

8 GARDNER'S BLISS

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There is a serious gap between studying films as "texts" and studying how they are received by viewers, for within that gap is the largely unexplored territory of what the filmmaker intended by the film and how it came to fruition. Textual analysis and reception studies each have their limitations. The first tends to dehistoricize films, focusing on their internal construction and assuming wider understandings for what are often no more than the cultural and ideological responses of the critics. Reception studies, on the other hand, may provide insights into how different kinds of viewers interpret films, but they also tend to disconnect these from the actual process of filmmaking. Even when films are placed in an historical context, they are often interpreted within binary frameworks (idealist/materialist, artistic/scientific, romantic/classical, realist/visionary, and so on) that oversimplify their motives and the realities of the creative process. Assessments of nonfiction films, in particular, frequently measure them against a highly specific vision of historical or anthropological "truth," in which they must all too often be found wanting.

What we lack are more commentaries on the intellectual underpinnings and creative processes by which films are made. Ethnographic filmmakers, possibly even more than others, tend to write little about their work, perhaps believing that in the academic world this can result only in superficiality—a substitution of words for the products of their labors. They may even take a perverse pleasure in foiling this process. "Making a film," says Jean Rouch (1985), "is such a personal thing for me that the only implicit techniques are the very techniques of cinematography... It is also very difficult for me to talk about it and, above all, write about it" (32). Filmmaking also consumes more energy than is generally apparent to outsiders, often leaving little for writing. Moreover, it entails a fundamentally different attitude toward communicating with others. Rouch has made over a hundred films but produced only a handful of articles about film itself. Similar explanations could be given for the relative silence of other figures in ethnographic film, such as Robert Flaherty, John Marshall, Timothy Asch, and Ian Dunlop. It is not that filmmakers are unreflective, for they are often quite talkative about their work, but the ideas, descriptions, and reflections they express are ephemeral. This is the perspective most easily lost to history. What survives in writing is usually fragmented and anecdotal.

If we had them, more comprehensive, fine-grained accounts of the filmmaking process would allow us to compare our own ideas of films with an understanding of how the filmmaker's ideas and desires had been pursued in them, within the intellectual and artistic

movements of their times. They would allow us to see how a film had progressed through the phases of planning, production, and editing and to witness the filmmaker's struggles to define issues, confront epistemological problems, and make his or her ideas and understandings manifest. Ideally, such an account would interrogate the filmmaker and the work at every stage of its production, although in most cases this is probably impractical. But until we have more full-length accounts by filmmakers, we will have to settle for less exhaustive testimony—diaries, production notes, interviews, and recorded conversations.

When Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* received its first public screening at the Royal Anthropological Institute Film Festival in September 1985, it was introduced by Gardner's colleague and fellow filmmaker Timothy Asch. After the screening, Asch suggested to the audience that it was the film Gardner had always wanted to make and was, in effect, the crowning achievement of his filmmaking career. Since then, Gardner has made more films, but Asch was probably right in attaching such importance to this one. *Forest of Bliss* was many years in preparation and required several years more in the filming and editing. Unlike many films in which Gardner has been involved, it was not the result of a short-term collaboration such as *The Nuer* (1971), *Rivers of Sand* (1974), and *Alvar of Fire* (1976), nor did it emerge from a group project, as had *Dead Birds* (1963); rather, it was a film Gardner had conceived and nurtured himself in a series of trips over several years to the city of Benares (now Varanasi). Although made with the close involvement of Ákos Östör, *Forest*

of *Bliss* really seemed to be a work close to Gardner's heart and the most mature expression of his creative thinking. More than that, it brought together two sometimes contradictory strands in his makeup as an artist—his desire to immerse himself in the physical existence of another society and his desire to explore its underlying symbolic systems and poetic resonances.

Two years after its release in 1985, *Forest of Bliss* became something of a cause célèbre through articles published in the pages of the *Society for Visual Anthropology Newsletter*. These included several incontinent attacks on the film and on Gardner himself (Moore 1988; Parry 1988; Ruby 1991, 2000). The attacks seemed to be fuelled by a kind of corporate outrage, as if Gardner had somehow let the side down or been guilty of insubordination. Several other articles appeared supporting the film (Chopra 1989; Östör 1989; Sical 1989), one of them as bracingly splenetic as those that had provoked it (Carpenter 1989).

Since then, much of the critical discussion of *Forest of Bliss* has revolved around the propriety of Gardner producing an interpretation of life (and death) in Benares that might reinforce the misconceptions of uninformed viewers. Gardner's subsequent reflections on the film, in a published conversation with Ákos Östör (Gardner and Östör 2001), was especially welcome in explaining his intentions and illuminating the film itself, although it will not do much to satisfy his detractors. Many of the critiques can in fact be read more as objections to Gardner's worldview than as any actual fear of harm being done. The film tends to divide its critics into those who have a view—of historical reality, of Benares, of India, or anthropology—that the film offends and those who, sometimes even in spite of this, see value in such a radically different kind of film being made. Nonfiction filmmaking is inevitably a perilous business, for it takes the stuff of real human lives and transforms it. There are some who see this as fundamentally immoral, yet it is also the process by which most of us observe the world around us and represent it to ourselves and others. One of the paradoxes of nonfiction film is that while we may deny it the possibility of objective truth (for it is always coded, always ideologically), we somehow expect it to be "true" in its representations.

Gardner chose to remain aloof from the debate, perhaps thinking of the discussion of the film that he and Ákos Östör had recently recorded in 1987. In this conversation, the exchanges between the two are detailed and wide ranging, filled with speculations, fresh observations, doubts, and questions. To anyone curious about the filmmaking process, there is far more of interest in them than can be found in any number of critical essays and film reviews. Reading the edited transcript is like listening in on some very highly polished shop talk.

During the course of the conversation, Gardner laments the fact that films over whose visual qualities the makers take endless care are so often shown in degraded copies. There is in fact a disjunction in public expectations about fiction and nonfiction films, when nonfiction is so rarely seen on anything but a small television screen. It is part of the popular mythology of nonfiction that it should be ugly and rough, that the camera eye should be



imprecise, with no love or patience for the things it sees—even to the extent that fictionalized documentaries simulate a roughness that no nonfiction filmmaker would tolerate. All these things are, of course, anathema to Robert Gardner.

Partly because of the controversy surrounding it, *Forest of Bliss* has achieved a certain notoriety among ethnographic films. But the same was true of *Dead Birds* before it and several of Gardner's intervening films. There is more than controversy involved: the films announce themselves as deliberate and uncompromising works, demanding to be taken seriously. They are not simply films "about" something but the products of a distinctive and rigorous imagination.

I am one of those who has no problem in regarding *Forest of Bliss* as an ethnographic film, not because Gardner does (he is distrustful of the label) but because it seems to me to mark out new conceptual possibilities for visual anthropology. Ethnography on film—the description of particular sociocultural systems and settings—is open to a variety of strategies: illustrative, didactic, narrative, and associative. Gardner is one of the very few filmmakers who has attempted the last of these. I believe it is useful to see the film as a prototype: an experiment in a radical anthropological practice that explores the largely invisible interrelations of the visible world by 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 that film can evoke so eloquently. As Gardner remarks at one point, "We seem to comprehend the world in ways that the world itself provides for its comprehension, and metaphor is one of the tools at hand" (Gardner and Östör 2001, 65). *Forest of Bliss* provides an alternative way of thinking and feeling about the world, one that may strike some as familiar and others as utterly alien. It is a film that interpreters reality by providing, to use Susan Sonag's phrase, a "reality in the second degree" (Sonag 1977, 52).

In 1957, Gardner wrote a statement about film and anthropology that can be taken as a prolegomenon for his later career in filmmaking. "At least two characteristics, fundamental to all people, help distinguish human beings from every other manifestation of nature. The first is the capacity for putting meaning into the reality apprehended by the senses.... The second characteristic is a capacity for being responsive to the meaningfulness of each other's behavior, either of deed or of thought" (Gardner 1957, 344–45). *Forest of Bliss* is a challenge to filmmakers and film viewers to be more responsive to the meaning-potential of everyday life.

Gardner and Östör's discussion returns often to the ways in which objects in the film oscillate between the literal and the metaphorical and how they can be perceived as both. This is but one facet of the redoublement that lies at the heart of film itself or any representation. But it is especially pertinent to film as an indexical medium, in which one periodically has the sense of seeing through the images to the objects that occasioned them. Film, used with a sensitivity to this conundrum, offers a unique approach to the ways in which the mind and the senses integrate cultural experience. However one regards Gardner's particular Benares (and there are many others)—whether one would prefer a more "ethnographic"



Benares or a Benares more situated in contemporary Indian history and politics—Gardner's way of seeing social and cultural interconnections can still be productive for anthropology. But this way of seeing owes much to an older tradition.

In 1975, Jean Rouch (1995) wrote that it was to Robert Flaherty and Draga Vetrov "that we owe all of what we are trying to do today." He went on to quote Vetrov, to the effect that "it is not sufficient to present fragments of reality on the screen, to represent life by its crumbs. These fragments must be elaborated upon so as to make an integrated whole which is, in turn, the thematic reality" (82–83). It is hard to think of *Forest of Bliss* without also thinking of Vetrov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1928) and the cluster of "city symphonies" made between 1926 and 1930 by Walter Ruttmann, Alberto Cavalcanti, Mikhail Kaufman, Jean Vigo, and Robert Siodmak. Gardner's film belongs to this tradition in more ways than one. If ever a film were a "city symphony," *Forest of Bliss* is one, and if ever a film was the work of one man with a movie camera, this film certainly is. Gardner is not interested in Vetrov's self-reflexive gestures, pointing toward the materiality of film, but he is interested in integrating fragments of experience into a thematic reality—a "film truth" that can never be the truth of other methods.

In *Forest of Bliss*, Gardner is committed to bringing us into a closer communion with wordless things and the networks of associations, by no means fixed, that may surround them. (Yotsna Kapur is right in stressing the materiality rather than the otherworldliness

of the film.) He is resolute in refusing, except for quoting a few lines from Yeats, to employ words or explanations or to translate speech in subtitles or in any other way to "linguify" the film (to borrow Lucien Taylor's expression). The published transcript of Gardner and Östör's explication of the film may thus serve as an antidote for those made uncomfortable by the lack of explanation in the film or what they see as a world made unnecessarily wordless. Gardner and Östör remark at several points that if speech in the film had been translated, we would not be much the wiser—it is the emotional tone of the various exchanges that is important. In eschewing verbal explanations, Gardner credits viewers with a good deal more intelligence and sensitivity to images and sounds than most other filmmakers would, and for an aficionado of words such as Gardner, this is significant. The film becomes a testament to seeing, but it is also intended as a challenge to our unthinking recourse to language as the first line of understanding. It is not that the film is so difficult, Gardner seems to say, only that we make it so.

Gardner and Östör's conversation about the film proceeds as a kind of gentle interrogation of Gardner by Östör. If there is sometimes a sense of each feeding off the other's views or of mutual congratulation, this is perhaps to be expected between colleagues and collaborators. And like the letters and diaries of writers and statesmen, the conversation was probably never meant to be wholly private; posterity was always in mind and publication always a possibility. It is not unexpected that these two would see the film through the logic of its creation. From their conversation, one begins to gain a sense of the knowledge and forethought about structural and anthropological issues that underlie the film but that the film itself wears lightly. One discovers that what some critics have seen as blind spots, such as political and ecological issues, were in fact matters of early debate and conscious choice. The filmmakers are aware of the limits of what a film can hope to achieve. At the same time, the film's meanings are never regarded as exhausted or exclusive of other views. The discussion is open-ended and a process of further discovery.

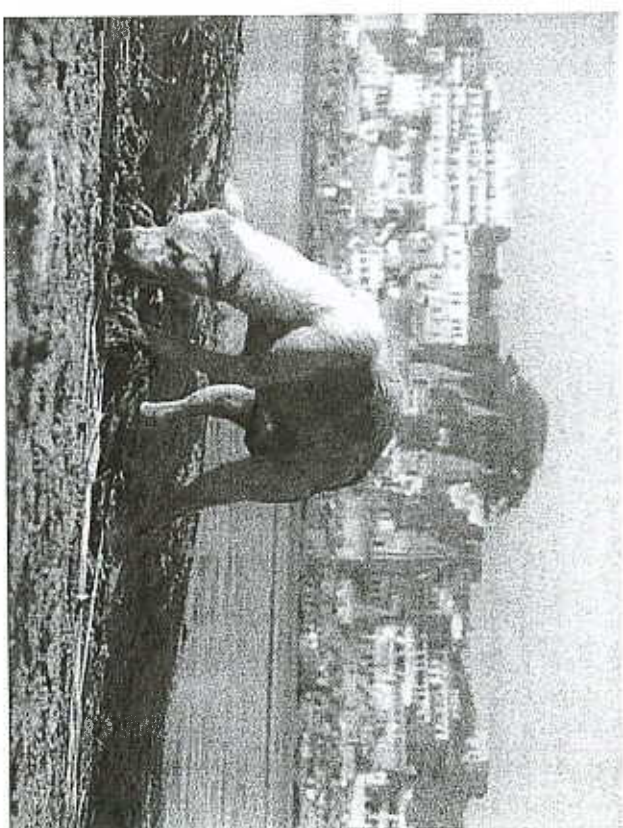
Early in the conversation (and in the film because they are working their way through it chronologically), Gardner and Östör refer to the scene of dogs fighting on the "far shore" of the Ganges. Gardner says that he had in mind an early warning to the audience that "the world is not the best of all possible places to be; to survive there is going to be an awful lot of anguish to deal with, and sometimes you don't quite make it" (Gardner and Östör 2001, 22). Thinking about the possible responses to the film, Östör remarks,

I know that it disturbs people a great deal when they see this scene the first time. I remember on this occasion—and many others when we were filming such scenes—I was disturbed for reasons that I still have to puzzle out, and maybe in this conversation I will. While you were filming, I was really sensitive about the seemingly negative aspects of dogs, and you remember we had a lot of discussion and arguments about filming the filth and the corpses, all these matters that outrage the uninformed visitor. It's not that one wants to deny these things and play into the hands of the superficial apologists for a "modern" India. Benares is not a hell-hole of death and corruption, but if certain people

see any evidence for some of these things they will assume the basest motives for the images being included. (22–23)

Östör is modest about his role in the film, acknowledging that at times he could not visualize what it would look like, but he is also frank in his disagreement when this matters, both on points of ethnographic detail and in his assessment of Gardner's aesthetic choices. Sometimes he sounds less protective than Gardner of the viewer's sensibilities. This is the tone of one of their exchanges:

RG: This is the first time that anyone actually sees cremation, a discernible body being consumed by discernible flames. This is the only time in the film that the audience is asked to see this way—passively. I would say, since there is nothing being asked of anyone except that they keep their eyes open. I was very concerned when I was doing this, and I remember this part as the hardest part of the film to edit. The rest of the film, by comparison, really almost edited itself. That's obviously not true, but it felt that way because it had a remarkable feeling of inevitability to it. But this part was very problematic, very difficult, and I wasn't sure what I should do. The whole Manikarnika episode in the film had to end in a way that resulted in some understanding and that also created some useful mystery. I worked a long time to get it to satisfy these two requirements.



AO: Well, I'm not sure. Here I find myself almost unequivocally on the other side, in the sense that it could have gone on much longer. The fire somehow makes it look more abstract. You weren't reticent about the earlier glimpses of corpses in the river and so forth, which have a far more recognizable and candid aspect. This body is somewhat screened by the fire.

RG: It has something to do with the obviousness of what is happening. I mean, when you set fire to something that's combustible, it's going to burn up. That's not only pretty obvious, it is completely unambiguous. But you are right about the possibility of abstraction, the fire screening the body, and so forth. A lot depends on how the shot is made, what the camera does to the subject. I think I may not have been too resourceful here. (Gardner and Östör 2001, 106–7)

Interestingly, it is often Gardner rather than Östör who alludes to the need for fidelity to ethnographic detail, as when he includes in the film the healer, Mithai Lal, blowing three times on a conch shell, where many filmmakers would cut corners and show him blowing it only once (Gardner and Östör 2001, 50–51). The rhythms of actual life may here come into conflict with the rhythms of the film, but for Gardner the choice of which to observe is often a matter of respecting the dignity of a person or the forms of human invention, which may go deeper than we think. Later in the film a boat is being repaired, and rituals are being done for its "rebirth."

RG: When those hands are painted with yellow ochre on the pavement... I actually show all five times it happens. It would have been very easy to begin the shot with the third or fourth time it's done. It's a little like the three blowings of the conch at the beginning of the film. I think that five is an auspicious number on an occasion like this, so, ethnographically speaking, there may be a reason for shooting and editing the scene to include it all... Nonfiction films, especially those made for commercial release, will not usually give more consideration to the original shape of the behavior than to the editorial requirements of keeping the film moving. But my feeling on this is that if you ignore the internal rhythms of things, you stand to lose more than just authenticity. (Gardner and Östör 2001, 87–88)

It would be difficult to underestimate the importance of chance and circumstance in Gardner's thinking. Again and again, he refers to the filmmaker as the recipient rather than the bestower of gifts. The leitmotif of luck keeps surfacing, like the freshwater Ganges dolphin that makes an unexpected appearance—one so slight that Gardner did not see it until viewing the rushes. We are made aware, if we did not know already, how dependent the nonfiction filmmaker is on luck and, as a corollary, how often critics mistake luck for intention. And yet this is only half the story, for the filmmaker makes his own luck through patience and observation and a talent for anticipation. "I would guess," Gardner says, "that one of the ways an argument might be made that this kind of filmmaking has some art to

it is to develop the idea of there being a sensitivity to the way things unfold in actuality. How much this is a talent and how much it is simply craft gained through long experience in observing life is hard to answer" (Gardner and Östör 2001, 36–37).

How then does luck become entangled in intention? Nonfiction filmmakers do not simply wait for actuality to happen to them, for, as Dai Vaughan (1999) has pointed out, "film is about something, whereas reality is not" (21). On the evidence of Gardner's observations, it is a matter of seizing the gifts that extend and deepen one's own vision and of respecting the world's enactments of itself. There was the moment when Gardner was filming the evening skyline and a monkey jumped into the frame, onto the roof of the tallest building. "How can such gifts of actuality be rejected?" he asks. "To Gardner, 'The monkey afforded a wonderfully surrealistic comment on the whole urban panorama... [as if] this world were being watched over by relatives of a lower order' (Gardner and Östör 2001, 113).

One sometimes has the experience while making nonfiction films that certain motifs recur uncannily in different combinations, as if they formed a thinly veiled network of underlying meanings—the sorts of meanings that in fiction seem consciously devised. These may become apparent immediately or emerge only long after the film is finished. At these times, the world seems metaphorically charged, as if there existed only a limited number of possible connections in human life. Are such experiences simply reflections of the



metaphors we live by and perhaps look for, or do they correspond to deeper resonances in the structures of society? Clearly, for Gardner, these are the taproots of his art.

Much of the talk between Gardner and Östör is about the convergence of elements that Gardner has chosen to focus on—water, wood, fire, boats, steps, marigolds, corpses, dogs, kites (as toys), kites (as birds), and so on. What astonishes Gardner as “luck” but what is objectively not really so astonishing is when some of these elements converge on their own, perhaps reinforcing the intimation of an underlying order that has attracted him to Hinduism in the first place. In a wholly constructed sequence, Gardner imagines a boy’s kite pulling up the fire of the sun at dawn. He keeps on filming kites as ambiguous symbols of childhood, flight, the spirit, the body, and so on. “There was also,” he says (with an air of innocence), “some obscure feeling that kites drifting off toward the far shore and sometimes falling into the river had a larger meaning” (Gardner and Östör 2001, 110). He keeps on filming kites, trying to film one falling into the water. One evening he is filming a boat drifting out to deposit a child’s body in the river, and there happens a kind of magical event:

Here, in the shot where the body is being dropped in the river, a kite falls in the back-ground. So as the body is put in, the kite joins it. You know, the whole thing seems to get said in one quite simple symbolic passage that is, at the same time, powerfully actual.

This was great luck, and someday we should ask ourselves what proportion of nonfiction film proceeds from luck. (110)

Hardly luck, one might suggest, but the other side of circumstance. For, as Gardner remarks at another point, “one of the few welcome accomplices of a nonfiction filmmaker is accident. . . . I really think that putting oneself in the position to encounter accident is very much a part of succeeding in this genre” (60).

The conflict implicit in finding meaning in the randomness of life—when so much of the film rests on such a process—seems to be tested when such fortuitous situations as the kite scene fall, as it were, into Gardner’s lap. In that particular scene, the relationship of elements is so subtle and the accidental quality of the events so evident that the problem is muted. But what if one filmed a body on a bamboo litter just as it passed by the bamboo worker’s yard, as often happened? “No one would have believed it was really happening,” says Gardner. Or, more to the point, “it would come off as something unquestionably contrived” (Gardner and Östör 2001, 58). There is a paradox, then, about asserting, at one and the same time, consequence and seeming inconsequence. Here, Östör goes to the heart of the matter more directly than Gardner when he refers to what is left *out* of a film: “It is symptomatic of the power to make things happen or make them not happen, and that says a lot about the very artificial crafting of these so-called real or actuality films. What is it that makes the ‘realness’ of one scene more or less acceptable than some other scene?” (58). I am not entirely convinced of the profundity of Gardner’s reply: “I think part of the problem is that the very act of filming changes the state of realness in things.”

Later the issue returns when, as the newborn boat is taken to the river, a body is taken to be ceremonially immersed. But once artifice has made its appearance, it cannot be conveniently suspended. “Here is a good case of actuality outdoing artifice,” says Gardner. “Nevertheless, despite this sanction of reality, the inference might be drawn that the actuality is too contrived. I have not felt it was a mistake to use this comparison, only that it failed to be entirely convincing” (Gardner and Östör 2001, 87).

There is repeated speculation in the conversation about how many of the connections and associations intended in the film will come through to the audience. It is not a futile question, but nearly so without the benefit of reception studies (and these can rarely get at the subtleties involved). There are so many audiences; and each viewer will make a somewhat different set of conscious and intuitive connections, some intended and some not. One would really have to sound out many viewers at length to discover a *consensus* on even one point. Filmmakers are understandably reluctant to cross-examine their audiences, but there is also a certain vanity involved and a strong conviction as well. One makes the film for its own sake—less as a message than as a testament to what one has seen and what one cares about. Sometimes it is enough to know that the connections are there in the body of the work, available to those who may someday discover them.

Doubts about viewers’ responses are aired early in the discussion in connection with the sounds of creaking oarlocks over several indistinct shots of boats in the mist. This sound will recur throughout the film, often evoking a boat that remains unseen. Gardner seems uncharacteristically tentative at this stage: “I don’t think anybody just looking at this scene in the early morning mist would know what is gliding by, but the sound of the oars tells everyone water is involved. . . . I have a feeling that at some level it is working” (Gardner and Östör 2001, 19). Not long after this, there is a shot of the holy fire at Manikarnika ghat. Östör says he associates the fire with steps, which are to become an important thematic element in the film. “I associate the steps with the fire,” he says. “Well,” Gardner replies, “maybe you can, but maybe nobody else can.” What is curious here is that neither of them, here or elsewhere in the conversation, thinks in terms of a second or subsequent viewing of the film. It is always as though the film will be seen once and only once. Is this just hard realism, or is it a misapprehension among filmmakers? Or is it simply that they are impatient for the film to deliver everything of itself on the first viewing?

By the time the discussion is a little further advanced, Gardner sounds more confident. Perhaps it is because here the elements of the film are being assembled more bluntly. There are vultures wheeling overhead and a shot of an “unmistakable” corpse in the water. “Spliced together they’re making the usual $A + B = C$,” says Gardner, as though reciting a bit of Eisensteinian algebra. There’s also a barge full of wood being rowed upriver. “It is not just for keeping people warm at night. I would hope all this is fairly clear from the editing” (Gardner and Östör 2001, 48).

A little later, Gardner again sounds a despairing note. The strains above the ghat are a recurrent image in the film, and we have now moved inside the Mukti Bhavan, a charity-run



hospice for the dying, and are looking up a staircase. Gardner says that while he was shooting this, he was thinking of stairs in association with the transitions of life and death. But is there any point in all this?

RG: The question I would like answered is when or even whether, with all the intention-ality in the world putting as much metaphorical spin on the images as I or anyone else can manage, the audience is ever going to know that they are being asked to look at the stairs in this movie in a way they haven't thought to look at such things before. I think they will be willing to admit to a certain bombardment of their senses, but the question remains whether and how much they are focusing on the idea of stairs having more than just architectural significance. (Gardner and Östör 2001, 61–62)

The issue is never resolved in the conversation, but it is clarified at one point when Gardner concedes that the filmmaker's conscious linking of ideas and objects may never rise to the level of cognition in the viewer, and perhaps this is just as well. "We are being very precise about our associations. The average viewer won't be. He or she will just undergo, at best, some strong but quite inarticulate feelings" (65). This is the minimalist view, from which he can take some comfort, but it is not, of course, entirely true, nor is it expected to be. Even the "average" viewer (whoever that is) will understand some of the metaphors of this film at a cognitive level (the corpse-bearing litter as ladder, perhaps, or the kite as spirit).

The more important lesson here is that an *explication du texte* is not what any filmmaker is after. Despite a great deal of effort organizing a film, much of its power as a source of understanding necessarily works at the level of feelings and ambiguous possibilities. If one wants the viewers to live the film, it is counterproductive to encourage them constantly to decode it. Moreover, in Gardner's view, explanation can easily displace other modes of understanding. Given an explanation, viewers "will no longer need to pay quite the same kind of attention" (114). The problem one sometimes encounters with intellectuals who are unable to "see" a film is that they are too busy trying to think what they are supposed to be thinking about it. The consequence, of course, is that they are then likely to conclude that the film has "no" meaning or is "incomprehensible," as some critics did in this case.

In what Gardner regards as a highly pregnant sequence, a boy is seen trying to launch his kite in the air rising from the cremation ground, with a scale for weighing wood in the foreground. This is followed by a shot of an important Hindu shrine, with sparrows pecking at the offerings. Gardner observes, "I don't know whether the audience sees these connections. I would be content if they merely registered the facts: fires, scales, boys, kites, thermals. I'm confident they would then, at some level of their imagination, work out their meaning" (Gardner and Östör 2001, 83).

Gardner's obsession with metaphor becomes unsettling only when it seems to afflict him with the sort of interpretive tunnel vision that he would find excessive in others. He confesses to not knowing why he felt compelled to include shots of sand being loaded on the "far shore" and then unloaded in Benares. He seems to feel obliged to explain this as his response to the "ant-like" dreariness of human labor or to time itself (sand running through an hourglass). But people are not ants by choice. Gardner seems a little too inclined here to turn everything in the world metaphorically to his purpose, even the need of human beings to make a living or to dig sand for the cement to build their city. It is a detachment that sits uneasily with his more intimate moments of sympathy for human beings and their lot.

This sympathy expresses itself in a restraint that some may find hard to follow or mistake for coolness. Most nonfiction filmmakers have few misgivings about making films about other people—indeed, it is in filming them that they find an endless fascination. But for Gardner this is presumptuous in the extreme. "The very idea of finding a way to reproduce some reality that can be called another person is, on its face, a total absurdity" (Gardner and Östör 2001, 99). His portrayals of individuals are therefore circumspect and, above all, respectful of what James Agee once called "the immeasurable weight in actual existence" of another human being (Agee and Evans 1960, 12). In his conversation with Östör, Gardner keeps circling around the problem of human dignity, never quite knowing how to find its center, except perhaps by indirection. Although there are three main "characters" in the film—the healer, the priest, and the Dom Raja—each maintains a mystery and autonomy that the film seems reluctant to break in on.

Gardner makes it clear that none of these persons is being developed "as a character in the familiar narrative sense" (Gardner and Östör 2001, 49). The one to whom he seems closest in an oddly companionable way is the old healer Michai Lal, perhaps the most mysterious



of the three. There is no clearly discernible core to this character, perhaps because so much of his stock in trade is mystification. And to Gardner, there are no obvious rules for respecting someone's dignity: one must assess each instance separately. Sometimes the result is counterintuitive. In the midst of a ritual, Michai Lal gives a great belch. "I didn't really hesitate to include that when editing. Why hasn't it diminished his dignity? Could it have anything to do with the way it was shot? The way it was graphically delivered? That there is a context already provided within which to deal with this event?" (51). All the above, no doubt, but also because there has been no attempt to recruit Michai Lal to a moral position within the classical structures of character narration. Within such a universe, there can be no real embarrassment. Perhaps that is the difference between filmmaking that strives to preserve good manners and Gardner's relative indifference to them. As he says at another point, it is amazing that fiction films that strain to achieve realism "never show anything as ordinary or as innocent as someone taking a pee" (41).

Fundamental to Gardner as a filmmaker is his desire to forge a closer relation with the physical world through the camera's almost prehensile vision. One is reminded of Barthes's notion of the *punctum* in photographs and his attention to the erotics of language. It could as easily be Gardner as Verov, saying, "I am the 'cine-eye,' the mechanical eye; I am the machine that will show you the world as only the machine can see it. Henceforth I shall

be liberated from human immobility" (cited in Rouch 1995, 82). For Gardner's camera is everywhere, climbing stairs, sweeping along laneways, stopping to glance at a child's broken kite on the ground, at a marigold, or at a pile of refuse. There is a sense of urgency to Gardner's filming, in both its movement and its moments of stillness, as if too little time remained to see the world with a clear eye. This way of seeing is strongly sensory, made all the more immediate by Gardner's refusal to allow us to see it through the screens of information or narrative. The subjectivity involved is explicitly his own, but it comes to us with a startling intimacy.

In Gardner and Östör's discussion, the erotics and haptics of filming tend to get covered over by the talk of meanings and connections. Occasionally, however, the conversation alludes to the more visceral aspects of bodily experience, including bodily functions. Gardner remembers the morning when he had to avoid stepping in piles of human excrement on the steps above the river and of finally resolving his feelings of aversion by including this in the film. About this, he remains a little ironic, referring to matter "of suspiciously human origin" as if less comfortable with naming than seeing. This diffidence surfaces unevenly throughout the discussion and the film. There are shots of a man defecating on the steps and another relieving himself in the gutter, both passed over fairly casually as matters of "innocence" and indifference.

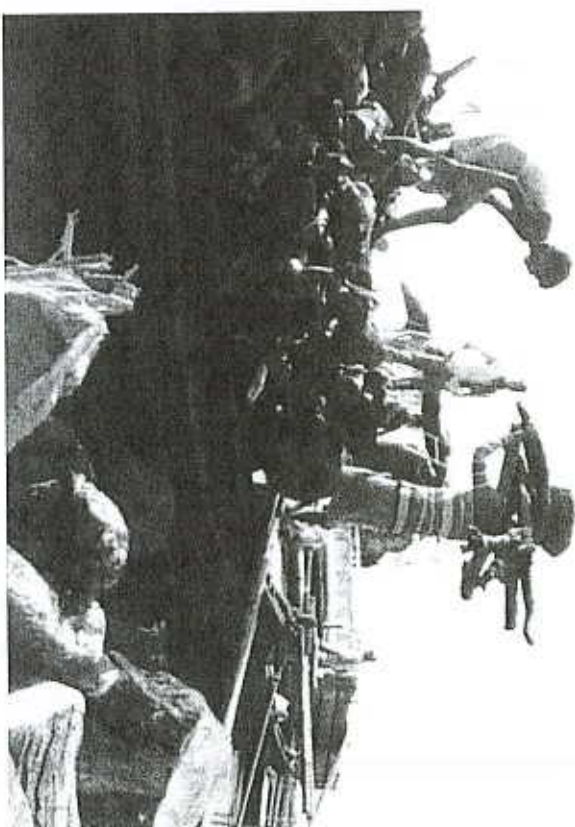
About shots of human corpses, Gardner and Östör are forthright, and perhaps naturally so since this was bound to be an issue among viewers. I have already noted their discussion of the cremation sequence. Although explicit shots of corpses are rare in the film, Gardner and Östör discuss how they are likely to be received. Of one shot quite early in the film—of a water-whitened body being chewed by a dog—Gardner says he is "a little astonished when people don't know what it is." They are more offhand about another sequence, perhaps from having discussed it before—a body in the water, anus up, preceded by a shot of circling vultures. They choose not to point out the implications of this, that vultures begin consuming a body through its orifices.

Although the possibility of disgust (at violence to bodies and excretion) is given some attention, the possibility of visual pleasure is treated more tentatively. Much of Gardner's interest in filmmaking clearly lies in its potential for empathetic and corporeal involvement in the world, but this is more difficult to talk about than its literary aspects. He obviously takes pleasure in certain sensory qualities intrinsic to the film—its sounds, its moments of tranquility, the form and details of certain rituals. At one point, he speaks of the comparatively rare moments (ten, he estimates, during the whole time in Benares) when he sees something unfolding through the viewfinder with a kind of wonder—as, for example, when the *Doom Raja* is waking from his sleep. On those occasions "you're at the height of your power, at the height of your ecstasy as a filmmaker," he says. Gardner is more reticent about other empathies, such as the sensuality—perhaps in sheer relief from the dissolution of human bodies—of the healthy boatman rowing the wood barge upstream. This involves several extended sequences, but they are mentioned only briefly.



Forest of Bliss contains shots of a rather more formal pictorial composition, such as a huge rising sun and boats with sails at dawn and dusk, filmed with telephoto lenses from the "far shore." For me, these represent the only aesthetic slippages in the film—Gardner's occasional weakness for the conventionally beautiful image in place of the distinctive character of the rest of his filming. When speaking of these rather dreamy images, he has a tendency to invoke classical and literary parallels whence one reaches the final image of a rowboat in the mist, grainy like a pointillist painting, suggesting the crossing of the river Styx.

In contrast to his silence on some of these matters, Gardner regularly takes up questions of structure and rhetoric. He notes the arrival of the film at various crucial junctures: the end of the introductory section of 11 shots; the end of the "initial phase" of the film, with the return of Mithai Lal to his house; the point "two-thirds of the way into the film" when the wood barge docks; and so on. The idea of structuring the film around a single fictive day is raised early in the discussion as central to the film's conception. "Hereafter, three forward structures are interwoven—the progress of the day from dawn to dawn, the movement of bodies from the inner parts of the city to the river, and the gradual convergence of symbolic objects. Gardner notes the way in which motifs that are "planted" at an earlier stage, such as the sound and sight of wood being cut and delivered or the making of the bamboo "ladders" and how these gradually reveal their fuller significance, resulting



in a sense of unfolding. One is reminded here of Flaherty's technique of presenting a series of details that gradually resolve themselves into a whole—with a sense, for the audience, of discovery.

At one point, Gardner and Östör discuss the general convergence over the entire length of the film of its chosen objects. Gardner has spoken earlier of the difficulty of approaching "complexity as complexity" since this almost invariably requires some sort of verbal exegesis (Gardner and Östör 2001, 45). It is also a potentially bewildering method for a filmmaker, who may end up simply filming unenlightening "grand confusion" (85). Instead, he has chosen to start with the detailed observation of "ordinary realities"—dogs, wood, kites, marigolds, and so on—trusting that their interrelationships can be gradually developed. And so we come to the sequence in which woodworkers are busy splitting pieces of wood and weighing them on a scale. The sequence brings together the stairs, the wood, the scales, the dogs, the boats, and the river. Here, as Östör observes, these elements become "incredibly charged." Gardner points to the two kinds of "layering" that can occur at such moments. In addition to the convergence of elements, forming a complex in which they are interrelated, each element can be layered "as to the significance or meaning of its content" (73). In other words, there can be an "optical" layering where we see the elements connected and a symbolic layering in which each element takes on multiple meanings from its associations in different contexts. We get an insight here into Gardner's strategy for

creating a narrative of ideas and associations. The film gains much of its forward motion from a gathering comprehension of its larger structure.

The dynamics of this narrative also involve a gradual increase in the pace, scope, and directionality of the film as more and more bodies are brought toward the river: a "stream of death going down toward Manikarnika" (Gardner and Östör 2001, 91). At Manikarnika, the burning ghat, the film reaches its dramatic climax, after which Gardner acknowledges he faced a difficult transition. "The editing problem was to find a way to get out of this powerful place" (108). One of the rhetorical features of the film is its shifts of mood from intensity to relaxation and from "metaphorically loaded" to "realist" or observational modes of expression. These changes seem to propel the film forward, as though releasing and storing up energy, then springing forward in a new way. Östör comments that it is surprising to him that the film can encompass several radically different filmmaking styles. "It shows up the futility of legislating for film—saying what it should or has to do—because here an allegorical, even abstract, sequence is followed by real time without any conflict, the film form accommodating both" (34). Gardner confesses that it is hard for him to put himself in other people's heads but that, like any filmmaker, he tries to attune himself to a hypothetical viewer's sensibilities. After the audience has "had to work pretty hard," he tries to give them a respite, a chance to find their feet and reorient themselves. His remarks

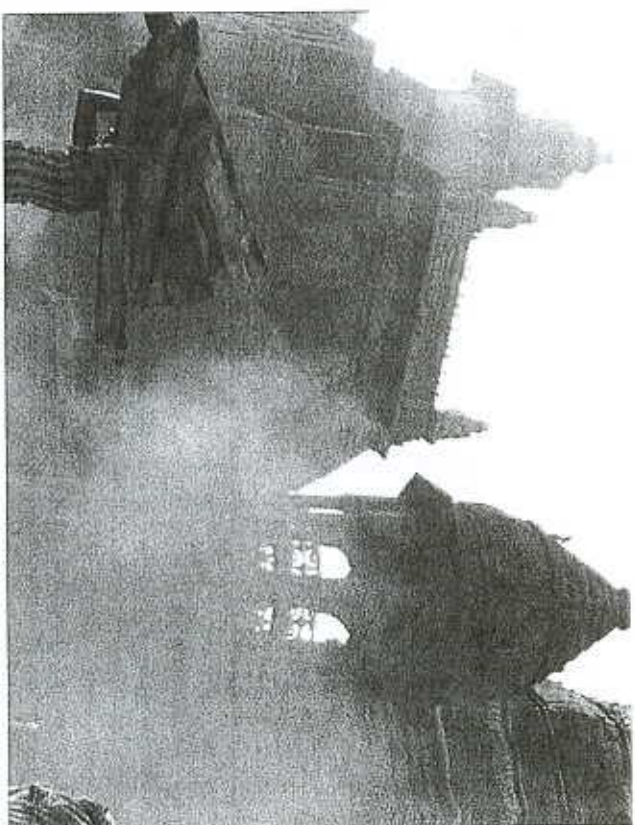


on placing the first marigold sequence give a sense of this method and also of the tension between the film's rhetorical and developmental requirements.

Of course, the placement of this marigold passage here, after the Mithai Lal sequence, is to some extent arbitrary. I actually think it was done partly for the sake of the light in that I was trying to sustain the notion of a day passing; but I also put it here because I wanted another quiet passage before getting swept away by the din and clatter of Benares. (47)

There is the suggestion here of an analogy between musical and filmic construction, although music is ever explicitly mentioned as a model. However, *Forest of Bliss* would have to be one of the most musically constructed films of the 1980s, with its movements, recurring motifs, and fuguelike overlapping of actions. Gardner refers to preludes and rhythms and tempo and melody. Discussing the last shot before nightfall, he says, "I did feel that there should be a pause before the film went into its final sequences" (113), much as a composer might speak of a pause before the final return of the main theme. Possibly even more musical in feeling is the one instance of slow-motion cinematography—girls seen playing hopscotch—a characteristic Gardner touch.

Even if not in formal terms, the film could be judged musical for its uses of ambient music, ritualized speech and chanting, bells, and natural sounds. The sound of creaking



oarlocks is heard long before oars are actually seen, and this is the most important sound in the film, to which it keeps returning. Gardner notes that after a day of filming tree falling in the forest, all he wanted to use was the sound of it (Gardner and Östör 2001, 25). At four points at least, mention is made of the "enhancement" during editing of existing sounds, which Gardner regards as a way of correcting for the inadequacies of location recording. Mithai Lal's grunting as he goes up and down the steps refers not only to the effort and discomfort of an old man but also to the steps themselves, which will become prominent in the film. Later, the sound of a donkey's dead body being dragged down the steps is also enhanced, and entirely new sound is created for the tapping of a blind man's staff (68). Gardner often uses sound to evoke images that would be less expressive if actually seen or to create the sense of a larger world offscreen. Here, as always, he is as much concerned with the viewer's imaginative contribution to the film as with what the film itself can show.

In following the contours of the film, Gardner and Östör's discussion also reveals the contours of a particular set of assumptions about it. As it mediates between these and our own responses to the film, it constantly invites our rejoinders and interventions. It thus functions differently from most available writing on ethnographic film. It allows us to witness how memory and conversation bring to the surface ideas and intuitions crucial to a film's construction. In their conversation, Gardner and Östör seem to rediscover the film and, as they talk, come to understand it more deeply. In listening in on them, it may come as a revelation to some that films about social and cultural institutions can take paths so different from those of social and political science and depart so radically from the structures of expository prose.

NOTE

1. An earlier draft of this chapter was published as "Gifts of Circumstance" in *Visual Anthropology Review* 17 (1, 2001): 68–85. Reprinted here with permission of the American Anthropological Association © 2007 American Anthropological Association.

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