s interpretation, but presumably nobody would disagree that the technology scenes in *FC* ostensibly fit Obeyesekere’s “myth model,” in which Europeans expect to be deified and feared by nonWesterners. For example, Obeyesekere sees the mapping activities

on Cook's voyages as "symbolic performances" of colonial dominance (1992:12). And Borofsky concurs that the,

British had a drama of their own to play out. There seems little doubt, for example, that the British—with their weaponry, astronomical navigation, and ability to manufacture daggers prized by Hawaiians—viewed themselves as technologically superior to the Hawaiians. [1997:263]

Critics like MacBean are right, then, to say that there is something problematic about *FC*'s depictions of natives reacting with awe at Western technology. Although my students have not read these travelers' accounts, their viewing of *FC* is prefigured by exposure to other media representations of "techno-dramas," not to mention their own daily dependence on technology. When asked on the written survey to compare funny *FC* scenes with other texts or experiences, students cited various popular Hollywood films, including Disney films. The single most common comparison, though, was with the South African blockbuster *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980). In the 300-level class, six out of the 16 students who had previously seen *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (*GMBC* hereafter) compared it with "FC." Five students made the comparison in terms of the celebration of Western trash by indigenous peoples in both films, i.e., the Coke bottle in *GMBC* and the tin lids and biscuit boxes in *FC* (the sixth student compared *GMBC* with the confusion in *FC* over how the white men excrete). After being asked in a follow-up survey whether they saw any connections between the two films, all of the other ten students who had previously seen *GMBC* also made specific comparisons between *FC* and *GMBC*, especially in terms of the Coke bottle and headdress.<sup>5</sup> In the 100-level class, nine of 18 students had previously seen *GMBC*; four of those nine made comparisons with various scenes in "FC," including the wives packed in bags (2), the headdress (1), and seeing the airplane as a bird (1).

These comparisons with *GMBC* do not reflect well on "FC," given that the former has been thoroughly condemned by anthropologists and other academics. The main charges are the following: *GMBC* perpetuates a mythical, stereotypical image of isolated, pristine, harmonious natives while ignoring the brutal history of exploitation of the "Bushmen" under white colonialism and South African apartheid (Blythe 1986; Gar-

land and Gordon 1999; Gordon 1992, 1995; Tomaselli 1990, 1992; Volkman 1986, 1988); by exaggerating Bushmen tracking skills, it justified the recruitment of Bushmen to the South African Defence Force, to fight against SWAPO (Gilliam 1984; Gordon and Douglas 2000); it exaggerates racial differences and justifies South African apartheid by providing a parallel story of incompetent black guerillas, Bushmen who do not need or want money or modernization, and white governance through superior scientific understanding and rationality (Davis 1985, Gilliam 1984, Gordon and Douglas 2000; Volkman 1988); it animalizes the Bushmen (Blythe 1986; Gilliam 1984); and it obscures processes of domination through "imperialist nostalgia" (Rosaldo 1993). This is not to say that all these authors agree with each other, or that their critiques are not susceptible to dispute.<sup>6</sup> But these multiple critiques at least indicate that *GMBC* is a problematic representation of nonWestern Others. Indeed, *GMBC* received an official condemnation from the American Anthropological Association (see Volkman 1988).

It seems likely, then, that students' perceptions of *FC* were mediated by their previous experiences with popular films like *GMBC*. In fact, Sam Pack has persuasively suggested that, in general, mass media images have this sort of effect:

I contend that negative stereotypes of the "primitive" are inherited by and perpetuated through popular media representations. After a lifetime of television programs, feature films, music videos, video games, etc., how can consumers of the electronic age view the "exotic" in any other way? [Pack 1998; see also Pack 2000, 2002; Chalfen and Pack 1998]

Pack's argument is plausible: it is consistent, for example, with Hayden White's theory (1978) about the influence of literary models on historical writings. Of course, the students, when responding to my request for comparisons with other texts, may have simply recalled *GMBC* without that film having significantly influenced their viewing of "FC." Although it is hard to rule out that possibility, the consistency with which students in two different classes made these comparisons with *GMBC* suggests that it did influence viewing of "FC." But whatever the exact level of that influence, the striking parallels between these two films—which other viewers would presumably recognize as well—

should raise alarm bells. We could say that *FC* is guilty by association with *GMBC*, particularly in terms of the latter's exaggeration of racial/cultural differences through portrayals of native awe and misunderstanding of white technology. (Other critiques of *GMBC*, such as elision of colonial history, perpetuation of Edenic imagery, and justification of army recruitment, do not clearly apply to *FC*; see MacBean 1995:116.) When this culpability is combined with the above-noted problems with superiority humor and spectacles of technological dominance, *FC* starts to seem like a deeply flawed representation—yet another case, in other words, of the racist stereotyping identified earlier by Martínez. In fact, Martínez himself also observed students' reactions to "FC," and found they came away from it viewing the New Guinea highlanders as "almost sub-human and savage cannibals that needed colonialism in order to 'understand the world'" (1992:137). It would therefore be easy to conclude, as Martínez did, that students continue to take away toxic images from this film.

But that is precisely the problem: it is *too* easy to draw this conclusion. As I show in the remainder of the article, there is much more going on here than racist stereotyping; other interpretations of student responses to the film complicate and challenge everything said thus far.

#### INCONGRUITY HUMOR

The humor of *FC* can also be interpreted as incongruity humor. According to a prevailing theory, humor results when two disparate, incongruous elements are juxtaposed—from sudden, surprising departures from the expected, from perceptions of anomalies and matter out of place. As Immanuel Kant originally put it, "Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Murray 1993:12). Thus, many people laugh at the surprising juxtaposition of human and nonhuman animals in Gary Larson's "Far Side," such as the cartoon of a group of dinosaurs standing around smoking cigarettes, with a caption that states, "The real reason dinosaurs became extinct." A filmic example is the popular documentary "American Tongues" (Kolker and Alvarez 1986), which gets laughs by juxtaposing dialects in the United States. Anomalies are another common form of incongruity and source of humor, as Mary Douglas (1975) has shown. Putting a tin-can ("dirt," in one cultural frame) on your head is matter out of place, like shoes on the table; it is not what

you expect or normally do see in that place. Humor not only results from such a juxtaposition, but it becomes a culturally approved way of handling the anomaly. As I show in this section, the humor of *FC* is based on such incongruities and anomalies. This does not necessarily mean that a sense of superiority may not also motivate student laughter at "FC," but the perception of incongruities is certainly one motivator, and may even be a sufficient explanation in itself for the film's humor.

In fact, as a rule, first-contact situations—in which two radically different cultural frames are juxtaposed—are inherently incongruous and liable to comedic interpretations. Even serious academics sometimes publicly acknowledge this state of affairs. For example, in his presidential address to the American Society for Ethnohistory, James Axtell (1992:171–193) discussed many examples of humor in early contact situations, including humor perceived by Indians and Europeans at the time, as well as in the eyes of contemporary readers of historical records of these encounters. Apparently Axtell's talk struck a nerve, for after it his colleagues showered him with other examples of humorous first-contact situations in the Americas (Axtell 1992:172). Writing about the other side of the world, David Tomas says he was initially attracted to the history of first encounters in the Andamanese Islands because he "was drawn to these odd events that seemed to escape all classification precisely because of their ephemerality, transience, and humor" (1996:2).

Just as humor is inherent in these moments of first-contact, so is wonder and awe. Stephen Greenblatt argues that "wonder" was the "central figure in the European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference..." (1991:14). Greenblatt connects this travel discourse with philosophers like René Descartes, who argued that wonder's strength derives from the element of surprise, "the sudden and unexpected arrival of this impression" (Greenblatt 1991:19). But of course a "sudden and unexpected" surprise could just as well describe incongruity humor. Greenblatt writes that "Wonder—thrilling, potentially dangerous, momentarily immobilizing, charged at once with desire, ignorance, and fear—is the quintessential human response to what Descartes calls a 'first encounter'" (1991:20). If so, one could also say that humor is the quintessential response to the recollection of first encounters. "Recollection," rather than "experience," is probably the right



word here because initial contact itself can be so startling as to produce more fear than humor. Relief humor may be a common response in these initial moments (i.e., the laugh from sheer relief at not being harmed), but it takes time for incongruity humor to work.

It is safe to assume, then, that other academics have been amused when learning about first-contact situations, and that they were reluctant to say so in public, since commenting on humor in most academic circles leaves one vulnerable to charges of frivolity and/or insensitivity. Not being burdened with such anxieties, students, on the other hand, said what others may have felt: it is funny to see someone wearing a biscuit box on his head. And their answers consistently pointed to the incongruity factor, albeit without using that term or offering much elaboration, as in the following 100-level students' explanations for why they found the headdress scene funny:

- 1) "It's an ordinary item we see every day used in an unordinary way"—Kristin Avery.
- 2) "It was funny because it's something so ridiculous in our culture. If someone walked around campus with anything out of the ordinary, anything obscure, it would be funny"—Sally Bullock.
- 3) "...such a juxtaposition, so we see it as odd, out of place"—Megan.
- 4) "Seeing something familiar used in a very different way. It was odd, strange, and somewhat comical"—Holly.
- 5) "Irony, again. Seeing something out of place can sometimes be a little humorous." Comparison: "It's like seeing a baby wearing a grown-up shoe: something that's totally familiar and therefore "disproportionate" to the culture of the baby"—Renee Koenig.
- 6) "Seeing a person with something unusual on their head (such as a tin can) is not a common occurrence and is funny looking." Comparison: "*Signs* where they put tin foil hats on to block brain waves from aliens. Other kids movies where they put the metal spaghetti strainer on their head"—Ashley San Blise.

Virtually every student (of the 17 who found this scene funny) said something similar, about this being an unordinary image. And you can see that some of these quotations were made by the same students who

identified the headdress as childish. My deliberate withholding of the full quotations above demonstrates how easy it is to misinterpret subjects by taking their statements out of context—a familiar problem, but not a minor one in a field where so many of us have such strong moral opinions about putatively negative cultural representations.

These student statements confirm that incongruity accounted, at least in part, for the perceived humor of the headdress scenes. Taking a cue from Taussig (1993), we could say, more specifically, that these scenes present an incongruity of economic forms. The tin can and Kellogg's biscuit box are icons of capitalism: machine-produced in standardized, identical forms, and advertised and sold as commodities in a nonface-to-face, capitalist market. The headdress, on the other hand, is a unique, hand-crafted ceremonial object. A tin-can headdress is therefore a place where the impersonal suddenly meets the personal, where two different economic worlds collide in a single striking image. At the same time, there is a common ground that allows this incongruity to make sense. Both the capitalist products and the headdresses made from them are objects of desire and display. A biscuit-box hat is totally unfamiliar in one sense yet not in another—move the Kellogg's logo down a bit and you could have a marketable t-shirt in the United States. We do not have to accept Taussig's entire argument about the parallels between primitive magic and Western mimetic technologies to see that part of the appeal of such first-contact images is that they playfully juxtapose capitalist and noncapitalist economic systems.

It may be that incongruity alone can explain the humor in *FC* with little recourse to superiority theory. I remember my own two-year old son Zach laughing when he saw my mother putting a pillow on her head and asking him if it was a hat; he was old enough to realize that hats go on heads and pillows do not, yet not old enough to have developed a sense of superiority to his grandmother. As this ready-at-hand and presumably familiar example shows, incongruity can, at least theoretically, suffice as a stand-alone explanation for humor.<sup>7</sup>

But to what extent does incongruity explain the humor in *FC*? I cannot rule out the possibility that the film's humor also derived from perceived superiority in a broad sense, including what MacBean calls spectacles of technological dominance. It would be understandable if the students, even with pseudonyms, did not want to say that they found the headdress and

other scenes amusing because they made them feel culturally superior. And even if students were open to such self-incrimination, it could be hard for them to recognize a sense of superiority that is an integral, unconscious part of their world view; incongruity, on the other hand, is by definition something out of the ordinary and, thus, easier to identify. We therefore cannot expect student exegesis alone to tell us whether the film's perceived humor is based on superiority. Fortunately, though, there are other ways to get at this problem: namely, comparing the various scenes in *FC* that the students did and did not find funny.<sup>8</sup>

#### LAUGHING AT PNG IRRATIONALITY?

So what does it mean when Western viewers laugh at Papua New Guinean natives being frightened by a gramophone or airplane? Following Obeyesekere's myth model, there is a distinct—and unflattering—possibility that they are laughing at the naivete, irrationality, or stupidity of the natives. But even if such feelings of superiority may be at play in immediate reactions to certain scenes, I think that ultimately the students see the film as confirming the rationality of the Papua New Guineans.

A good example is the scene in which the natives examine the Australians' excrement, to see if they're human. The reported conclusion of that test—"Their skin is white, but their shit smells like ours"—seemed funny to the overwhelming majority of students: 15/18 in the 100-level class marked it as funny, and 13/19 in the 300-level class did the same, making it, along with the headdress scene, one of the scenes most consistently perceived as funny. Once again, this scene had a strong element of incongruity and surprise. In one sudden, unexpected moment, a number of distinctions between the cultural actors in the film were collapsed and reversed:

Skin	vs.	Shit
Body exterior		Body interior
Gods/spirits (previous status of Australians)		Humans (new status of Aus- tralians, post-test results)
Difference		Sameness

Added to all these reversals, nervous energy is released by the mention of "shit," a taboo subject in Western culture (see Morreall 1983). The combination of in-

congruity and taboo works to great comic effect, with almost every single student finding this scene funny, despite the lack of intonation (the "shit smells like ours" line appeared in subtitles) or a special visual image (the shot here is simply a highlander talking with minimal facial expression).

It would be easy to say that this scene is also funny because it reveals the technological inferiority of a nonWestern culture. In fact, William Thompson interprets student reactions to a similar scene in John Marshall's *The Hunters* (1956) in precisely this way:

At one point [in *The Hunters*], Kaow, "The Beautiful," picks up the fallen dung of the giraffe, smells it, and crumbles it in his hand. It is, anthropologically, a beautiful moment in the film. For it always raises laughter and disgust in a student audience. The average student is revolted by his perception of a savage crumbling giraffe dung in his fingers and so he is confirmed in his conviction of civilized superiority. [Thompson 1971:107]<sup>9</sup>

Yet, as Thompson goes on to say, the better students in the class recognize this "dung test" as the work of rational intelligence, the counterpart to Western medical science:

The perceptive student, however, is confirmed in his conviction of the Bushman's intelligence. Kaow crumbles the dung, examines its texture, and smells it to see how far the poison has been assimilated into the animal's system, and to guess just how long he has to wait before it drops. In what the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss calls "the science of the concrete," the mind of this savage is thinking concretely in terms of what we would more abstractly call the animal's mass, its metabolic rate, and the extrapolated time of death. It is the average student who is revolted by the sight of dung who is the real intellectual primitive, and, in fact, if he were to be trained as a doctor, he would have to learn how to handle his data as dispassionately as Kaow. [Thompson *ibid.*]<sup>10</sup>

This example raises an important question: Do viewers actually see the Papua New Guinea "feces test" as rational and logical? I investigated this issue by asking the students three follow-up questions (with-

out using terms like “rational” or “logical,” for fear of unduly shaping the answers): “1) Could the PNG have used tests of Australians’ humanness that would have been *more* effective than inspecting their feces?; 1a) If so, please specify those alternatives; 1b) If alternatives existed, why do you think the PNG chose to study feces instead?”<sup>11</sup> The students all concluded, in effect, that examining the Australians’ feces was the most effective, logical test for humanness given the circumstances. The combination of their answers to #1a-b made it clear that they were saying “no,” i.e., in those circumstances, there could not have been a more effective test than the feces examination. Fifteen of the 16 students thought of other tests that, hypothetically, could have been as effective as the feces test, such as seeing whether the Australians had blood (six students thought of this alternative), seeing their anatomy when naked (5), checking their breathing (3), and inspecting their food (2).<sup>12</sup> Yet none of the students ultimately thought that these alternative tests would have been more effective than the feces test: as every single student said in answering question 1b, the feces test was the safest way to test for humanness since it did not involve physical contact with the Australians (as opposed to drawing a blood sample or seeing them naked, etc.). Here is the way one student put it:

- 1) I think the PNG checking the feces of the Australians was fine. Breathing, eating, and getting rid of waste is something all living things do, so it only makes sense that the PNG would investigate all three attributes of the Australians. Also, checking the feces isn’t something so far fetched that Westerners wouldn’t do it either.
- 1b) I think checking the feces was an easy way to determine if the Australians were human that involved little direct contact, and it transcended the language barrier—Sally Bullock.

So the students recognized the intelligence of these nonWesterners, granting them what Obeyesekere has called “practical rationality.” The “feces test” nicely fits Obeyesekere’s distinction between practical reality and common-sense utilitarianism in terms of the former’s reflective quality, a “calculation or weighing of the issues involved in any problematic situation” (1992:20). You could say that the Papua New Guineans, like the !Kung, used astute common

sense to track animals by examining their feces, but for Obeyesekere, that would only be an example of Lévi-Strauss’ science of the concrete, which Obeyesekere finds is still dangerously close to older theories about mystical primitives, such as Lévy-Bruhl’s (Obeyesekere 1992:15). The test of the Australians’ feces, on the other hand, showed that the Papua New Guineans confronted a novel, problematic situation—first contact with outsiders, who were not known to exist previously—and, through conscious reflection, were able to make sense of that situation. In fact, the Papua New Guineans’ conclusions are coterminous with Obeyesekere’s premises, as well as those of Buddhism, in which the human body reveals humankind’s biological sameness: “Not in the rump, sex-organs or the breast... Nothing unique is in men’s bodies found” (Borofsky 1997:272). Obeyesekere—and presumably others—would therefore be glad to know that these students recognize the practical rationality of these nonWesterners. The “shit smells like ours” line initially seems funny to the students because of its incongruity and taboo subject, but it ends up being one of those jokes that has more truth to it than one first realized. Perhaps if Thompson had directly asked his students what they thought of the giraffe-dung test, he would have found that there was not such a large gap between the “average” and “perceptive” student. Or perhaps the rise of multiculturalism since the time he was writing has closed that gap (more on this below). For whatever reason, my students grant enough rationality to the Papua New Guineans to make the superiority theory of humor an improbable explanation for why they laugh when hearing about the feces test of humanness.

There is a similar dynamic at work in the headdress scene. In the second class session, I asked the students to answer the following question individually, in writing: “Can you think of any historical situations in which Westerners placed tremendous value on something of no value to the other culture (like the PNG headdress with the biscuit box)? Please give examples (if any exist).” Most of the students made the comparison with Western money and gold, including the Australians’ search for gold in the film. In the 300-level class, 11 out of 15 students compared the headdress with either the gold in the film or with oil; and in the 100-level class, seven of 16 students mentioned gold or money.<sup>13</sup> Without any prompting, these students were able to close the loop, to see the parallels between the two cultures despite all

the ostensible differences. Both cultures placed great value on a rare hard metal and used it for ornamentation purposes. This is not to say that the students endorsed the Australians' search for gold, just that they perceived a cultural equivalence, and, the headdress, like the "feces test," was deemed logical. Confirming the view that Obeyesekere and Sahlins are not always as far apart as they claim (Borofsky 1997; Geertz 1995), the students combine Sahlins' sensitivity to cultural symbolism with Obeyesekere's emphasis on human commonalities.

#### LAUGHING AT PNG FEAR?

The other implication of previous critiques—Obeyesekere's in general and MacBean's and Rony's in particular—is that *FC* viewers are laughing at native fear of Western technology, which makes such laughter complicit with colonial dominance. I did not find that this was the case.

If the students were only or primarily laughing at native fear, they would have laughed at the scene where one of the New Guinean interviewees recalls that "we wet and shitted ourselves with fear and confusion" upon seeing an airplane for the first time. In fact, in light of the overwhelming response to the "their shit smells like ours" scene, we might have expected the incongruity of this situation ("over-reaction" to a plane, an adult defecating in his or her pants), together with the simple mention of the word "shit," to elicit gales of laughter. Yet only one student in the two classes marked the "we shitted ourselves" scene as funny; 97% (36/37) of the students did not see it as funny.<sup>14</sup> The students have no trouble laughing at incongruity and even native awe, but when the native reaction crosses over into outright fear, the humor is lost. As one student said:

There were some parts in the film where I thought something could be funny if one was insensitive. But I think it's sad instead. For example, when they said they shitted themselves at the sight of the airplane landing. It could be seen as funny just because it's so outrageous to us to be afraid of something like an airplane—Jessica Berger.

It is also remarkable that students do not laugh more at the gramophone scene. Only three out of 18 students in the 100-level class classified it as a funny scene, and in the 300-level class only six out of 19 did the same.

By comparison, 17/18 in the 100-level class and 16/19 students in the 300-level class thought the headdress scene was funny. And even those who marked the gramophone scene as funny did not find it as funny as other scenes; in the 300-level class, for example, the "two funniest scenes" in the movie were the headdress scene and the "shit smells like ours" scene.<sup>15</sup>

This is remarkable because the first half of the film primarily deals with disturbing violence (MacBean 1995:115), so the switch to the incongruous gramophone scene should be quite surprising and, thus, potentially funny. In fact, the gramophone scene is a turning point in the film in terms of the directors' construction of it. The manipulations that Ruby (1995) refers to, in editing of footage and artificial creation of soundtrack, are germane because they show how the directors want us to view PNG reactions to Australian technology. Starting with the gramophone scene, we see the Papua New Guineans laughing more and more onscreen—and the student audience, in turn, starts to find more and more humor in the film after this point. The gramophone scene itself ends with an old man laughing and making quick, jerky shoulder motions reminiscent of Charlie Chaplain or Woody Allen. The soundtrack also signals this shift to a comedic frame. For the first part of the film, we often hear spooky music—what Ruby (1995:143) calls an "overwrought electronic score" and MacBean (1994, 1995) calls "ominous electronic music."<sup>16</sup> But suddenly, in the gramophone scene, we hear an up-beat song, "Looking on the Bright Side of Life," which is radically incongruous with the images on the screen of startled, fearful New Guineans who view the gramophone as a box full of ghosts. This combination has all the ingredients for comedy noted earlier—incongruity, surprise, a single powerful visual image—as well as an aural cue. If anything, by the time the headdress scene appears a few minutes later, after we hear a long New Guinean recollection of the stealing of the tin lid, the viewer should experience less surprise and comic effect. So why did most viewers find the headdress scene so much funnier than the gramophone scene?

I think there are two interrelated reasons. First, by the time the headdress appears, viewers have seen the Papua New Guineans laughing at themselves (i.e., the children laughing as the man recalls stealing the tin lid), which gives them the message that they, too, are now permitted to laugh.<sup>17</sup> Second, the natives are clearly not afraid of the headdress, whereas they were

visibly shaken by the gramophone. Once again, then, student viewers did not laugh as much when extreme fear was visibly present among the Papua New Guineans in the gramophone scene, which is all the more striking in light of the film's editing strategies.

There is an underlying reason for such perceptions of humor in this film: these students are generally sympathetic with the Papua New Guineans and not with the Australians, whom they view as rapacious colonialists. Nobody in either class found it funny, for example, when James Leahy frankly admitted he was there for his own profit and then laughingly said (echoing the purported reply of a white businessman accused of being a robber), "Well, he said I didn't come up here to get a suntan." In fact, no student shared the Leahys' sense of humor in any way: none marked as funny any scene where the Leahys smiled or laughed. To the contrary, the students were more likely to laugh *at the expense of the whites*, such as when they are seen being carried across the river by native porters. More than half the 300-level class (10/19) found that river-crossing scene funny because it was so ironic: here were self-identified rugged explorers afraid to get their clothes wet. The students found the scene "outrageous" (Tyson Bernhardt) and "ridiculous" (Kyle)—a symbol of colonial arrogance and "ignorance" (Jane). As one student (Chas Beshears) summed it up, "The Australians were treated like kings. They in no way deserved this treatment, and the viewer knows it." I would add that the reversal here has a gendered dimension: when films depict someone being carried across water, usually it is a man carrying a woman, from Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn in the *African Queen* to the white male scientist carrying the female teacher in *GMBC*.

A skeptic might wonder whether the students were just strategically putting on a "cultural sensitivity" front so as not to be negatively judged by their teacher; at least such dissimulation strategies are found among other American college students (Martínez 1996; Moffat 1989). But I do not think dissimulation accounts for my students' answers, or if it does, then all the students in all my anthropology classes have been doing a remarkable job of dissimulation for years. My anthropology students are decidedly liberal, and consistently on the side of oppressed peoples. This is particularly true for the majors and upper-level students, who have chosen a course of study that tends to be sympathetic to the plight of oppressed peoples, given anthropol-

ogy's commitment to participant-observation in Third World cultures. In my 300-level class, many students were active in peace, social justice, and minority organizations on campus; and in class even when I tried to encourage debate by soliciting defense of media stories on the Iraq war, almost none of the students would bite. The students in the 100-level course, by contrast, were less openly active in political organizations and less inclined to voice strong political opinions in class, although they, too, tended to be sympathetic with indigenous peoples in class discussions.

#### WONDER, HUMOR, AND EPIPHANIES

It should be clear, then, that students are not laughing at Papua New Guinean stupidity or fear in "FC." But I would go even further than saying that the students' humor is not malicious. More positively, I think it derives from an intellectual impulse that can be called the delight of insight. Far from "just a joke," incongruity humor is inherently connected to intellectual processes, including nimble perspectivalism and creative linking of ostensibly disparate phenomena. Sammy Basu characterizes these connections as follows:

Humor gives reason room to play. Truth has (flip) sides. Texts are not necessarily univocal, neither is language. Both obtain their meaning through interpretation and usage. Humor finds ambiguities, contradictions and parables in what is otherwise taken literally. The comic is itself a form of contingency, novelty, re-creation, re-description. Aristotle noticed this, too: "those who joke in a tasteful way are called ready-witted, which implies a sort of readiness to turn this way and that," as did Kant. Humor acts as a lens in a skeptical and perspectival epistemology through which one witnesses what is absent from the "whole truth." There is, of course, no reason to assume that the comic perspective is any more true than the serious discourse that it debunks. Still, it is usually a veracity at once economical and hyperbolic that accounts for really delicious humor. At the very least, humor suggests that all knowledge... is laughably partial and incomplete. [1999:388]

Not only is the intellect-humor connection well established (yet repeatedly forgotten) by philosophers, as Basu notes, but social psychologists have more re-

cently verified this connection with experimental evidence (see Murray 1993). Indeed, from what I have seen, students enjoy the buzz of a sudden altering of their normal perspective, the surprising discoveries of cultural juxtaposition and analysis—the sudden leap from seeing the “holy mouth men” as part of an exotic culture (Miner 1956), or from seeing white Australians as gods to humans whose shit stinks. As one student said about the gramophone scene: “...in a way, it *is* a box of ghosts, though.”

Just as I argued above that the incongruity of first-contact situations makes them particularly prone to wonder and humor, I would argue that such encounters are linked to cognitive processes as well. In other words, we should add humor to the connection between wonder and intellectual discovery that has been well articulated by philosophers dating back to Aristotle:

Such terms, which recur in philosophy from Aristotle through the seventeenth century, made wonder an almost inevitable component of the discourse of discovery, for by definition wonder is an instinctive recognition of difference, the sign of a heightened attention, ‘a sudden surprise of the soul,’ as Descartes puts it (p. 362), in the face of the new. [Greenblatt 1991:20]<sup>18</sup>

Not only do the students themselves enjoy the cognitive thrill of a good joke, they get vicarious pleasure from seeing that cognitive thrill experienced by others, which at least partly accounts for the perennial appeal of media images of natives marveling over Western technology. Nor is this desire to “give the gift of humor” limited to undergraduates: even sensitive, seasoned anthropologists occasionally confess to fantasizing about native awe at their technologies. For example, Stephen Leavitt, who has done fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, admits: “In spite of myself, I often wondered what it would be like to take a Bumbita man to San Diego, to show him the freeways, the skyscrapers, the factories and shipyards” (2000:305). Following Lamont Lindstrom’s bold analysis of the connections between Western unrequited love, capitalist desire, and the anthropological literature on cargo cults (1993), Leavitt interprets his impulse as “a romantic fantasy of the fulfillment of desire” (Leavitt 2000:305). I agree with this cargo-cult interpretation, particularly since Leavitt’s fantasy concerns a post-contact, capitalistic situation, but I would

add that this fantasy is also linked to the thrill—and humor—of intellectual discovery, whether experienced directly or vicariously. We should expect scholars and teachers, whose business it is to hand out surprises, to be drawn to such images of wonder and humor. I do not necessarily mean to endorse such first-contact fantasies; in fact, knowing that many of history’s wrongdoings have been committed by people intent on bringing the best of their culture to others, perhaps the presence of a gift-giving impulse should make us *more* suspicious of Western narratives of native awe. But even if that is the case, I think it is worth recognizing the intellectual dimensions of first-contact narratives as well.

## CONCLUSION

Myth models do exist, as Obeyesekere argues, but the way they affect the interpretation of specific texts by actual audiences always remains an open question. This can be clearly seen in the differences between *FC* responses documented by Martínez and myself: relatively slight differences in audience position—same age group and “culture,” different time period, campus, and course design—resulted in radically different perceptions of the same film text and genre. In fact, Martínez himself found changes in student responses after only a five-year period:

In 1987 students were comparatively more prone to express their spontaneous, ethnocentric interpretations and ‘negative’ judgements of the represented, and to reject cultural behavior they disliked or could not process adequately. By 1993, viewers appeared more ‘savvy’ and ‘relativistic’ in their interpretations, yet also more reserved and deceptive in their personal opinions. [1996:87]

Martínez attributed such sensitivity to,

increasing socialization of students into multicultural contexts, the impact of postmodern media, instructors’ heightened attention to the politics of representation and corresponding critical teaching practices. [1996:87]

If audience responses can vary this much after only five years on the same college campus, we can only imagine how much variation divides 21st century

North American students, early 20th century Australian colonialists like the Leahy brothers, and the explorers of Captain Cook's day. Even within a single historical moment, receptions of cultural representations will be determined by differences in social positioning, including variations in culture, religion, occupation, ideology, and gender (Jhala 1996). Even within the same demographic, differences will be found according to student background. In this study, only students in the 100-level class made comparisons between natives and children, and the 300-level students were quicker to see the connection between Australian gold and PNG tin headdresses. If I focused less on an emotional response like laughter and more on anthropological skills like the ability to read cultural symbolism or critically evaluate evidence, I am sure I would have found even more significant differences between my lower-level and upper-level students. With baseline studies like this one and further research with larger, more varied samples, researchers could look at the way responses to ethnographic film vary according to these and other factors.

Without the ethnographic research that Ruby (2000) and others have called for, we risk conflating all these distinctions. We risk falling into what Greenblatt calls "a kind of sentimental pessimism that simply collapses everything into a global vision of domination and subjection" (1991:152, n. 4); or, echoing critiques of Said's *Orientalism*, we risk falling into an essentialist reading of the West that replicates precisely that which it criticizes.

Interesting questions remain about student receptions of ethnographic films. Although I have tried to show that incongruity explains most of the film's humor, I still would not rule out the possibility that student laughter was fueled by some sense of superiority as well. I did not find a great deal of reliable evidence for the superiority interpretation, but perhaps other research designs would produce different results. Certainly humor will continue to provide an interesting angle precisely because it tends to be so ambiguous and complex.

Complexity will increase as we move from the empirical to the ethical: that is, questions about our moral obligations as film directors, viewers, and instructors. MacBean (1994, 1995) takes Connolly and Anderson to task for not more fully contextualizing PNG cultures, thereby leaving their films open to racist interpretations. Up to a certain point, I accept Connolly's response, which was to deny responsibility for every

conceivable reading of his films. A reviewer got it right when he said that what makes *FC* such a great film is that the directors "never explain too much" (quoted in Connolly 1996:100). As Connolly says, the challenge filmmakers face is to "make the drama meaningful without clogging the film's arteries...because nothing destroys a film as easily as too much information" (Connolly 1996:100). In fact, the same point applies in the print medium: as I have written elsewhere (Wogan 2004a:136), many ethnographies are needlessly marred by an "everything and the kitchen sink" mode, [in which] five examples are used where one would have sufficed... But at what point is it acceptable for filmmakers to proclaim, as Connolly does, "we are filmmakers, not publicists or educators" (1996:100)? This dichotomy between professional filmmakers and trained anthropologists is precisely what Ruby (2000) sees as the fundamental shortcoming of most ethnographic films. It seems disingenuous for Connolly, who has addressed anthropological audiences and even stated his affinity for anthropological methods (Lutkehaus 1994), to turn around and use his status as a filmmaker to swear off responsibility for his films.

MacBean (1994, 1995) insists that his most damning criticism is that *FC* leaves a gap between "then and now." In a spirited response, Connolly (1996:99-100) argues that some of the information omitted in the film would have actually been *more* damning of the Papua New Guineans. Connolly could argue that the film's "then-vs.-now" dichotomy actually protects the Papua New Guineans by preventing the viewer from realizing that, to this very day, some New Guineans see white visitors as powerful spirits (see Leavitt 2000 for descriptions of such reactions). Does MacBean really want to argue that this film should have informed Western viewers that they are still being viewed as spirits? MacBean should be careful in calling for the elimination of then-now gaps: he might just get what he wishes for.

I personally do not wish for the elimination of all ambiguity, since that would mean the death of art and thought. I am comfortable saying this because I believe responsibility for cultural representations ultimately lies with viewers and instructors. I found a discrepancy between the 100-level and 300-level classes in terms of the latter's students more quickly catching on to the parallels between the Australians' obsession with gold and the Papua New Guineans' ceremonial use of tin cans and other "trash." This difference between the two

classes can be partly credited to the value added by age/maturity and anthropology coursework, both of which seem to heighten sensitivity to Western colonialism and crosscultural comparison. Another factor apparently at work was that the 100-level students were more easily misled by my question, assuming that the other examples I asked for had to come from other cultures, rather than under their noses, in the film itself. But I wouldn't exaggerate these differences. After I pointed out to the rest of the 100-level class that other students saw a parallel between the Australian gold and PNG tin cans (the perspectival problem of trash-vs.-treasure distinctions), the point immediately clicked, and they said, in so many words, "Ah, of course—we should have thought of that!" This example demonstrates that we should give student viewers and ourselves more credit: we should recognize our capacity as instructors to fill in filmic gaps that trouble us, and we should allow students to wrestle with complexities.

We also need *more* humor, not less. Humor is not just a way to reach the masses (no small benefit for anyone who believes in a public anthropology), but a way to create insight into complex situations—and to create cultural critiques, which, like incongruity humor, employ techniques of juxtaposition (Marcus and Fischer 1986) and subversive verbal play (Rosaldo 1993:192). "Nacirema" is wonderful, but the field of anthropology, after a hundred years or so of professional existence, should be able to come up with more than this one good joke and the few others that get trotted out at times like this. Even now, in an age of experimental ethnographic writing, few anthropologists have answered Renato Rosaldo's call for satirical, insightful cultural analyses in the tradition of Veblen and Goffman (1993:62). Whether inspired by Goffman, Montaigne (see Basu 1999:384; Greenblatt 1991:119–151), or Seinfeld, we could use some more jokes.

Of course humor risks offending people, so it will not make a simple addition to our rhetorical repertoire. It may be precisely Connolly and Anderson's lack of formal status in anthropology—their liberation from fears of offending anthropologist colleagues and PNG collaborators—that allowed them to create such a complex, funny film. But, in a sense, being on the verge of offending others is as it always has been in anthropology. As Geertz said in his reflections on the Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate, anthropology is a discipline designed for vexation: "Anthropology generally, and cultural anthropology in particular, draws the greater part of its

vitality from the controversies that animate it" (Geertz 1985:4). All the more reason, then, to make each other laugh—and think—while we're at it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As a reflection of his vision of more rigorous, theoretically-grounded filmmaking, Jay Ruby proposes reserving the term "ethnographic film" for:

those works in which the maker had formal training in ethnography, intended to produce an ethnography, employed ethnographic field practices, and sought validation among those competent to judge the work as an ethnography. [2000:6]

Although I agree with Ruby's vision, I use the term "ethnographic film" here simply because it is immediately recognizable.

<sup>2</sup> *FC* has won the following awards: Academy Award Nominee; Festival de Popoli, Florence, Italy, First Prize; Cinema du Reel, Paris, Grand Prix; Sydney Film Festival, Best Documentary; Australian Film Institute Awards, Best Feature Documentary; Silver Sesterce, Nyon; San Francisco Film Festival, First Prize in Sociology; American Film Festival Red Ribbon; Australian Teachers of Media, Best Documentary.

<sup>3</sup> Other anthropology instructors, including instructors from universities in the United States South who heard my conference paper on this topic (Wogan 2004b), told me that their students always laugh at "FC." This is not to treat students as a homogenous group; various students presumably laugh at different scenes and for different reasons, as ethnographic studies would show.

<sup>4</sup> Although MacBean is not sure whether the record-biting scene was invented by Flaherty, it was, in fact, a filmic recreation of something Flaherty saw Nanook do (Rotha and Ruby 1983:31).

<sup>5</sup> In a follow-up during the class period after the initial survey, I asked for written answers to the following questions: 1) When did you see *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, if ever?; 2) If you saw it, do you see any similarities with *First Contact*? Please explain.

<sup>6</sup> Tomaselli, for example, argues that Gilliam, Blythe, and others have sometimes exaggerated (Tomaselli 1990); Afrikaaners may be more taken with pastoral longings than pro-apartheid sentiments (Tomaselli 1990:77; 1992:213); and the San themselves do not necessarily agree that *GMBC* is racist or that hunting is primitive essentialism (Tomaselli 2002:208–209).



Gordon also refers to Rosaldo's thesis as a "crude psych-  
chologism" (Gordon 1995:44), and he altered some  
of his own views on cultural authenticity between the  
writing of the first (Gordon 1992) and second edition  
of his book (Gordon and Douglas 2000).

- <sup>7</sup> I agree with Oring (2003:4) that children's humor is generally a problematic guide to adult humor. I only use this toddler example, however, to illustrate the theoretical *possibility* that humor could be based on incongruity alone--and the toddler, who clearly has no sense of superiority, is uniquely qualified to illustrate this point.
- <sup>8</sup> Although I realize humor does not always result in outward "laughter," I use the transitive verb "laugh" sometimes in order to reduce the number of passive-voice constructions like "was seen as amusing," etc.
- <sup>9</sup> Thanks to Tad Tuleja for drawing my attention to this passage.
- <sup>10</sup> Indeed, stool samples can symbolize biomedical, scientific knowledge: in *GMBC*, the white "scientist" studies elephant dung with elaborate equipment. None of the students in either class ever compared this aspect of *FC* and *GMBC*, perhaps because most had seen *GMBC* more than seven years prior and only remembered more central, reoccurring symbols like the Coke bottle. Also, there is minimal comic effect the first (and only) time we see the scientist taking a dung sample in *GMBC*: this action is not accompanied by special music or slapstick-style speeding up of the film, and it is not even immediately clear what the "scientist" is doing.
- <sup>11</sup> These questions were asked at the start of the class session after the film was watched, and the questions were only asked of the 100-level class. I still had not yet explained any of the results of the survey nor my reasons for asking all these questions. Questions were written on an overhead transparency, and students filled out answers independently on their own paper. Two students were absent, so the total number on this follow-up survey is 16, rather than 18. To clarify question #1, I added verbally that any alternative test of humanness would have to use the level of technology that the PNG seemed to have had at that time.
- <sup>12</sup> Perhaps this misreading of the exact question occurred because a) the wording and/ or numbering was confusing (in retrospect, I should have numbered the questions as "1a," "1b," and "1c"); and/or b) the question was written on a transparency projected onto a screen at the front of the room, which made it harder to see the exact wording of the questions (especially the phrase "more effective"). For all the other surveys, each student had a photocopied "hard copy" form at his or her desk. I used the transparency, rather than a sheet with pre-set spaces for each question, in order to save paper and not limit or effect the length of answers.
- <sup>13</sup> Four students in the 300-level class did not answer this question because they took more time on earlier questions and ran out of time. The other four students answered as follows: solitude, the outdoors, weapons, and food.
- <sup>14</sup> The one student who did find this funny said he did so because he "was unaware that fear and confusion were directly related to bowel movements"--Henry.
- <sup>15</sup> The survey allowed students to list as many funny scenes as they wanted, but it asked them at the end to put an asterisk "next to the two scenes that you thought were the funniest of those described above." Both classes overwhelmingly marked the headdress and "shit smells like ours" scenes as the two funniest. Of the six students (in the 300-level course) who also found the gramophone scene funny, all six marked the headdress scene as one of the two funniest scenes; four marked the "shit smells" scene as one of the two funniest; and two marked the "they must have huge penises" scene as one of the two funniest.
- <sup>16</sup> Although MacBean (1994, 1995) and Ruby (1995) debate the relationship between these sound effects and the film's anti-colonial message, they agree that the initial music was ominous.
- <sup>17</sup> This was also true of the final scene of the movie, where the New Guineans are shown laughing at the earlier Leahy footage. As one student noted, "It's like seeing a home movie of yourself years later and you see yourself so differently" (Jessica Berger). Not only does such PNG laughter make it easier to laugh along with them, it makes it easier for students like Jessica to empathize with the New Guineans.
- <sup>18</sup> But just as an excess of difference or wonder can result in mental and moral paralysis, as these philosophers noted (Greenblatt 1991:20), so incongruities must be moderate and comprehensible to be deemed funny (Murray 1993:15).

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