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# Forest of Bliss*: Sensory Experience and Ethnographic Film*

**Abstract**
*Forest of Bliss* (1986) is a film that explores the ancient Indian city of Benares, focusing on both funeral and religious practices. The viewer comes to know the city through the eyes of ethnographic filmmaker Robert Gardner. He describes it by the use of complex editing that allows this documentary to be included in the subgenre of city symphony. The film is distinguished both by its dense network of visual and aural symbols with which the cycle of death and regeneration is represented and by its ability to communicate the sensory experience of being there. The filmic procedures of *Forest of Bliss* evoke synesthetic perception, increasing the viewer's participation in the daily life of the culture shown. Because of these features, the film can be considered in relation to the recent attention anthropology has given to the role of the senses in a given culture, even though Gardner did not intend this film for scientific purposes.

**Keywords**
Robert Gardner, Forest of Bliss, anthropology of the senses, ethnographic film, Benares, being there, city symphony, sensory experience.

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graduated from the University of Bologna in "Dams" (curriculum Cinema) and has a diploma from the School of Visual Ethnography of ISFCI in Rome. His area of expertise is Visual Anthropology, especially the use of film for the study and comprehension of the various aspects of culture. The film journal «Bianco e Nero» (n. 571, 2011, CSC, Carocci) published his essay *Forest of Bliss. Esperienza sensoriale e film etnografico*. His work entitled *Rappresentazioni indigene: profili e tecniche del 'salvataggio' etnografico.* Dead Birds *di Robert Gardner* was published in the book *Rappresentare. Questioni di antropologia, cinema e narrativa* (2012, Clueb).

In the United States the second half of the twentieth century was a period of major development for visual anthropology. Margaret Mead continued promoting the use of cine-photographic tools in the study of culture and field research, while the production of ethnographic documentaries made important strides thanks to the work of Robert Gardner and the Film Study Center. This production center was founded in 1957 and it was established initially in Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. The center, directed by Gardner for 40 years, represented a source of young talent, among which were John Marshall and Timothy Asch, who for the next few decades became some of the most active individuals experimenting and proposing various forms of contact between cinema and anthropology. While in Europe Jean Rouch, who trained in Marcel Griaule's school, used the camera to document other cultures, it was the important work of Gardner and the Film Study Center in America that led to an even closer collaboration between documentary film and cultural anthropology. With his academic background in anthropology and his self-taught education in cinema, Gardner established himself as a filmmaker in 1964 thanks to *Dead Birds*, a film shot during an expedition in Western New Guinea in which Karl G. Heider and Michael Rockefeller also took part. Gardner's first feature film directly highlights the double nature that distinguishes almost all ethnographic documentaries directed by him: in addition to representing local culture, there is also an interpretation of anthropological data, in order to express a personal vision with the primary purpose of representing indigenous reality as an existential condition of all mankind.

Human mortality, which is a recurring theme in this author's works, is particularly explored in the film by going beyond the meaning given by the society being observed, in order to describe the concerns and profound needs that are common to all individuals, regardless of their origins and traditions. Gardner often avoids addressing of scientific concerns in his films, nonetheless they are analyzed by anthropologists and ethnographic film academics, and they undoubtedly represent an important part of the collection of works in the history of visual anthropology. His films have raised debates, at times quite controversial ones, between those who appreciate their original and effective representation methods and those who instead believe these representations are too subjective of the populations encountered to be scientifically valid. The main focus of said discussions has been *Forest of Bliss*, the portrait of an indigenous culture that is the most complex and experimental of Gardner's ethnographic films. Together with *Dead Birds* it is among his most famous works, and to this day it allows us to reflect on important epistemological questions of visual anthropology. The blend of art and science, the authenticity of the representation, the use of film language to render the experience of others, and the use of specific cinematic codes to free this field of research from a subordinate relationship to written anthropology, are all central topics in the connection between film and ethnography that can be discussed using Gardner's work as an example. This film represents an interesting point of discussion in a field with blurred boundaries where the definition of "ethnographic documentary" is subject of debate among scholars.

*Forest of Bliss* is a 1986 documentary filmed in Benares, Varanasi, in collaboration with various anthropologists, including Ákos Östör, a very experienced researcher in India. "Forest of

Bliss" is the name used for Benares in ancient Sanskrit texts. It is the city on the banks of the Ganges River: a privileged place for believers who reach it upon dying in order to be cremated or to bathe the corpse in its sacred waters, in the hopes that by dying in this city they can free themselves from the perpetual cycle of reincarnation which everyone is subject to. *Forest of Bliss* offers a mosaic description of Benares. Various events and actions intertwine repeat and alternate with each other, forming a complex composition. Among the images shown by Gardner, who shot and edited the film, we can see workers transporting sand and wood; temples and religious processions; marigolds being collected and turned into garlands; prayers and offerings made to gods; animals feeding on whatever they encounter; cadavers being transported in the streets or by water; or burnt in funeral pyres; various types of boats as they move along the river; and children playing. There are three people who are followed more closely than others as they perform their daily activities, but episodically nonetheless, and whose names are not mentioned in the film but simply in the director's writings: Mithai Lal, an elderly healer; Dom Raja, an "untouchable" who takes care of affairs related to funeral ceremonies; and Ragul Pandit, a man devoted to prayers and rituals. In the film, the ancient atmosphere of stone architecture and religious liturgies prevails: there are only a few scenes of chaotic streets filled with crowds, bicycles, and traffic noise. The Ganges River has a central role in the film's depiction of the city. The events and activities shown often concern the long string of bathing ghats, the cremation ground, the transport boats and the stretches of sandy shores. The film begins and ends with dawn, describing a day in Benares without employing educational or explanatory description; rejecting many stylistic features of anthropological cinema which have been used by Gardner in previous documentaries. In *Forest of Bliss* we can see the elimination of an immediate cause-and-effect continuity between events. The meaning is produced through metaphors, symbols, and allusions, at times difficult to interpret, created by complex editing partly influenced by the work of Eisenstein, Vertov, and Ruttmann. *Forest of Bliss* can, in fact, be placed within the city symphonies genre. It is a form of documentary that was inaugurated by the European avant-garde of the twenties, where a restricted environment, usually a city, is described by rejecting the conventions of narrative cinema and the focus on verbal communication, in order to rely on a conceptual representation based on the expressive and associative potential of images. In the diegesis of the film, the city is often represented through a single day, which is used as the frame and reason for the progression of the situations shown. As observed by William Guynn, the representation abandons the use of the classic elements of film such as main character and continuity of actions, because the people that are filmed are followed for short periods of time, too short to allow the unfolding of a narrative plot. The film must therefore find new and different methods of textual organization in order to give coherence to the succession of sequences (Guynn 1998: 91).

Gardner's interest in the visual possibilities for shaping ideas and concepts, led him to gradually disengage the use of narration and interviews in his ethnographic documentaries. In *Forest of Bliss* we can, in fact, experience an absence of intelligible speech, since the film has no voice-over, no captions, or subtitles explaining the images, except for a brief introductory quote

and the name of the place. Consequently, the non-translated discussions and comments of the people of Benares acquire a paralinguistic value. In the absence of verbal or written communication, which attributes a specific significance to events and connects them to each other, the viewer is led to other forms of reception including, as we shall see, sensorial and symbolic ones.

*Forest of Bliss* is an exploration of the ancient city of Benares, focusing on funeral practices and surrounding business, while interpreting the dualism of life and death through images and sounds that evoke a sense of death and the continuous regeneration of existence. As a means of finding order in the chaotic city center, Gardner extrapolates a series of elements, which are often ordinary, building a network of symbols and parallels that communicate the transitory nature of existence throughout the film. In *Forest of Bliss* the freshly picked marigolds will be partly used as body decorations in the funeral rituals; the stacked wood will be used to cremate the dead; and the vitality with which men prepare and use the boats or supports for transporting the cadavers is destined to wane. The wood will be consumed by the fire, turning into ash; and the men's bodies will become inert over time, in a process of continuous consumption and transformation that represents the theme of the film, as well as a reification of the Hindu beliefs in the cycle of existence. "Everything in this world is eater or eaten, the seed is food and fire is eater": this is the interpretation of the film given by the initial quote of W.B Yeats from the Upanishad translation, which indicates a world where nothing lasts forever and everything that is born is destined to be consumed, to be symbolically burnt or devoured (Gardner, Östör 2001: 23). Boats, birds, dogs, kites, and marigolds, for example; all become visual motifs, symbols of life and death with possibly a slowly emerging significance; just like the aforementioned piles of wood, which, only near the end of the film, can we begin to understand are associated with the dead, to be used in their cremation ceremonies. The Ganges River becomes an image and chronotope of the passage between opposite conditions or states of being and the eternal cycle of existence. The camera constantly moves through a world where rituals of purification and urban decay, holiness and materialism, vigorous figures and lifeless bodies all coexist. It follows the life of Benares in order to embody its atmosphere in the cinematic experience and to give the viewer the feeling of being there.

Although the topic will be introduced for functional purposes, this paper will not go into detail regarding the complex structures of symbols and metaphors which have already been extensively discussed elsewhere (Oppitz, 1988; Gardner and Östör, 2001; Henley, 2007, etc.); instead we will examine how the film is able to evoke a physical and multisensorial exploration of the local culture. This is why we have included a detailed description of some parts of the film with specific reference to the procedures that create this effect. We will consider the connection of *Forest of Bliss* to anthropology and its recent interest for the role of the senses, to indicate some of the applications ethnographic film might have within that field of research. We will see how a research-oriented interpretation of this work is possible, even though Gardner did not intend to produce this film for scientific purposes.

*Forest of Bliss* focuses on the description of a city based on an elaborate combination and repetition of images, colors, sounds, voices, and songs. Ilisa Barbash states that:

> […] the film virtually demands the viewer to respond non-verbally, viscerally. As such, it stimulates an interplay of the senses with an uncommon intensity: the camera's eye seems at once unusually tactile and unusually auditory. More than that, it is an olfactory eye and a haptic ear. We feel and smell the ghats and their pyres, the boats and their oar locks, the bamboo-worker and his *bidi*, as much as we see and hear them (Barbash 2001: 377).

The spectator's attention is drawn towards the sensorial world produced by the activities of the inhabitants of Benares and their relationship with the environment in which they live. This aspect, however, does not preclude the need for active engagement in understanding the documentary: the dense network of metaphors, visual and audio symbols to be deciphered, and the connections between situations that are not immediately accessible are constant throughout the entire film. This response to the film, which we could define as "conceptual" appears rather hidden and difficult to grasp compared to the more immediate sensorial one. In *Forest of Bliss* we witness various discontinued activities, without contextualization or a direct explanation. At first glance the movie appears to be a series of miscellaneous situations, linked only by the fact that they take place in Benares and often concern funeral rituals. This characteristic has provoked harsh criticism from reviewers: according to Jay Ruby (1991: 13) the documentary represents "a jumble of incomprehensible vignettes", while for Jonathan P. Parry (1988: 7) the message given by the film is that India appears too impenetrable, therefore "all we can do is stand and stare. So let the camera roll". However, in *Forest of Bliss* each element is carefully arranged to form a logical and coherent filmic discourse, without resorting to conventional organizational layouts, and, as we saw with Guynn, this is an aspect deeply rooted in the subgenre of city symphony. In fact, these same considerations may be applied to *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), which as Noël Burch observes, must be viewed several times and requires the active participation of the viewer to decipher the images, in order to understand its multiple associations of concepts: Every shot is determined by a series of meanings, which become fully accessible only through a meticulous and thorough knowledge of the film as a whole (Burch 1979: 94). Although *Forest of Bliss* does not have a classic narrative structure and the events are often fragmented to create symbolic, visual associations, there are still some story lines that can be reconstructed by connecting seemingly unrelated situations. For example, in the first part we see certain actions where the significance escapes us: large quantities of marigolds being picked and transported to the city (Fig. 1); a type of ladder being built out of bamboo (Fig. 2); the inner courtyard of a building being washed (Fig. 3). In addition, the film shows elderly women lying in bed receiving visitors, including a priest. These events are not immediately explained and they are blended with other various situations. Their significance, however, becomes clear a while later (min. 39-43), when the body of a deceased elderly woman is carried on what we now realize is a stretcher, decorated with marigold garlands used as funeral elements, and it is laid down in the hospice courtyard, which was previously prepared and purified for this moment (Fig. 4). Using the slow

disclosure technique, typical of Flaherty's documentaries, the meaning of the previously shown activities is explained gradually, becoming fully understood only after the documentation of this funeral ceremony. This method, used in Gardner's film, gives the viewer the sensation of progressively exploring and discovering the city, while lessening "the potential for initial revulsion on the part of a Western audience that may have differing ideas about death, corpses, and economics" (Coover 2001: 416).

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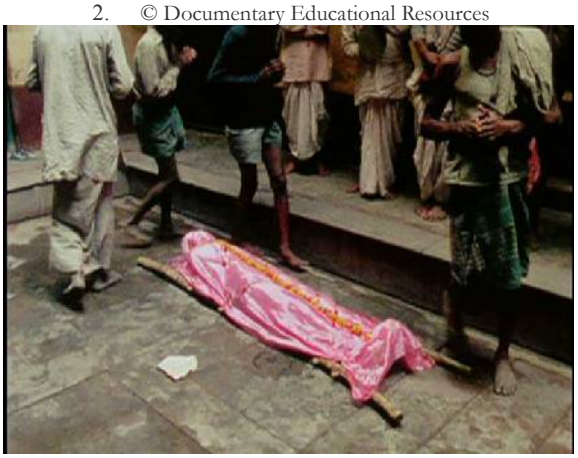

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In the world of ethnographic cinema, the documentary series *Netsilik Eskimo* (Quentin Brown, Robert Young, 1967–1968) has also described another culture without relying on an explanation given through narration or translations, except in rare instances. These films were shot among the Canadian Arctic Inuit under the supervision of anthropologist Asen Balikci, and they mainly provide a portrait of the material culture of the indigenous people. Hunting and fishing practices, building sleds and homes, and tanning skins, for example, are often told using analytical editing and the previously mentioned visual suspense mechanisms. Parallel editing is also commonly used to make scenes dynamic and to better describe the subdivision of tasks according to social roles. Through the use of careful shots and accentuated sounds, this series of films emphasizes the sensible aspects of the indigenous environment—its objects, foods, and inhabitants—by evoking the feeling of being there and intimately participating in the Inuit everyday life. Nevertheless, *Netsilik Eskimo* uses a linear narration and the lack of explanation is motivated by the principle of using films as a didactic tool in various educational contexts, with suitable written material and explanations from the instructor used as a support. *Forest of Bliss* has a different and rather more ambitious objective: to communicate the intangible—in other words, the ideas related to spirituality, and the life and death of the people of Benares, often through a kind of editing in which the sum of images produces a new meaning compared to the content of single shots. We see a boat loaded with wood moving along the river, then a cut to birds flying in the sky, and finally the image of a cadaver floating in the Ganges River "in order to say that wood has some death-related meaning, that it is not just for keeping people warm at night" (Gardner, Östör 2001: 48).

As previously mentioned, aside from its particularly semantic and narrative characteristics, Gardner's film is distinguished by the representation and evocation of the sensorial world of Benares. *Forest of Bliss* creates an immediate impact due to its visual and audio peculiarities. The seductive images of the city are often accompanied by sounds, with an increased volume in comparison to the background audio. This stylistic feature of Gardner's cinema intensifies the involvement of the viewer's senses. Sounds can be enhanced to better express the material nature of the elements filmed. With certain shots—when the body of a donkey is dragged down a stairway accompanied by a loud hollow thud as the head hits the steps—the solidity of this space is communicated through a graphic description that which would not have been possible without heightening the sound (Ibid., 68).

On the other hand, the grace and balance of the women as they carry marigolds on their heads (min. 16-17) is transmitted with the fluid movement of the camera and the silence produced by this task, whereas the spectator has become used to hearing the sounds of everyone else's activities. This scene is also contrasted with the much noisier one that follows, which contributes to a greater impact.

Here (min. 17-18), the weight of tree trunks laboriously loaded and carried on the shoulders of the workers is effectively depicted by the low position of the camera and the

upwards angle shot, which focuses the main aspects of the actions in the upper part of the frame producing the effect of pushing the viewer down to the ground (Fig. 5, 6)[1]
The sounds are intensified by Gardner, even when their origin is offscreen, thus giving the

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impression of a wider space than what is seen in the frame (MacDougall 2001: 83-84), a space aurally disclosed as the viewer waits to be affected by the remaining senses. The repeated sounds of bells, and the strokes and squeaks of the oars rhythmically punctuate the images, allowing the viewer to slip into the atmosphere of Benares. Many shots in *Forest of Bliss* were recorded without synchronized sound: Gardner (2006: 303) does not believe in the *cinema vérité* approach, and prefers to work the audio separately in order to make the most of the possibilities of expression. Sight and hearing evoke the perception of other senses: we feel the soft texture of the food being avidly eaten by Dom Raja; we breathe in the incense used during prayer; and we are enveloped in the smell of smoke and the heat of the fire of religious rituals. In the representation of Benares the numerous images of alleyways, temples, and dwellings are alternated with bright and open shots of flower fields, the sky, or the riverside, in a composition of space that oscillates between feelings of constriction and relief. The fascination with color contrast is expressed in these environments: between the pale tints of buildings and the intense tawny, lilac, and purple tones of flowers, of certain clothing and fabrics, even the ones used for the dead in the ceremonies (Fig. 1, 7, 8). Color is not simply perceived by the eye; its material qualities also engage the sense of touch. During the blessing ritual for a recently repaired boat (min. 48-52), the fluid color can be felt on the skin; or dust can be felt on fingertips as the

1 Stan Brakhage conversation with Robert Gardner in *Forest of Bliss* - Special Edition DVD. 2008, Studio7Arts. All images included in the article are courtesy of Documentary Educational Resources

carpenter plunges his hand in the yellow ochre paint, then delicately touches a ruby red substance leaving fingerprints or small markings on the hull, the ground, and work tools (Fig. 9, 10).

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In the city of Benares that is depicted in *Forest of Bliss*, people and animals coexist and move incessantly. People are often filmed through shots that avoid or overshadow their faces due to the contrast of light. The shots concentrate on bodies walking, working, praying, and tightening up. The camera tends to avoid illustrative shots and prefers dramatic and suggestive angles (Fig. 11, 12, 13) or tight positions that amplify the illusion of physically participating in the activities shown (Fig. 14, 15, 16).

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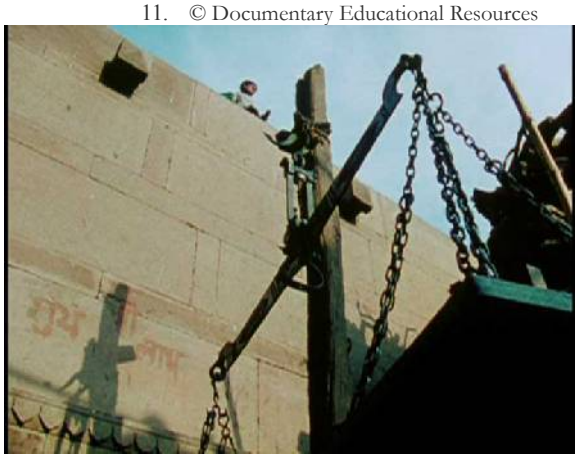

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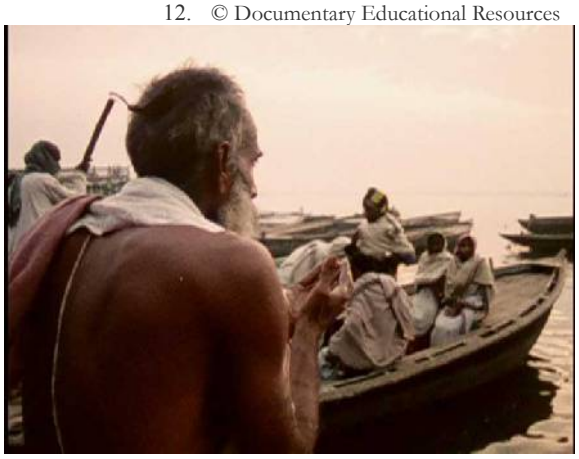

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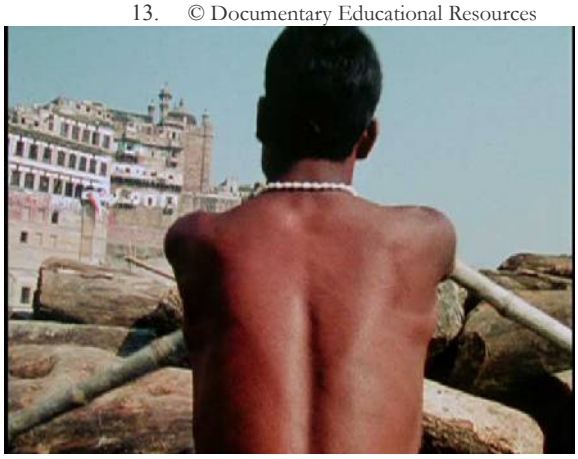

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The recurrent images of the dirty and dusty ground and stairs, as people and animals walk by, further emphasize the strong and concrete relationship between the city and its inhabitants.

For example, at the beginning of the film we see Mithai Lal leaving home to go to the waters of the Ganges River for daily ablutions (Fig. 17, 18, 19, 20).

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The camera follows him with ten shots (min. 3-4) from different positions, at times up close, without ever clearly revealing his face. The attention is exclusively focused on his careful

steps, the slow and strenuous movements of his legs, the sound of his bare feet as he descends the stone stairs, the tight and filthy alleyways, the background noises, and, most of all, his voice as he makes throaty comments— which to us are incomprehensible—during his long walk. The body, space, and movements are all combined to depict this man's experience and the physical characteristics of the area where he moves about. As we already know, in *Forest of Bliss* there is no particular importance given to a sole individual. The film focuses on the relationship between the people and the environment made up of a city maze, incense and temples, coexistence with animals and river activities—while communicating the idea of an organic whole. Michael Oppitz (1988: 210) talks about an "impersonal quality of the film", because aside from the three cases mentioned, the other inhabitants of Benares appear as expressions of the activities they perform, disappearing behind their tasks. Nevertheless, Gardner's film avoids objectifying people by transforming them into mechanisms of a highly organized social life, which is what occurs in many "visual symphonies" such as those by Ruttmann and Vertov. *Forest of Bliss* is a representation of material and spiritual life, which in fact recalls *The Song of Ceylon* by Basil Wright, a 1934 documentary that deeply inspired Gardner's work. Most of all, Gardner appreciates the capacity to express the sacred atmosphere of the place through the editing, with the use of simple images of birds, stones, the sky, and water; seeing these on their own and without audio would not create the same effect (Gardner 2006: 310). Furthermore, *The Song of Ceylon* possesses "an amazing capacity to make images that convey feeling and mood at the same time they are representing, even preserving, the world of reality" (Gardner 1996: 171). If Wright's film uses narration and describes the changing of a world (from ancient times to the introduction of commercial trade on the island), then it is the use of symbols and above all the humanity and depth of its portrayal that are the important aspects we can be sure to find in *Forest of Bliss*. According to Thomas W. Cooper the film displays people through various points of view, sometimes already in mid-action, allowing the viewer to participate in the events more effectively:

> Often we originate with a process, like its "intimates," rather than being attracted toward it from afar, like tourists. When bodies of the dead are being prepared, we encircle them, then follow them, as do others in the procession (Cooper 1995: 40).

*Forest of Bliss* does not have a communicative strategy that overlays images with characters, a narrative voice, or texts. Instead, these images are what attract the attention of the viewer, asking to be perceived along with sounds in all their expressive power. From this point of view, the prologue of the film is paradigmatic. *Forest of Bliss* starts with a long fade-in from black, and the first sense being engaged is hearing, through the increasing volume of bells, birds' cries, and the patter of animal. These moments evoke in the mind of the viewer the sensation of an undefined open space. The first shot is of a dog on a whitish background (Fig. 21), looking in various directions beyond the frame and walking on the sand, until disappearing past the right margin of the screen. The same direction of movement is followed in the next shot of a boat in

the dim light of dawn (Fig. 22): the coming in and out of the frame continues to suggest a space which goes beyond the visually perceived, a space already introduced by the sounds offscreen. We then see workers (Fig. 23), animals, boats, architectural elements, and a young boy (Fig. 24) tightening the string of a kite (offscreen) as the sun rises. The shots filmed in the morning fog have a grainy texture. The image is lacking in consistency, and the "haptic eye" tries to penetrate the space evoking the feeling of a porous membrane. The growls and barks, increasing in intensity, break the stillness by changing the tone of the scene. On the sand, a few dogs start biting each other: an emotional moment due to the harsh impact, which transmits a sense of pain caused by this sudden and violent action. The scene ends with the opening credits and dull sounds, which we understand to be hatchets as we hear a tree crashing to the ground. Although these elements will come together in the film creating a framework of

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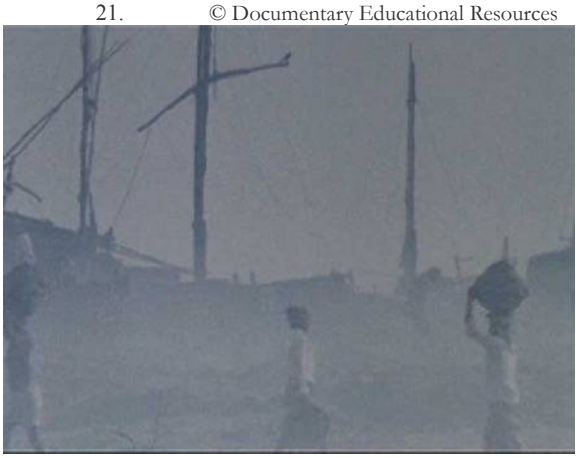

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well-defined meanings and symbols, in the prologue they affect the viewer and his or her imagination through a synesthetic experience, which does not simply engage sight and hearing but the entire body, creating a strong impression of spatial dimension. The film particularly suggests an image of the environment that often it is not possible to directly see: the presence of the river is evoked through shots of sandy surfaces and the movements of boats and the sound of splashing water. Shots of the young boy allude to the kite and the sky. While the sounds of the fallen tree create a compelling image in the viewer's mind, much more than sight would have allowed (Gardner, Östör 2001: 25). *Forest of Bliss* stimulates a physical and emotional response in the viewer. The "haptic eye" provokes repulsive sensations as it lingers on corpses floating in the river, or on dogs chewing carcasses with the sound of flesh between teeth (Fig. 25). The texture, mass, and superficial character of the elements shown are communicated at times with close-ups, creating a contrast in volumes with the subjects in the background: the rough mass of the sand load carried by a boat is contrasted with the slender figure of the boatman (Fig. 26), just like the heads of water buffalo, with their swollen eyes and their round hairy bodies, fill the screen as the inhabitants of Benares appear in the background as small figures (Fig. 27). However, the attention given to the human body, with its physical and organic nature, which may appear efficient (such as men rowing, carrying wood, building objects) or dysfunctional (such as Mithai Lal's difficulty moving, the blindness of an elderly man, the bedridden women dying), is usually one of the main aspects through which *Forest of Bliss* represents the city. The interest in the body emerges from constant physical and manual labor, and from the organic processes and bodily functions sometimes included in the film. It emerges from the inclusion of elements of everyday life, which, as David MacDougall (2006: 19) observes with regard to cinema, are often excluded in films due to the social taboos involved, when they are in fact shown, a sense of realism is created. Through feelings of aversion or empathy, shock or familiarity, and disturbance or visual pleasure, the body of the viewer is engaged at an emotional and sensorial level within the space of the film, regardless of his or her narrative or symbolic understanding. Finally, in addition to the physicality of the subjects filmed and the viewer, the documentary also calls into question the body of the filmmaker, whose presence emerges from numerous hand-held shots, thus suggesting an active figure behind the camera. The filmmaker's body and his movements are fixed in the film, allowing us to reflect upon the relationship between the observer, the observed and the viewer, through the resonance of their physical experiences.

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*Forest of Bliss* distinguishes itself from many documentaries about other cultures due to the different methods of representation used. It has been criticized for its experimental nature: some scholars find this way of describing a culture as ineffective as visual anthropology. In his harsh attack of Gardner's work, Ruby (1991: 13) judges *Forest of Bliss* as a discontinuous and formalistic portrait intended to depict India as a mysterious and exotic country, which in his opinion is a cliché that is accepted or "forgiven" by various anthropologists due to the artistic qualities and universal themes of this author's films. Östör (1994: 80) believes that even if the film does not document every aspect of the religious activities, it still recalls the overall meaning of the events shown. He affirms that *Forest of Bliss* shows how the cycle of death and rebirth is described, accepted with detachment by the people of Benares through the power of ritual practice that permeates their life, allowing them to transcend everyday experiences in order to get in touch with metaphysical truths. Ritual practice acts as a support for the inhabitants of Benares when dealing with traumatic events, replacing the public manifestation of pain which is socially unaccepted here (Ibid.). This is an aspect of Hindu tradition rendered by *Forest of Bliss*: through the use of editing, it alternates simple material practices with funeral and religious ceremonies, showing how these situations are intimately related to the habitual customs of Benares. The contemplation of the flow and transformation of existence is preferred over the representation of anguish, which fleetingly emerges in only two shots of the film. *Forest of Bliss* does not aspire to achieve an exhaustive and straightforward description of indigenous society; instead, it organizes a complex experience where the world of the Benares people blends with the director's vision to involve the viewer, both emphatically and rationally, in the actions, the works, and the ceremonies of Benares. By borrowing an idea put forward by anthropology, the viewer becomes part of what Sarah Pink calls "ethnographic place". This is not the real place of fieldwork but rather the place built by its representation (through a book, a film, a musical composition, or other form) which embodies the experiences, discourses, thoughts, theories, memories, and imagination of the ethnographer and the subjects studied: the reader or viewer is invited to participate with his or her own subjectivity and senses to imagine him or herself in this

conceptually abstract space already experienced by others, and to therefore understand its relationships (Pink 2009: 41-42/140-141).

The attention given to the body, its perceptions and its environment, allows us to consider *Forest of Bliss* in relation to the growing anthropological interest shown in the past twenty years regarding the relationship between human senses and culture. There are earlier examples of ethnographic research which examined the various sensorial aspects of human activity and their context[2], just as there were studies of psychology, philosophy, art, neurology, etc. that had investigated man's relationship with the way he perceives the world in which he lives. That said, this concept did not gain interest until the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, also under the influence of two remarkable works that are considered landmarks of the anthropological study of the senses, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989) and *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997), both by Paul Stoller. That is when this discipline turned its attention to the complex role of bodily senses in the acquisition of knowledge and in the attribution of meaning to social practices. The growing interest in these themes and consequent large quantity of publications that were produced, brought about a consolidation of the concepts into a field of study that compelled anthropological research to consider new epistemological questions and often, to rethink the ethnographer's work in the field. Stoller criticizes conventions of ethnographic realism and the researcher's attitude towards indigenous cultures as if they were texts to be analyzed objectively, stripping research results of the complexity and intensity of the researcher's own sensorial experience, lived in the first person with the natives. In sensorial anthropology, the study of social phenomena does not privilege the senses of sight and hearing in field research and avoids a scientific approach that relies on severe detachment: even the senses of touch, taste, and smell—in other words the profusion of stimuli of reality—all come into play in the anthropologist's acquisition of knowledge and expression of theories. Therefore, these research communications modes are gradually more efficient in portraying this realm of experience. Various studies of the anthropology of the senses used an interdisciplinary approach and resorted to instruments for recording real life, in order to gain further knowledge and communicate the ethnographer's work about topics that are sometimes hard to describe, as is sensorial perception. From this point of view *Forest of Bliss* shows interesting possibilities; the film can be used to render environmental aspects as well as the physical and sensorial engagement of both the indigenous peoples and the observer, which would be difficult to communicate in other contexts through writing. As we previously examined, the effective perceptual evocation of the film occurs through inter-sensorial connections, the study of which is central to this type of anthropology, and they help to create a

2 These topics occur, for example, in the research of Alfred C. Haddon (Pink, 2006, pp. 5-6), of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (Pink, 2006, p. 9-10) and of Bronislaw Malinowski (Stoller, 1989, p.8).

sense of being there. Ethnographic film may therefore be a means to engage the viewer at a physical and emotional level, in questions related to experience, the body and the senses, that are an inevitable part of any field research but are often removed from finished reports of anthropologists (Nichols 1991: 38-39).

Stoller (1997) pointed out how the places of research are not only inhabited by the anthropologist, but they can also penetrate his own body in unexpected, profound and sometimes traumatic ways. As we have seen, the portrait of Benares in *Forest of Bliss* transmits a set of sensorial stimuli, which gives the impression of a world that flows viscerally into the spectator's body. Stoller (1989: 153-156) recognized the evocative power of cinema. He cites the example of Rouch's film, to claim that also thanks to this channel it is possible to communicate the intensity and richness of the sensorial experience of living in another culture. *Forest of Bliss* is not a detailed description of Indian society. It explores several situations, particularly connected to the cycle of death and regeneration and holiness that permeates life in Benares, while transmitting a strong impression of the city's atmosphere. Clearly, the film was not designed as an analytical investigation of the city's religious rituals, nor as research into the senses. Gardner intended to communicate an experience of the city through those aspects that he felt were significant:

> […] the combination of sounds and images in "Forest of Bliss" was intended to highlight what I've felt were essential elements of my, and perhaps others', experience of Benares. You must remember that all such films as "Forest of Bliss" are highly subjective in the manner in which their subject matter is presented, and that there is nothing final or definitive about the content of "Forest of Bliss".[3]

As mentioned, the interest that anthropology has had in sensorial perception brought about a search for methodologies for effectively communicating it. Stoller gives a great deal of importance to a narrative approach—especially written narrative—in order to describe the sensorial experiences of the ethnographer and the native people and their cultural significance. However, this is but one of the possible approaches that can be used by anthropology of the senses. In fact, this discipline does not have any one methodology for the representation of the sensorial sphere. Through its abundant research, the discipline has also studied the role of perception from divers angles. Pink identifies three main questions that this field of research has focused on:

> It explores the question of the relationship between sensory perception and culture, engages with questions concerning the status of vision and its relationship to the other senses, and

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> demands a form of reflexivity that goes beyond the interrogation of how culture is 'written' to examine the sites of embodied knowing (Pink 2009: 15).

We have noted that *Forest of Bliss* does not employ a conventional narrative framework, and yet it presents a rich sensorial description of the local culture. The film does not pursue scientifically the way in which perception of the senses gains significance in the context of the social phenomena it depicts. An example of this type of film is the series of documentaries shot by MacDougall (2000-2004) in the residential all-male Doon School, the most prestigious secondary school in India. MacDougall (2006: 94-119) shows how the strict education received by the students is not expressed exclusively through formal, institutional precepts and teachings, but on a non-semiotic level, it is played out through the esthetics of daily experience: in an implicit and pervasive way in the organization of space and time, in movement and in the use of the body, in types of gesture and posture, in the use of clothing and colors and so on, that are all part of the institution's daily life and whose order is deeply internalized by the students. MacDougall calls this aspect of culture *social aesthetic* and about it, he claims: "I should stress here that I do not mean a system of signs and meanings encoded in school life, but rather the creation of an aesthetic space or sensory structure" (Ibid., 105). Even though Gardner's film was not conceived within a project that delves into anthropology of the senses, it is useful for an investigation of ways to depict perception that are alternative to words. In this essay, we have considered the processes that allow the spectator to experience the film in ways that involve his or her body in the description of Benares. The inter-sensorial effect that the film evokes is an example of the interconnection among the senses that gives a "global" perception of the places and actions that are presented. The topic of anthropology and research of perception was treated critically in recent years by Tim Ingold who referred specifically to sight and hearing when he championed the idea that sensorial perceptions by their nature do not occur separately from one another but concurrently, so that an interpretation of their function in terms of contrast or of a hierarchical classification on the base of differing social contexts is misleading (Ingold, 2000). This idea is supported, for example, by Stoller who in studying the Songhay people of Niger, hypothesized that for them the sense of hearing was primary over seeing, while in the Western world we usually recognize that sight has a central importance among human perception (Ibid., 250-252). If we follow Ingold in accepting the idea that the senses are necessarily inseparable, we can still note that for the subject area we are examining, there are film-making methods that can effectively involve this aspect of sensorial perception. In fact, *Forest of Bliss* shows how— thanks to the methods that we have described here—the film medium can give an impression of being there and an idea of the "sensoriality" of another place; this is an experience which is not only visual and auditory but it can evoke wider perception. This representational mode is also useful in the ethnographic realm, even though the film was not intended to serve that purpose. In fact, Gardner states that the *Forest of Bliss* project diverges from *Dead Birds* in this way:

> In 1961, when I was planning work in New Guinea, I can remember how bound I felt by anthropological scruples. I had not yet formulated a working distinction between fact and truth, document and insight, observation and vision. This accounts for the tension I now see between the requirements of science and of art in my film *Dead Birds*. In Benares, I expected to be free of those kinds of concerns and yet […] there was the conceptual predicament of how to make sense of the chaos I saw in Benares as a whole (Gardner 2006: 279-281)

Nevertheless, *Forest of Bliss* has provoked heated academic debates over its ethnographic value and it is interesting to re-examine the work in the light of a consolidation of the study of the senses in anthropology, which occurred after the film's release. Further, also the work of an author like Flaherty, while not motivated by scientific research, is now included in the field of visual anthropology, and its role in the development of the ethnographic film genre has been often studied. If we look at Gardner's work from the standpoint of a study of the senses, it acquires interest even *a posteriori*, because of its depiction of cultural practices that manage to transmit a sensation of actually participating in the situations displayed; re-enacting Benares' atmosphere and the multitude of stimuli it offers. While he was shooting the film, Gardner wasn't particularly interested in portraying the human body or its senses, he wanted to treat the theme of man's mortal destiny ("our animal fates"), stating: "I was also interested in the rituals surrounding the preparation of the dead (or bodies) for their onward journey".[4] Like many of his other works, the film aspires to involve the spectator in reflections on his own existence:

> Films like mine, I have hoped, would act in some manner or other, as a mirror of the viewer's own soul, that is to say, life experience. To the extent this occurs, I am confident that a viewer will examine his or her own life, which seems to me the most desirable goal of all.[5]

In our opinion, Gardner's priority in *Forest of Bliss* of communicating the experience, of communicating the world he encountered while in Benares, is an important motivation that orients the film towards depicting sensorial phenomena, spaces and the bodies that inhabit them, which is useful for a study of the relationship between the film and anthropology of the senses. In fact, as Pink noted, the study of an in-the-field experience, as lived out by both the ethnographer and the subject of the research, has often been significant in studies of anthropology of the senses, as are the possible modes of communicating such experience. (Pink 2009: 23-26). She proposes a type of ethnography that takes experience into account, investigating "the relationships between bodies, minds and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment" (Ibid., 25). While, "anthropologists cannot get inside other people's lives or have

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*their* experiences. Nevertheless […] we have a variety of techniques for getting close to them through *our own* lives and experiences" (Pink 2006: 134), referring also to the use of means of expression like film and video to reach this result, through various pathways and with supporting theoretic-anthropological references. It is from this point of view that *Forest of Bliss* can be considered a work that was ahead of its time. It showed the medium's potential for portraying sensorial experience. This appears differently than Östör's work, as Gardner's activity was not intended for an anthropological analysis, but for other purposes. In his own words:

> We shared many interests in the city of Benares. Östör's main interests were, however, more in the Indo-logical aspects of his experience in that city. My own interests encompassed a different, and perhaps wider, concern for the city as an experiential whole.[6]

MacDougall (2001: 71) considers *Forest of Bliss* a documentary with an original approach that has the merit of indicating new concepts for visual anthropology. In fact, in his opinion ethnographic film can adopt various strategies for representing social realities: illustrative, didactic, narrative and associative. For MacDougall, *Forest of Bliss* uses the latter, and can be considered as a prototype of its genre:

> An experiment in a radical anthropological practice which explores the largely invisible interrelations of the visible world through visual (and it must be added, auditory) means. Moreover, it seeks to do so in a fashion that resembles the way in which sensory awareness, cultural meaning, and metaphorical expression are combined in social experience, and which film can evoke so eloquently (Ibid.).

*Forest of Bliss* avoids a "transparent" description of Benares: although it is sometimes considered an example of "observational cinema"—due to the lack of narration explaining the images; the intimacy of observation; and the impression of witnessing reality—the filmmaker clearly expresses his interpretation of the local culture by using an expressive form of editing, which starkly differentiates this film from all others in this genre of documentary.

Gardner does not believe that film manages to record reality "as it truly is":

> All film-making consists in shaping something in such a way and with such materials and devices that it becomes an object with meaning, an object that is itself an invention; another item of culture with form and content (Gardner 1986: 23).

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Therefore, his films are not based on the attempt to describe social facts in the most neutral and comprehensive way possible, a method proposed by Heider—for example, in his famous formulation of principles for the use of film in the documentation of indigenous cultures (Heider 1976). However, this does not mean that Gardner's cinema abandons an attempt at depicting the meaning and transmitting the value of social experience. Ethnographic film can portray a culture through original cinematic language in order to capture various dimensions of the human condition. As is the case of *Forest of Bliss* and his exploration of the material, spiritual, and sensorial world of the people of Benares.

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