

Book and Media Reviews

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to interrupt the dominant discourse that US militarism enables security for the global community. These women's stories make possible new conversations that address the multilayered ways in which militarism can have lasting impacts on communities both within and along expanding boundaries of command and control.

JESI LUJAN BENNETT
University of Hawai'i, Mānoa

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Cargo Cult. Animated film, 11 minutes, 2013. Sacrebleu Productions. Directed by Bastien Dubois, written by Bastien Dubois with the collaboration of Gaia Guasti, produced by Ron Dyens. For availability, contact the producers via the film website: www.bastiendubois.com/cargo/.

Back in 1958, *Pacific Islands Monthly* subtitled one of its articles with the complaint “The Cargo Cult Won’t Die Quietly in the Pacific.” In years since, despite numerous similar predictions that cargo cults will soon give up their ghosts as the darker Melanesian corners are infused with new lights of education, economic development, and steadier rationality, cargo cult lives still. Actual culting in these islands has indeed faded away—or, rather, it has morphed into arresting forms of political organization, charismatic Christianity, health and wealth gospel, and global Internet scams. But cargo cult vigorously endures in popular literature, travel writing, art, music, and film. Despite anthropological unease and even firm repudiation of the label, cargo cult is proving impossible to kill. A quick check of amazon.com finds

on sale three new Kindle cargo-cult novels (one about Tanna’s John Frum movement; another offering a dash of science fiction; and the third about the US Pacific Northwest); a cargo-cult travelogue (again about John Frum); and a full rack of cargo-cult music CDs.

To all this we can add Sacrebleu’s animated short, *Cargo Cult*. Sacrebleu Productions, headquartered in Paris, produces animated and live short films, features, and documentaries. Bastien Dubois, *Cargo Cult*’s director and co-writer, has completed several other short animation projects, including *Madagascar, carnet de voyage*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for best animated short film in 2011. This features a Malagasy ritual of reburying the dead. Apart from its being a similarly exotic theme, viewers may well wonder how cargo cult caught the animator’s eye. Gaia Guasti, who collaborated on the script, writes young adult novels.

Dubois’s animated cargo cult—drawn in lush island greens and blues—rewinds the story back to the Pacific War. Without much dialogue except for cargoist debate in an unspecified Melanesian tongue without subtitles, the film’s only plain words are an introductory epigram from science fiction writer Arthur C Clarke: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” The opening scene illustrates this conceit. A huge, hulking, black warship overtakes and overshadows an island canoe. We next see an American airbase as the film follows the familiar cargo storyline. An Islander has crept onto the base, dodging jeeps, planes, Quonset huts,

and jogging servicemen with guitars and dog tags (and dogs, too). A few servicemen are Black—as many certainly were—although the US military remained segregated until the late 1940s. Our Islander hero spies a radio operator in a communications shack, wearing headphone and microphone, sending out a message. A plane lands and wonderfully disgorges crates of cargo—beer and tinned food, mostly. The watcher hurries home with the news.

The new cargo prophet passes along a verdant jungle path, which is home to praying mantises, ants, frogs, spiders, and tropical birds. Along the way, he contrives a homemade headphone by chopping some nut in half. He skirts by a cargo shrine and enters the village. His return precipitates an argument with an older but wiser leader: traditional priest versus cargo prophet. (Now we overhear scraps of that mysterious island language.) The prophet leads village men to a life-size model plane made of wooden planks, parked atop a mountain. He ascends a lofty, homemade tower and sends out a spiritual communiqué. A bullroarer swings. The film's hues shift to black and white as invoked ancestral spirits animate the scene with geometric design. Suddenly, a disabled, smoking plane zooms low over the assembled cultists and crashes in the distance. The cultists hurry back down to the coast.

The film's color scheme now changes to reds and yellows. Death and destruction rule. Dive bombers bomb. Bullets fly. Antiaircraft guns flash. Ships explode and sink. Flaming planes ditch into the sea. The sea burns. The air and sea battle dimin-

ishes, and horrified Islanders discover cargo washing ashore: life preservers, a canteen, wooden crates, more tinned food. The main color is dim violet. The Fijian anthem "Isa Lei" builds toward the climax. Our cargo prophet approaches a smashed plane crash-landed on the beach. He comes face-to-face with a dead pilot, also wearing headphones, who sits in the broken cockpit. The prophet looks to the skies—to us the viewers, in fact—as the film's closing perspective pulls away, up toward the heavens.

The film is populated with generic, mostly naked Melanesians boasting a mélange of penis wrappers and grass skirts, bushy beards, pierced and boned noses, pig-tusk and pearl-shell necklaces, feathers, beads, armbands, stone axes, net bags, living in villages of high-gabled thatched houses. The cargo cult, too, is generic, although the brief view of the cargo shrine featuring crosses and a small model plane recalls John Frum movement shrines on Tanna (Vanuatu), and the full-sized wooden plane and ersatz communication tower on the mountain top must derive from similar scenes from the climax of the 1962 "shockumentary" *Mondo Cane*. The short's soundtrack is also eclectic; besides Fiji's "Isa Lei," it samples "Abebe," by Papua New Guinea musician George Telek, and "Fleurs du Pérou," by French artist Youri Blow.

Such disconnect with Melanesian reality matters not, insofar as the film's story belongs to the global imaginary more than to the Islands. True, at a snappy eleven minutes long, one could screen the short in some introductory college class concerned with Pacific history, religious move-

ments, or the like. But it works better as a paradigm of the modern tragedy of desire. Desire is unquenchable, so new prophets always come to replace wiser priests. Desire burns onward, no matter. Even when cargo arrives, it never satisfies, and, worse, cargo

invites tragedy: death, destruction, despair. *Pacific Islands Monthly* was right. Cargo cult won't die quietly. It noisily carries on and on and on.

LAMONT LINDSTROM
University of Tulsa

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