

# the village VOICE

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**FIRST CONTACT.** Produced and directed by Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson. Distributed by Filmmakers Library. **TROBRIAND CRICKET.** Directed by Jerry W. Leach and Gary Kildea. Produced by the Office of Information, Government of Papua New Guinea. Distributed by the University of California Extension Media Center. At the Film Forum, through December 20.

**THE COURTESANS OF BOMBAY.** Directed by Ismail Merchant. Produced by Merchant Ivory Productions for Channel 4 (London). At the Museum of Modern Art, December 8 and 12.

**YOU THE BETTER** and **OUT OF HAND.** Two films by Ericka Beckman. At the Millennium, December 10.

There are some documentaries where you take what you can get; prize archive material often transcends the limitations of its immediate context. Thus, the Australian *First Contact* is remarkable mainly for its artless footage of two hitherto unacquainted races meeting each other face to face. The place is New Guinea, the time's the 1930s, and the images of frozen astonishment are priceless. Giving Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson's hour-long film added piquancy are interpolated interviews with sundry survivors of this epochal close encounter—two venerable prosecutors who, in their daredevil youth made of fortune panning gold out of the central New Guinea highlands; and the nameless, now grizzled aborigines who were there to greet them.

An affable postscript to the age of imperial expansion, *First Contact* has a plot familiar to any reader of *Uncle Scrooge* comics: venturing where no white duck has ever gone, Huey, Dewey, and Louie—in this case, the three Leahy brothers—discover hidden treasure in a lost valley of colorful natives. Encountering a new tribe, the Leahy brothers typically demonstrate their occult powers by shooting a pig (great footage of people standing transfixed or bolting in individual panic at the sound of the gun's report). With luck, they are able to bamboozle the locals into giving up their unspecified traditional activities and working the gold mine for a salary of seashells.

No matter whom you identify with, the film offers as pithy a demonstration of capitalist development as one could imagine. Indeed, if I remember my undergraduate anthropology correctly, Melanesia in general (and Papuans in particular) have frequently been used to demonstrate the innate consumerist greed of the human species. Confronted with European culture, these primitives sought to realize new opportunities to gain social status by the traditional means, namely proving one's ability through the accumulation of wealth. (Hence, the cargo cults endemic to the region.) "They loved a big sing-sing," one Leahy seems to recall amid footage of several score aborigines stamping the ground to create an airplane landing strip. Not irrationally, the workers explain what they figured this would cause "good things to fall from the sky."

"They thought we were supermen—and I suppose we were," another Leahy flatters himself. Actually, the native veterans of his regime reveal themselves to have been somewhat more sophisticated. If they initially took the Leahy brothers for extraterrestrials or ghosts they soon concluded, after a scientific investigation, that "their skin is different but their shit smells like ours." As the capper, a now-widened woman recalls "We had sex together and then we knew they were only men." This makes for great advertising copy and, in fact, the line appears under a picture of a nubile native girl in the film's hilariously sleazy promotional brochure. Unfortunately, *First Contact* tells us very little about the psychological effects of the white man's appearance.

This is too bad because *First Contact* is actually as much science fiction as it is anthropology, concerning nothing less than time travel, space invasion, and the annihilation of the world—as well as what Columbus might've brought back if he only had a Betamax. The filmmakers are not devoid of irony—*First Contact's* theme song is the depression ditty "Looking at the Bright Side"—but they're short

## FILM



Beckman's *You the Better* brought out *l'esprit sauvage* in the NYFF.

## Kind of Close Encounters

on imagination and the movie, which has been enormously popular in Australia (as well as the festival circuit), feels incomplete at 54 minutes.

Rounding out the Film Forum bill is an underground ethnographic classic, the justly celebrated *Trobriand Cricket: An ingenious response to colonialism*, made in 1975 by Jerry W. Leach and Gary Kildea. While *First Contact* hints at the human response to extraterrestrial incursion, *Trobriand Cricket*—set on the nearby islands familiar to readers of Bronislaw Malinowski—provides a more complex look at the thinking of savages. The film opens with a mondo absurdo image of assorted Trobrianders dressed in loincloths and feathers, capering about in a mysterious frenzy as one of their number flails a stick at a ball. "The Trobriand islands have a population of 15,000," the solemn narrator informs us, "and a unique way of playing cricket."

Taking the English game (introduced to the Trobriands by Methodist missionaries) as a substitute for warfare, the Trobrianders adapted it to conclude as many players as show up, an umpire for each side, a vast litany of ribald chants, and a tacit agreement that displaces the actual competition into the realm of showmanship and always allows the home team to win the actual cricket match. The bulk of the movie annotates a contest between the Scarlet Reds and the Airplanes. (The latter team even has its own version of the San Diego Chicken, a mascot who imitates a European tourist running around in a flowered shirt and gawking through wooden binoculars.)

The tone of *Trobriand Cricket* could not be bettered by one of Peter Greenaway's imaginary BBC films and it received nothing less than a rave review from Edmund Leach, the president of the Royal Anthropological Institute. "Quite

apart from the obvious nostalgic interest for any social anthropologist," he pointed out in the institute newsletter, *Trobriand Cricket* was made "with the active cooperation of the local Kabisawali Movement and the sponsorship of the Office of Information of the imminently independent government of Papua New Guinea" and "represents something of a breakthrough in methodology."

*Trobriand Cricket*, Sir Edmund concludes, "is not so much an ethnographic image of a famous corner of the Disappearing World viewed by sympathetic European outsiders, as a piece of propaganda by indigenous Trobrianders in favor of their national game, which, with good reason, they consider to be far superior to the English 'rubbish' from which it is derived."

A more melancholy fix on cultural transformation is afforded by Ismail Merchant's new documentary, *The Courtesans of Bombay* (this Thursday and Monday at the Museum of Modern Art). The film records life in Pavanpuli, a moldering tenement block sheltering a caste of courtesans—singers and dancers who once performed for India's maharajas and nawabs and now strut their stuff, in overcrowded apartments, each night for the male public at large.

Show biz aside, Pavanpuli is a fascinating world whose male inhabitants are mainly drones and where the birth of a girl is a prized event. Families live 10 to a room and are often supported by a single courtesan. Housing perhaps 5000 people, the tenement is a self-contained universe where erotic intrigue runs rife. Left to its own devices, the local color (not to mention the furnishings) of this fabulous dive could easily live up to the film's porno-exotic title (how do you say *The Cowgirls of Dallas* in Hindi?) but Merchant hokes

it up with imported actors, regaling us with soliloquies to explain the goings-on as well as the profession's sad decline. The traditional courtesan dances have been debased by the influence of Bombay's *filmi* culture—an odd complaint for a moviemaker to lodge.

*Courtesans of Bombay* inaugurates a complete Ismail Merchant-James Ivory-Ruth Praver Jhabvala retrospective (running at the museum through the end of the month) and like much of the trio's work—whether set in India, Paris, Hollywood, or Boston—it suffers from severe bouts of blandness. The film lacks the fierce purity of Mani Kaul's *Dhruvad* as well as the casual verité of Mira Nair's *So Far from India* (to cite the two most recent Indian documentaries to play New York). Having opened the door on a scene whose richness could sate a Balzac, Merchant settles for wan nostalgia and the dubious platitudes of phony folk wisdom.

Like vintage cartoons, the films of Ericka Beckman are filled with nervous activity and comic violence, sexual imagery and syncopated energy, perceptual game playing and ingenious homemade special effects. Her work has affinities to the early plays of Richard Foreman as well as the trickier sections of Robert Nelson and William Wiley's *The Great Blondino*, but basically she's an idiosyncratic original with a full-blown style that's all her own.

Beckman's narrative are fraught with enigma but she has a recurring core of thematic preoccupations—competition, cognition, role-playing, organization of ground rules, "the coordination of the self in the physical world"—which have characterized her work for the past half-dozen years. With its sing-song voice tracks, choreographed calisthenics and iconic use of sports equipment or cheerleaders, the Beckman oeuvre is something like the *Jane Fonda Work-Out Book* of the avant-garde. If anything, many find her work too entertaining to take seriously.

Thus, one of the more illuminating events at the last New York Film Festival was the half-hour pandemonium that accompanied the screening of Beckman's recent *You the Better*. The film was attacked by a sustained volley of hisses, whistles, and derisive clapping. At the end, Beckman was not only booed but actually pelted with programs. In short, the audience (who had paid to see *Passion*) offered a more pristine example of primitive behavior than any to be found in the Trobriand Islands.

Actually, *You the Better* (which will be shown this Saturday at Millennium, along with Beckman's earlier *Out of Hand*) has more in common with *Trobriand Cricket* than one might suppose. An inexplicable contest, the film represents a mysterious gambling game—half dodge ball, half roulette—played by a mainly male team inside something like an abstract slot machine. It's *The Wide World of Sports* as pure spectacle, an essence of Americanness delivered with a maximum of rattling pow. There's no apparent resolution but, as was pointed out in the film's lone review (by Armond White in the *Voice*, Beckman's "command of screen space" is complemented by "a terrific sense of edited rhythm that even the millionaire technicians of *Tron* could envy."

Less focused, Beckman's 1980 *Out of Hand* (the last of her super-8 films) is also a kind of contest. Most of the action takes place in a miniature colonial-style house; the protagonist is a young man searching for an unknown missing object. Everything is set in an ambiguous interior space and accompanied by an abstract doo-wop mantra ("gotta gotta get it... gotta gotta get it"). As with all of Beckman's film, the laws of physics are highly malleable and much of the action is an Oskar Fischinger—like dance of outsized, rotating cubes and empty suitcases. Frought with images of break-in and loss, the film suggests an Allstate Insurance commercial as it may appear to an autistic child and will probably never be shown at Lincoln Center.