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**Cowboys and Aliens:
Body Techniques and Audience Reception in Malaita, Solomon Islands**

Geoffrey Hobbis

Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among the Lau of Malaita Province, Solomon Islands, this paper revisits the “imperial cowboy problem” through an anthropology of technology approach. It specifically examines audiences’ preference for Westerns, or “cowboy movies,” and rejection of science fiction, or “new technology movies.” Non-verbal, visual communication, material cultures and body techniques are shown to be particularly significant for how unintended audiences engage with foreign visual media in light of their own socio-cultural context.

Introduction

Before the proliferation of mobile and smartphones in the Solomon Islands starting in 2010, residents of rural areas did not have much choice when it came to watching movies. Some villages had ad hoc movie theaters (*muvi haos*) where audiences usually sat on the ground in a leaf house and watched a small selection of VHS or DVD movies chosen by village elites (Hobbis 2017; White 1992). Today, with mobile digital technologies, public and elite-controlled consumption of audio-visual materials is no longer the only or even primary way of accessing foreign movies. Mobile digital technologies, fitting in the palm of a hand, are often individually owned and used. At the same time, mobile phones have led to an explosion in the number of audio-visual materials available to individual villagers through the increased computational capacities of mobile phones and their microSD cards (125MB to 2GB storage capacity), and the regular influx of audio-visual materials, often foreign movies, in the form of remittances from urban relatives.

These movies have come to matter profoundly as they are being integrated into social relationships and, as I have shown elsewhere (Hobbis 2017), in particular into debates about how best to raise children. In Gwou’ulu Village, Lau Lagoon, Malaita Province, where I completed ethnographic fieldwork in 2014-2015, residents used foreign movies as ways to instill particular

understandings of moral masculinity and femininity in their children. In this article, I examine how Lau-speakers understand the foreign visual media to which they have an increasing access to develop a better understanding of the visual, socio-cultural mechanics of audience receptions.¹

Based on twelve months of participant observation-based fieldwork and 100 interviews about mobile phones as telephonic and movie-watching devices, I specifically discuss two movie preferences for audiences in a small village in North Malaita called Gwou'ulu: (1) the choice to watch Westerns—popularly referred to as cowboy movies—and (2) the choice not to watch science fiction movies—popularly referred to as new technology movies.²

The agency of “unintended audiences” (Jhala 1994) such as the villagers of Gwou'ulu is hard to grasp. As Hughes notes, “film is formed through a kind of dialogic anticipation of response and inflected with the expectation of an answer from an audience... Audiences are already implicitly inscribed in film as it is being made” (2011: 294). However, close to none of the audio-visual materials watched in Gwou'ulu has been made with a Melanesian, and especially not Malaitan, audience in mind. During my time in the village there was only one local, professionally produced movie.³ It was a brief clip set in the Solomon Islands that was designed to instruct citizens on how to vote in the upcoming elections, with the actors speaking in the lingua franca of the country, Solomon Islands Pijin, with which most villagers were familiar. Few villagers saw this clip and even fewer enjoyed it. The vast majority of movies that Gwou'ulu villagers do watch are set and produced abroad, for “other” audiences.

I present an anthropology of technology approach to studying audience reception that transcends a focus on dialogue and themes. This means treating social movie watching as a technological system with the viewer in the center of a web of connections inside and outside of being an audience member; and to account, more concretely, for the significance of non-verbal human communication, body techniques and gestures that are deployed in relation to technological operations (see Lemonnier 2012). Accordingly, in order to examine the movie watching choices of Gwou'ulu villagers anthropologically I investigate day to day life in the village, specifically material cultures and body techniques, to find correlations between the technological processes that are present, or absent, in Gwou'ulu, and the cowboy and new technology movies that Gwou'ulu villagers choose or do not choose to watch (see Lemonnier 1992:52). By so doing, I show how villagers primarily interpret foreign visual media through the material cultures that are displayed, and the body techniques that are performed on the screen.

This challenges dominant argumentations about the role of themes in determining the popularity of cowboy movies in the Global South, what Damon Salesa calls the “Imperial Cowboy” (2010: 334).

The Imperial Cowboy Problem

In my summary of the “Imperial Cowboy Problem,” I draw in particular on the extensive discussion of the problem and associated literature presented by Pearson (2013) in her article “Cowboy Contradictions: Westerns in the Postcolonial Pacific.” Pearson (2013), and others, have highlighted how cowboy movies have enjoyed a prominent place in the viewing preferences of colonized people around the world (see Keesing and Keesing 1956: 166; Ambler 2001: 133-157; Burns 2002: 103-117; High 2010: 761). The popularity of cowboy movies in places like central and southern Africa was such that the genre became synonymous with all cinema (see Burns 2002:103).

The history of cinema in Samoa constitutes a case study of the preferences of indigenous audiences and their skilled visions of the cowboy genre (Pearson 2013, 2014). Unlike the Solomon Islands, Samoa had a robust film-based cinema industry which allowed Samoans to formally express their aesthetic tastes preferring cowboy movies vis-a-vis the other genres displayed such as romances or European historical dramas (Pearson 2013: 158). There is the Samoan novelist Albert Wendt, who favored the genre as inspiration for plot and theme in his prolific writings about life on that island (Salesa 2010: 332); and John Kneubuhl, of Samoan and German-American descent, even contributed to “screen plays for almost forty television series including many influential westerns such as *Gunsmoke*, *Wagon Train*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, and *The Wild Wild West*” (Pearson 2014: 2)—a canon of work that is part of a golden age in English language cowboy narratives for television.

From a thematic perspective, this popularity is surprising. Why do colonial audiences enjoy the genre even though it glorifies white supremacy (Pearson 2013)? Pearson (2013) notes how initial explanations of local and colonial elites to this popularity focused on the perceived “unsophisticated,” “low brow” (Burns 2002: 104) or otherwise crude and unintelligent (Reynolds 2015: 118) nature of the cowboy movie *and* its colonial audience. In 1942 the British Film Institute conducted a study on the ideal type of film to show the colonized audiences of Africa concluding that African audience tastes are similar to those of 10-year old “white boys” and that

action movies, specifically western movies, should be shown (the Zimbabwe National Archives (ZNA) s935/10, Gale to Bell, 3 August 1942 cited in Burns 2002: 103).

Pearson (2013) emphasizes how research has shown that audiences have taken more nuanced and complicated interpretation (see Salesa 2010: 330-332). Instead of identifying with the “Indians,” with whom audiences in Oceania and Africa share a common subjugation by white colonial forces (Pearson 2014:1), audiences in Oceania (Pearson 2013: 156-157), the Amazon (High 2010), and Africa (Powdermaker 1962: 254) tend to identify with the cowboys. Pearson (2014) argues that audience members did not consider the racial, social, economic and political slots of the cowboy protagonists as important as the themes portrayed in the genre, such as intense corporeal masculinity that overcomes cosmic injustice. Hortense Powdermaker additionally suggests that in Rhodesia association with cowboys allowed African labourers to “[fantasize] unconsciously or consciously, being as white as the dominant group and always winning over them” (1962: 254).

The popularity of cowboy movies is even less surprising considering that colonial authorities liked cowboy movies (Pearson 2013). Cowboy movies were cheap to produce so they were made in abundance resulting in affordable licensing costs for formal and ad hoc cinemas that operated throughout the world (see Burns 2002: 103; Pearson 2013: 157; Reynolds 2015: 86). The popularity of cowboy movies in the film-based colonial era can then not be ascribed to audience preference alone, but rather by political-economic context and external control over movie choices (Pearson 2013).

The Imperial Cowboy Problem Revisited

This availability- and theme-based explanation for why cowboy movies are particularly popular in some colonial and post-colonial contexts is unsatisfactory. Cowboy movies do not have a monopoly on the theme of corporal masculinity and cosmic justice. Nor is there anything exceptionally “cowboy” about themes of alienation, cultural hybridity, colonial oppression or the life of cultural outsider. Especially in the options made available with digital technologies, there is no reason for audiences to think otherwise. Themes prevalent in cowboy movies arguably transcend genre and include fantasy movies such as *The Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003) series which was available to viewers in the Lau Lagoon, but no one was particularly fond of it.

Themes easily slip between genres. A famous example is *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), a popular cowboy movie wherein a group of cowboys come to the aid of a peaceful Mexican village under the threat of bandits. This movie is a remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) that depicted samurai coming to the aid of a peaceful farming village set in Japan. Robert Vaughan, who starred in *The Magnificent Seven* later starred in an adaption of the same story into a science fiction movie called *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980) which had space cowboys come to the defense of the peaceful farming planet of Akir against marauding space mutants (Gray 2004: 147). Another example is Djibril Diop Mambety's film *Hyenas* (1992). Presented as "African," there are tones that suggested it borrowed from Friedrich Durrenmatt's 1962 play *The Visit*, with additional inspiration taken from the cowboy genre (Ocherwits 2008: 223). The theme of a movie does matter, but theme alone is wholly insufficient to explain the mass appeal of cowboy movies in Gwou'ulu.

An additional concern with the "imperial cowboy problem"—the university educated audience's confusion as to why colonized audiences identified with romanticized depictions of colonizers and not with the similarly oppressed "Indians" in the movies—is that nuance has been neglected in a multiplicity of ways (see Salesa 2010: 330-332). As noted by Person (2013), cowboy movies largely focus not on "Indians" but, more precisely, the nomadic aboriginals of the North American Great Plains. There is a great deal of heterogeneity amongst North American aboriginal peoples with a "pan-Indian" identity only being adopted by them recently for political purposes in Canada, the USA and Mexico (see Hertzberg 1971). The same is true to varying degrees of the aboriginal peoples of Africa, Oceania, Amazonia and elsewhere.

Furthermore, while "Indians" were typically cast in the role of the villain, and when they were not they were often played by "white" actors (Pearson 2013: 155), they did not have a monopoly on this role. There were "white" characters cast in the role of the "white hat," the hero, but there were also plenty of "white" characters cast in the role of "black hat" villains (see Agnew 2012: 131). It takes no stretch of the imagination to see how this applies to the context of Malaita where there has been a deep historical conceptualization of difference between coastal and inland peoples. For example, a coastal Lau audience could see themselves playing the role of a "white hat" versus the antagonism of an inland Baegu "black hat."⁴

Last but not least, while colonial audiences, that is to say people the producers of a movie did not anticipate as being an audience (see Jhala 1994), may care about the theme of a movie,

they do not necessarily interpret the theme of a movie using the dialogue as evidence for understanding plot. In many cases this has been impossible: censors might have completely re-edited the film making the dialogue impossible to follow even for fluent audience members,⁵ the audience might have been physically too far away from the speaker equipment to even hear the audio of a movie, or audiences might not be fluent in the language of the dialogue.

The latter was and remains true for Gwou'ulu villagers. During my fieldwork only five out of 250 adults were fluent enough in English to follow the dialogue in a movie: a man in his 80s who worked on translating Jehovah Witness literature into the Lau language, the indigenous Anglican Priest of Gwou'ulu, a retired Lau member of the Anglican clergy, a retired member of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, and the school headmaster from the neighbouring To'abaita. All had gained a formal education during the colonial period or shortly thereafter. Of the five, only the school headmaster and the retired police officer actively watched movies. The other three, at least publicly, abstained from watching movies on religious grounds, the idea being that movies were a distraction from religious life. The other villagers, men and women alike, had either not been sufficiently formally educated or had not used the English language, either written or spoken, for prolonged periods of time. They often only knew individual words and some phrases.

Even if and when English comprehension takes place at a performative level—it is entirely possible that certain members of a given audience are reluctant to demonstrate superior knowledge of the dialogue in a movie than other members who may have been of higher social standing, such as women not wanting to “show off” in front of men—it is likely that, because of the contextual situatedness of the dialogue, some core terms are misunderstood or not understood at all. This is especially the case for movies if the tropes used and historical references made to communicate a particular meaning to the intended audience were unfamiliar to Gwou'ulu. For example, understanding the two words “time” and “travel,” does not necessitate an understanding of the concept of “time travel.”

The reason why dialogue cannot be used to analyze audience engagement with visual media, specifically movies, in Gwou'ulu is, then, simply that so few people sufficiently understand the language being spoken. The plot of a movie was deduced by other means. Active audience participation took the form of interpreting the use of props—the technologies, techniques and material culture that the actors in a movie engaged with. The props of cowboy

movies were simply more familiar than other genres that share many of the same themes, such as depictions of masculine protagonists overcoming cosmic injustice.

The importance of props to the audience of any given movie is not peculiar to the villagers of Gwou'ulu. This is exemplified in the German movie *Good Bye Lenin* (2003). Set in former East Berlin the son of a woman who recently awoke from a coma, strives to find the Soviet commodities, such as Spreewald gherkins, with which she was familiar before entering into the coma. The commodities that play a significant role as plot devices in *Good Bye Lenin* speak directly to a generation of viewers from former East Germany, and to a lesser extent the people of the same generation living in neighbouring countries or who otherwise had contact with that time and place. However, they say very little to the general North American audience, and even less to Solomon Islanders. What is seen here is that while no piece of art is a totally closed system, the degree of proximity of a viewer to the material references in a piece of visual art like a movie does matter.

The vast majority of movies that Gwou'ulu villagers do watch are then set abroad and in languages that very few understand at the level needed to follow the plot of a given movie. What becomes relevant instead is an understanding of the material culture that is featured in movies and this is why, more than a theme, the props of a particular genre, in particular landscapes and body techniques, are significant to the audience in Gwou'ulu.

The Familiar Cowboy

Having argued that dialogue plays a lesser role in the skilled visions and preferences of movies for colonized audiences, I now focus in on what tropes visually register with the audiences of Gwou'ulu and compare them to those that do not. To do this it is necessary to pay closer attention to action that takes place both on and off the screen, and to develop a better sense of the interpretive constraints Gwou'ulu villagers face when watching foreign visual media.

One evening I was watching music videos with a Lau man, Max, who had never left the Solomon Islands, and his sister, Susan, who had recently returned from Papua New Guinea and who had also travelled Belgium and Turkey. One of the music videos showed moving walkways—horizontal escalators. Astounded Max asked if such a technology truly existed, or if it was part of the “fantasy” world portrayed in the music video. Susan broke out in laughter. Turning to Max she exclaimed, “I have used them many times at international airports,” shifting

her focus towards me she explained, “there are no escalators in the Solomons, and certainly no walkways, some I know even doubt that elevators and traffic lights are real.”

Susan is an outlier in Gwou’ulu in her travels outside the Solomon Islands. For the vast majority of villager’s domestic mobility is severely curtailed by prohibitive costs, and international travel is nearly impossible. In addition to Susan there are a handful of villagers who have at one point or another worked on international cargo vessels and seen a wide swatch of the industrial ports that dot the borders of the Pacific Ocean. Some had ventured beyond the ports and experience the urbanity of cities like Tokyo or Honolulu. While their experience does inform the perceptions of other villagers about life and technologies outside the Solomon Islands, the accuracy of the information that they passed on when they share these experiences is dubious, with exaggeration and hyperbole taking over.

Because of the lack of economic opportunities for travel the audiences of Gwou’ulu are captive to the context of their local surroundings. The type of movie that captures the day to day material culture, landscape, body techniques and broader experiences of life in Malaita, par excellence, is the cowboy movie. My observations and interviews about movie choices revealed that cowboy movies are favoured by villagers of all ages and genders. What made them so appealing to such a wide ranging audience was the familiarity of the action on the screen; not just the thematic action at a meta-narrative level, but the more mundane gestures the actors performed within the scene and, more importantly, their props. Up until very recently the basic props of a cowboy movie, things like rifles, pistols and kerosene lamps, were as omnipresent in Malaita as mobile phones were in 2014.

Guns have a remarkable place both in the history of Malaita and in the popular imagination of Malaitans. Throughout Malaita’s history there have been periods involving colonizing forces rounding up firearms and munitions. In the nineteenth century, Malaitans returning from indentured labour in Queensland and Fiji frequently brought one or two guns and ammunition (Akin 2013: 45; Corris 1973). Protectorate officials estimated that Malaitans at one point held between 4000 and 5000 Winchester repeating rifles and that 80% of Malaitan men owned some type of firearm (Akin 2013: 45). After a colonial official and most of his party were wiped out while collecting taxes in Kwaio in 1927, one district in north Malaita surrendered 1,077 guns, at least partly in an effort to prevent a reprisal attack (Akin 2014: 45).

While violence by guns was a practice made possible by contact with the “white man,” violence itself was nothing new for Malaitans. Akin notes one example:

One style of Malaitan warfare resembled that in the New Guinea Highlands: groups formally faced off at established fighting grounds to duel with bows and spears, layered tapa cloth body armor, and painted shields of wood and bark coated with flint shards or canarium almond shells, while women repaired arrows behind the lines. But guns put an end to all that (2013: 45).

Guns were a “disruptive” technology, and like the production of skilled visions done with movies, guns “fit” well into Malaitan culture. The colonial officials did their best to round up the firearms on Malaita, with greater success on the coastal areas like the Lau than in the interior (Akin 2013: 66). The last effort to sweep the province before our fieldwork was during the civil unrest between 1998 and 2003 (the Tensions). After the Tensions many of these firearms were collected during “gun drives” wherein they offered amnesty to anyone who voluntarily gave up their guns with the threat of long-term imprisonment if they were caught possessing any firearm afterwards.

For over a century guns have been a symbol of power (Akin 2013: 83) and continued to be so into 2014. One man I interviewed recalled owning what, based on his description could only have been an M16 assault rifle. For this one man, the weapon was, “Too much. Too loud. Too heavy,” despite how “cool” it was to “be like Rambo.”⁶ He much preferred the idea of owning a pistol for personal protection and he hoped I would be able to help him get ahold of one. This was a common request made of me by men up and down the North Road who had the impression that the *waetman* had access to an unlimited supply of firearms, not unlike the rascals that the people of Gapun, Papua New Guinea, spoke of as they interpreted the villains in the Rambo franchise (Kulick 1993: 10).

Colonial programs of pacifications were the driving force behind the disarmament of Malaita. Other things like kerosene lamps were made redundant by technological advancement. While some kerosene lamps still existed in the village, as an emergency back-up for households or as a sort of relic that was never sold in one of the canteens, the nighttime lighting needs have been replaced by solar power units. In the more elite, or entrepreneurial, households these units are large and stationary supplying the power for multiple LED bulbs that are hung freely and

moved according to need. Otherwise the majority of solar power units are small 5 watt panels, and can power only one mobile, hand-held light.

Everyone older than 20 knows this sort of cowboy stuff at an intimate level, having been masters of the operations necessary to make these things work. Cooking over a fire with cast iron pots, using outhouses or the bush to defecate and urinate, butchering animals at home and many other such technologies and techniques, more of the sort of stuff common in cowboy movies, continued throughout our stay.

The setting of these films, too, is very familiar. For instance, the provincial capital Auki resembles a frontier town in the American West: dirt roads lined with Chinese shops with uneven wood verandahs. Interestingly, while there have been waves of migrants from East Asia into Auki, the oldest members of that community migrated there only several decades after the heyday of the American Frontier (Bennett 1987: 206) and it is not unreasonable to imagine that had there been no gold rush or other such economic development in places like California it might look very much like Auki does today. Similarly, the peri-urban Malu'u looks very much like a frontier outpost and some of the villages in between have signs on the North Road that boast being a gun free place that personally invoked in my imagination Wyatt Earp collecting the guns of visitors to Tombstone.

In 2014 there were no horses on Malaita, but there were two analogs that villagers associated with horses and horse-based travel: canoes and trucks. Canoes, of which there were many, are often spoken of as if they were horses. This use of metaphor is not a great leap insofar as the Lau do not conceptualize their lagoon as water when discussing rights of use for maritime resource exploitation, but more precisely as land covered by water (see Akimichi 1991), making the lagoon a landscape separating settlements that they traverse in their "horses." The trucks that travel the roads of Malaita and connected Gwou'ulu to the other settlements along the North Road to Auki were compared by some villagers to stage coaches. While watching *3:10 Yuma* (2007) viewers joked that the stagecoach that was raided by the character played by Russel Crowe was the *Suafa Express*, a name of one of the familiar trucks.

Additionally, while instances of cattle rustling were used as evidence of the effect cowboy movies had on Samoans (Pearson 2013: 155), the same causality can be made in the case of Malaita. In Malaita a very similar activity, the theft of a neighboring village's pigs by boys seeking to become men, enjoys a long historical precedent pointing again to the apparent fit

between the world of the mythic history of the American wild west and that of Malaita. This familiarity with not only the themes but the props, or material culture, of cowboy movies exists in a dialectic and mutually reinforcing, seemingly pan-Malaitan love of western music such as Dolly Parton and the Bellamy Brothers. The interest in cowboy music goes back at least until the 1970s when Malaitan folk musicians such as Fred Maedola took inspiration from the “Western” ballads of Woody Guthrie (David Akin, personal correspondence 18.01.16).

The overlap between the “wild west” of cowboy movies and Malaita, reinforced by the weak presence of the state in this province and the related tropes of outlaws and local law enforcement finds resonance in the imagined potentials of the island itself. Many Malaitans anticipate “development” to someday come to their land in the same fashion it did to the American West, in the form of a gold rush. The most popular movies shown in the village during our stay was *Blood Diamond* (2006), due in no small part to the thematic of making a fortune from a gold rush.

When people in the Lau Lagoon struck a seam of quartz during our fieldwork some of the villagers of Gwou’ulu, upon hearing of it through the “coconut radio” secretly travelled to land they thought might yield the mineral, where they then “staked a claim.” They jealously guarded the area day and night and zealously dug simple shaft mines basically deep holes in the ground. Some were successful, gems were extracted, but there were also stories of some being hurt when the pits they dug collapsed. During this time one villager, who had taken on the comportment of a miser, secretly showed me his haul of the crystal and asked me to estimate the worth of the “diamonds.” Despite my protestations that they were quartz, one of the most abundant types of minerals on the planet, he and his *wantoks* insisted that they were diamonds and that their clan was on the edge of possessing unimaginable wealth.

Beyond Cowboys: “Alien” Science Fiction Movies

We have thus far seen how audiences in Gwou’ulu seize upon cowboy movies for the familiar technological operations they present on the screen. Here we shift to something they dismiss or emphatically dislike, demonstrating a choice born out of their own traditions and contact with foreigners their visual media. Villagers made the choice not to produce skilled visions of science fiction movies. The issue of choice is central to an anthropological understanding of technological systems, including the technique of audience,

Because technical actions under construction as well as changes in technology are in part determined or encompassed by social representations or phenomena that go far beyond mere action on matter, societies seize, adopt or develop certain technical features... and dismiss others. It is as though societies *chose* from a whole range of possible technological avenues that their environment, their own traditions and contacts with foreigners lay open to their means of action on the material world (Lemonnier 1992: 6)

The socio-technical milieu of Gwou'ulu is unfavourable for science fiction. Science fiction shares many of the themes of cowboy movies, such as highlighting lone men or small groups of men, the embodiment of masculinity, setting out to overcome cosmic injustice. Yet they showed actors on the screen interacting with alien material cultures in alien settings.

I collected no evidence of local knowledge of extraterrestrials (ETs), neither their presence nor existence in, on, near or above North Malaita. While David Akin is asked questions about UFOs on his frequent trips to the southern parts of Malaita (Personal communication 18.01.16), and Michael Scott (2012: 58) encountered references to UFOs in Makira Province, such queries were never posed where I worked. Instead audiences responded to science fiction by actively ignoring this trope of media. This underscores the key role that the material culture used in visual media—the props—play in how Gwou'ulu audiences conceptualize visual information of this type.

Knowing my interest in new technology movies one villager visited me one morning and told me the story of one such movie he remembered watching during a trip to Honiara some years back. The movie told the story of a flying car that ran on garbage. I could not immediately identify which movie he was talking about. In the ensuing conversation it became apparent that, try as he might, he could not remember anything else that was noteworthy until he told me that the car was driven by a tall man with white hair. This could only be *Back to the Future Part II* (1989). *Back to the Future* (1985) delighted audiences in North America in the 1985 with references to the language, social norms and material culture of their own recent small town past set in the year 1955. *Back to the Future II* (1989) inverted this plot device by repositioning the 1980s characters in the imagined future of 2015. The science fiction it presented was destined to delight audiences once again when 2015 came and went and the North American audience saw that none of the futuristic material culture had been realized. The changes to material culture that charmed the North American viewer of *Back to the Future II* were meaningless to this man in

Gwou'ulu and so it is no surprise that, for him, the only memorable plot device was a car that ran on garbage and that flew instead of staying on roads, upending conditions with which he was familiar.

Much of science fiction revolves around “new technologies” and how the technologies and materials of an imagined future, or alternative past or present, play on temporally and culturally bounded conceptions of what technologies and materials can and cannot do. Science fiction here is a “negative” example, “in which the actions on the matter seems... inadequate” (Lemmonier 1993: 4). The local audience treatment of science fiction, recast as it was as new technology movies, underscores the important role of the material cultures exhibited in movies in how this particular audience understands what is happening on the screen.

The mobile phone was anticipated by *Star Trek* (1966), which in turn inspired scientists to realize the fantasy first in the form of a mobile phone, then tablets, which converged into smarter mobile phones. With no such recourse to a familiar mythos as *Star Trek*, many Lau do not bother trying to make the mobile phone familiar, and simply accept it as it is. However, one man did locate the smarter mobile phone in a local mythos, explaining to Stephanie and I that in the *taem bifo* contact with the *waetman* Malaitans practiced a type of magic that imbued certain types of stone, the same size and shape of mobile phones, which rendered them as useable as mobile phones except with perfect reception and limitless coverage. Here we see a desire for technological improvement cast not into the future but into the past and the effacement of technological complexity beyond the control of Malaitans into the realm of magic wherein they were once, and could be again, the masters. But ultimately, this man's narrative located the strangeness of mobile phones in the familiarity of his own history.

For the villagers of Gwou'ulu, the action in a new technology movie was like using a net to carry hot stones in the preparation of a stone oven in Anga. In Anga, some groups use nets and others use tongs to handle the hot stones of these ovens and “informants belonging to groups unaware of the latter technique generally deny that it is possible to grasp a hot stone this way without burning and destroying the net” (Lemmonier 1992: 54). The category of science fiction made no sense to the villagers. People instead shrugged and took the pragmatic position that, at least for the present, this confusion did not matter, and they therefore ignored all movies in that category as, at the very least, useless to the technology of audience participation in Gwou'ulu.

Conclusion

Dialogue-centric analysis of audience reception is not by itself suitable for understanding movie preferences. This much is obvious in the success of silent movies. However, this phenomenon cannot alone account for the role of props and body techniques in visual narrative. What makes the type of skilled visions I identify in this paper significant is that they are based on understanding props as mimetic referents of gestural technological action, despite the movies in question *not* being silent. This argument has been made elsewhere (Kulick and Willson 1994: 3-4) but has stopped short of examining in detail what exactly it is that audiences such as the one in Gwou'ulu use as evidence for their individual and group-based interpretations of what they see on the screen. Instead, scholars have jumped to the issue of mimetic reproductions of what audience's view on the screen as evidence they understand what is happening in movies (Reynolds 2015: 119).

Through this anthropology of technology approach an understanding can be generated of the local perception of technological efficacy. Treating the viewing experience of villagers as a socio-technological system with the viewer at the center of a web of social and cultural contexts, recasts movie genres as either working, or non-working, as realized in local movie preferences. The designers of interpretation in Gwou'ulu only produced skilled visions of movies that looked like, to them, what movies should like (see Lemonnier 1992: 73). In the anthropology of technology this is what Leroi-Gourhan (2013: 27) called *tendance*, tendency. Cowboy movies deal with action on matter that is immediately identifiable as action on matter, Leroi-Gourhan's *dernier degreé to fait*. The same phenomenon, action on matter, happens in science fiction but is not recognizable as such by the audience members in the village. Lemonnier argued that "when [technological actions take] place among technological principles which are themselves very compelling, the scope of possible variations is narrowed even further" (1992: 75). In our case here technological principles are found in the technological milieu of life in Malaita and the potential to understand, and to enjoy, movies is significantly restricted.

The ability of Gwou'ulu audiences to develop an interpretation of theme is predicated on the familiarity of what they visually experience while viewing. This, more than the racial, economic, political or otherwise social themes of a movie informs the popularity of particular film genres. The audiences actively produce skilled visions of movies based on the world they live in. With science fiction movies, "it becomes obvious that some technical behaviors are

technically illogical and outlandish because they fail to achieve their material goal. But they are right and coherent from the standpoint of the social logics which they are a part” (Lemonnier 1992: 4). Herein lies the “vulgar materialism” of Jhala’s “unintended audience” (1994). Without a readily conceivable visual repertoire of actions on matter the plot or theme of a given movie becomes useless to the audience.

Endnotes

¹ The argument that I present in this article is specifically in reference to the audience preferences of Gwou’ulu villagers. While previous work has located similar interests elsewhere in the Pacific Islands it is, based on current resources, impossible to generalize the entire region.

² Also martial arts movies enjoy some popularity in the Solomon Islands. I observed this, in particular, during my fieldwork in urban areas (see also Jourdan 1997: 147 note 14). However, my research in Gwou’ulu only revealed one martial art movie in the collective digital data of the village, *The 3 Ninjas Kick Back* (1994). Accordingly, I do not include a detailed discussion of martial arts movies in this paper. I also contend that the popularity of martial arts movies in the Solomon Islands and elsewhere in the Pacific (e.g., see Hahn 1994) does not challenge the argument presented here. The core action of a martial arts movie, martial arts, entails a series of technical gestures involving hand to hand, but also metal and wood based weapon combat. Furthermore, Cantonese and Mandarin communities have a long history in urban and peri-urban locales across the Pacific, whatever “uniquely” “Asian” material cultures used by them are frequently also well known by Pacific Islanders.

³ I do not include here pornographic materials produced in Melanesia.

⁴ This antagonism is exemplified in Harold Ross’ description of Baegu-Lau relations that my own fieldwork confirms: “Accusations of land theft and title litigation are ubiquitous, because hill people claim land in which sea people have interests based on adverse possession or cognatic inheritance from Baegu ancestresses. Both accuse the other of practicing *arua* (sorcery) using contagious magic. Each has prejudicial stereotypes of itself and the other...As a result, hill and sea people distrust one another..., there is little casual mixing, and they do not trespass on each other’s property” (1978: 122-123).

⁵ Such was the case in the African Copperbelt (Ambler 2001: 134)

⁶ The popularity of Rambo in Melanesia is well documented (see Jourdan 1997; Kulick 1993; Kulick and Willson 1994; Maranda in Woodhead 1987; White 1991). Jourdan (1997: 143) suggests that its popularity among Malaitans can be traced to the harmony between a local type of warrior, a *ramo*, and Rambo.

Filmography:

Becker, Wolfgang

2003 Good Bye, Lenin! Berlin, Germany: X Verleih AG.

Gunnarsson, Sturla prod. and dir.

2005 Beowulf and Grendel. Austin, Texas: Truly Indie.

Jackson, Peter

2001 The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. 178 min. Los Angeles, California: New Line Cinema.

2002 The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers. 179 min. Los Angeles, California: New Line Cinema.

2003 The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. 201 min. Los Angeles, California: New Line Cinema.

Kurosawa, Akira dir.

1954 Seven Samurai. Tokyo: Toho.

Mangold, James

2007 3:10 to Yuma. Santa Monica, California: Lionsgate Films.

McTiernan, John

1999 The 13th Warrior. Burbank, California: Buena Vista Pictures.

Murakimi, Jimmy

1980 Battle Beyond the Stars. Atlanta, Georgia: New World Pictures.

Sturges, John, dir. and prod.

1960 The Magnificent Seven. 128 min. Beverly Hills, California: United Artists.

Woodhead, Leslie dir. and prod.

1987 The Lau of Malaita. Manchester, UK: ITV Granada.

Zemeckis, Robert

- 2007 *Beowulf*. Burbank, California: Warner Bros.
- 1985 *Back to the Future*. 116 min. Universal City, California: Universal Studios.
- 1989 *Back to the Future Part II*. 108 min. Universal City, California: Universal Studios.

Zwick, Edward prod. and dir.

- 2006 *Blood Diamond*. Burbank, California: Warner Bros.

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