

'A hunter-gatherer with a movie camera':

two ethnographic films of Robert Gardner

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

This paper argues that Robert Gardner's ethnographic films, especially *Dead Birds* (1963) and *Forest of Bliss* (1986), aesthetically refuse to serve just as social scientific documents and visual lectures for anthropology, and their status remains true to the film's ability to mimetically preserve and symbolically evoke the capacity of life under the auspices of what we have all agreed to, at least on general terms, call 'culture'. Although his films break the boundaries of form and narration, and provide unprecedented method into the representation of 'other' cultures in film, it is the way in which his whole cinematic approach to evoke human condition and human culture in film that makes his work unique in the genre of ethnographic film. In his approach, Robert Gardner breaks away with any discipline's 'methodological philistinism' (Gell 1998), meaning that a non-fiction film doesn't have to necessarily be a didactically structured 'filmic ethnography' to get the license to be shown in the gallery in the *cathedra anthropologia*.

Keywords:

Robert Gardner, ethnographic films, *Dead Birds*, *Forest of Bliss*, ethnographicness, filmicness

Bio

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Introduction

Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* (1986) has divided anthropologists on the very issue of authority of ethnographic film. Some have called *Forest of Bliss* a 'poetic' but not an 'anthropological' film (Ruby 1991; Parry 1988; Moore 1988). Others have maintained that Gardner is "a poet, painter, provocateur and not [...] a social scientist" (Loizos 1991: 323-324), but have supported his 'aesthetics' as philosophical inquiry that can only enrich anthropological purpose. Others, such as Radikah Chopra (1989) and David MacDougall (1998) have supported Gardner's poetic vision, claiming that the status of ethnographic film does not have to be chained to anthropology's methodology, since film can be used to create cinematically powerful ways of anthropological inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life. It has also been argued that in their "cinematography and editing they immediately and unmistakably announce themselves as Gardnerian" (Barbash & Taylor 2007: 1).

Robert Gardner is most well-known for his two major films: *Dead Birds* (1964) and *Forest of Bliss* (1986). He produced and directed many more films, such as *Rivers of Sand* (1973), *Altar of Fire* (1976), *Deep Hearts* (1981), *Ika Hands* (1988), and also contributed to cinematography, editing and narration of another film made by Hillary Harris called *The Nuer* (1971) and *The Hunters* (1958) made by John Marshall. He also worked on several short films and videos. His cinematography is very particular. Discussing his aesthetic form, Daniel Morgan argues that "Gardner uses a formal technique to create new connections, to provide new insights that are part of the domain of ethnographic knowledge; that is to say, his films function as ethnographies by the virtue of the claim they make in and through the aesthetic form" (2016: 47). Although Gardner did not practice ethnography, as most trained and academic anthropologists do, his films were characterised by, what Karl Heider (2006) and (in a new perspective) Paul Henley (2020) discussed as 'ethnographicness', the potential and quality of film to describe, beyond mere observation, how daily life is enmeshed into daily practices, social and cultural institutions and what they mean to that society or group being filmed. Gardner has shown that apart from 'ethnographicness', discussed by Karl Heider and Paul Henley, his films are equally and more characterised by 'filmnicness', as shall be discussed below.

In this essay, I shall discuss the *Dead Birds* (1964) and *Forest of Bliss* (1986) as setting in motion his style and legacy. Echoing Dziga Vertov's title of his movie, *Man with a movie camera* (1929), I have metaphorically called Gardner's journey as that of a *hunter-gatherer with a movie camera*, a hunter-gatherer of images and sounds that evoke the conversational (poetic) knowledge of human diversity and reality. I will try to emphasize that Gardner's films embody the ideal autonomous status of ethnographic film, characterised by both 'ethnographicness' and 'filmicness'.

The status of ethnographic film

There is a continuous claim that anthropology is built upon ethnographic description of peoples and places, experiences and practices, social lives and social relationships. Anthropologists describe, evoke and interpret life as lived, valued, experienced and interpreted by people themselves. Anthropologists write a succinct prose on their subject and about their subjects in order to convey those sets of interpretations. Yet, anthropology has been complemented by images since her early days. The flux of technological adoption into anthropological research and the way it has been used as a tool and a type of knowledge has established a new sub-discipline called visual anthropology, which often serves as an umbrella for what we call 'ethnographic film'.

David MacDougall makes the analogy of visual anthropology with "the suit of clothes bought a little too large in the hope that someone will grow into it" (1998: 61). The use of film by anthropologists has served as an excuse

to claim the genre of ethnographic film as something which belongs to the discipline of anthropology, or at least it remains closest to what anthropology should do with film and where and how ethnographic filmmakers should be trained. As such, film is the medium which has had a dynamic history with anthropological research. However, what has puzzled all the stakeholders in the discipline of anthropology is the ontology of and the authority over the ethnographic film. What is an ethnographic film? Who decides what it is? For whom it is made? Who has legitimacy to make it and call it that? What does this mean to the field of anthropology? Which part should weight more: 'film' or 'ethnographic'? (Ruby 1975, 1991)

Margaret Mead, as one of the main anthropologists that used film in function of anthropology of words, as she points out it, added a remarkable emphasis on the role of film as valuable resource to anthropology. Although, she wasn't concerned with the artistic value of ethnographic films as she puts it, she didn't flag artistic intentions on ethnographic films as worthless. She asserted that "we can cherish those rare combinations of artistic ability and scientific fidelity that has given us great ethnographic films" (2003: 5). Nevertheless, her inclination was that there are criteria for ethnographic films: fidelity to science. This fidelity to science was followed by generations of anthropologists who wanted to ensure that their discipline doesn't lack the scientific rigour. However, Robert Gardner is one of the anthropologist-filmmaker that didn't accept 'the didactic and pedagogical criteria' of his contemporaries and predecessors. He moved away from the didactic period of ethnographic filmmaking and started a new pathway, treating cultural worldviews as an artistic ethnographer.

Ethnographic film has been a hot subject of debate between those who value the cinematically created understandings and those who value its ethnographic illustration. Karl Heider argues that ethnographic film must have some ethnographic 'ingredients' which characterize it as such. Those ingredients include 'description', 'context', 'holism' and 'truth' (1976, 2006). Heider proposes that

"a useful approach is to look for various attributes or dimensions that effect ethnographicness in films. Adopting this strategy, we should ask: "What film features may be more or less ethnographic?" and "In what ways is this film ethnographic?" the idea then is not to define an ethnographic box category but to make explicit those features that contribute to the ethnographicness of the film." (2006: 2).

What Karl Heider seems to assert in his time-honoured argument is that we needn't define ethnographic film per se but we need to look for more explicit ways which make some films more ethnographic than others. Also, as it is apparent in Heider's thought, ethnography must prevail over cinematography, yet he acknowledges the fact that if cinematography fails, ethnography can be jeopardised too. Ethnographic films ought to have a degree of "ethnographicness" to use Heider's word. And, they ought to have a degree of "filmicness", too. Heider uses the term without a clear distinction to what it really means (2006: 5). Yet, what echos loudly in his text may be interpreted as follows: *filmicness* is constituted by the artistic elements brought to bear on an ethnographic film, that are more conventional to the art of storytelling in images than in words. In Heiderian terms, it can be argued that to achieve a degree of filmicness the cinematographic attributes ought to converge with ethnographic attributes.

On the other side, more recently, Paul Henley has argued that ethnographic film should be centred on authorship, claiming that "the aim should be to develop modes of film authorship that, while playing to the strengths of film as a medium of communication, also reflect contemporary ideas about the practice of ethnography more generally" (2020: 483). Accordingly, the filmmaker

should seek to relate the ‘flesh and blood’ practices of lived experiences to the “skeleton” and the “spirit” of the social group, which ought to be “authored” by the ethnographic filmmaker, as Henley points out:

“The challenge of ethnographic film-making then is to find a way of authoring films that employ these forms of language without at the same time undermining the unique capacity of the medium of film to impart a sense of lived experience” (2020:484).

In a way, this challenge is a constant debating theme pertaining to the status of the ethnographic film. The ontology of ethnographic film, the marriage between ethnographicness and filmicness, seems to be manifested in the triangle: the ethnographic *mise-en-scene* of the film, the intentionality of authorship and the aesthetic capacity of the film to document, represent and evoke. Echoing Paul Henley (2020), it can be emphasized that Robert Gardner has held the beacon high in authoring films that embody the “flesh and blood”, “the skeleton”, and the “spirit” of a people into a ethnographic-filmic portrait.

Dead Birds

Dead Birds (1964) is one of the main films that launched Gardner’s career as ‘ethnographic filmmaker’ during the decade when the emerging yet undefined genre of ‘ethnographic film’ was emerging. Although the film was shot in 1961-62, screened for the first time in 1963 and released in 1964. Before *Dead Birds* the so-called ethnographic cinema was quite naive in terms of being a conversation and correspondence about other people’s culture. Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) and many other scrupulously accurate short visual documents made by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson may be considered provisional in what Tim Ingold calls “an inquiry into conditions and possibilities of human life” (2007: 69). Gardner’s *Dead Birds* is a completely different film. It is powerful story about Dani, a Neolithic farmer-warrior group in New Guinea, and their ritual warfare. Gardner spent many months in 1961 in Grand Valley of the Balim River, knowing the people and filming in collaboration with anthropologists Jan Boekhuyse and Karl Heider. Jay Ruby calls *Dead Birds* “one of the most popular ethnographic films in the history of the genre” (1991: 6)

Dead Birds was shot during an expedition organized by Dutch Government to New Guinea to “take a party of interested friends to a remote corner of the Grand Valley of the Baliem River, home to the last practicing stone-age society on the planet...to document its authentic but threatened warrior/farmer culture” (Gardner 2006: 8). As the film starts, we see an eagle flying across mountains and immediately afterwards the narrator (Gardner himself) utters the introduction to the film

“There is a fable told by mountain people living in the ancient highlands of the New Guinea about a race between a snake and a bird. It tells about a contest which decided that men would be like birds and die, or be like snakes which shed their skin and have an eternal life. The bird won and from that time all men like birds must die.” (*Dead Birds*, DVD, 1964/2004)

The narrative of the film is structured around three main characters: The Dani warrior Weyak who daily mounts a watchtower to keep an eye on the enemy, young boy Pua, who is a pig herder and a daydreamer and Laksha, the woman who cares about the family. Of course, such character development seems to resemble much of the western story development. McDougall notes that “the creation of these characters, their needs and problems, is consistent with the character-centred narration of much Western fiction” (1998: 108). Gardner seems to have been at pains trying to develop a story that would convey the understanding of Dani, the people he went to study. His metaphor was found during the last days with Dani. They refer to victim’s captured weapons,

ornaments and corpses by 'dead birds'. He also found that Dani people identify deeply with birds. Thus, the metaphor of 'dead birds' evokes an aspect of Dani culture that is quintessential to them: reciprocal revenge. The film shows that they film the reciprocal revenge is crucial in maintaining the balance in the universe.

The film starts to build the picture of Dani as peaceful and calm farmers. The introduction of Weyak is whilst he is weaving and humming. We are told that

"He is a warrior, a farmer a leader of the band of men who guard the most dangerous sector of the frontiers which divide themselves and their enemy." (*Dead Birds*, DVD, 1964/2004)

Weyak is shown as a man who apart from doing homely things he also ensures the safety of the frontier, the landscape where other tribes can appear and attack. The frontier was the scene where the ritualized battle usually takes place. In his published diaries, Gardner (2006) brings into account the whole saga about the ritualized warfare, the intrusion of missionaries and government, the rumours that he tried to provoke a war in order to film it, etc. He was frightened that the law enforcers would have a restraining effect in the normal Dani behaviour. Gardner identified Dani manhood as entirely derived from the concept of ritualised warfare. He seems to have believed that Dani's ethics were ethics that depended on the warfare.

Gardner wrote in his diary

"That there is ritual war in the Baliem Valley is something all people who have lived in that valley know for a certainty; but what no one has bothered to find out is what warfare means to those who make it or what it could mean to deprive them of it." (2006: 15).

The film continues to provide the Dani cultural *mise-en-scene*: Pua is introduced together with making his yellow clay which helps Dani to complete their image as birds. The film unfolds to show us the whole village as well as the 'no man's land' frontier near which the watchtowers are situated. The film shows Weyak taking his spear or bow and arrow and going to watch the frontier. We are immediately told that due to an enemy killed two weeks ago Weyak is particularly worried because he knows that the blood must be revenged. The camera follows Weyak in a compositionally structured manner, keeping close to his running to the watchtower, and providing an editing of the images of running and watching from the tower as unique suspicious images. There is only the sound of the village and Weyak's footsteps. We are conditioned to think that this is a tense time for Dani of this tribe. The author of the film, the *auteur* tells us the background to this tense created in the village:

"They fulfil the obligation for the living towards the slain, towards in fact the ghost of the slain. Un-avenged ghosts bring sickness, unhappiness and possibly disaster. It is for this reason that they go to war and for the reason that they like to." (*Dead Birds*, DVD, 1964/2004)

Gardner, thus, tells us that the revenge is deeply connected to the whole way of life. It is not only the ethical structure of Dani culture that gravitates towards the ritualized warfare (revenge/vendetta) but their mythology, too.

We have close-ups of Weyak weaving, Pua's face, etc., which juxtaposed signify a sense of home and tranquillity. The viewer is told that younger unmarried men must do a larger share of garden labour whereas married men should do less. Pua learns from adults how to dig a soil to make a new garden, so he can do that when he grows up. At this point of the film, we have shots of Weyak getting back to his hut. The camera focuses on his body, on his wide

and muscular back calves signifying Weyak's strengths as a farmer and a warrior. Gardner is a master of following a subject in action as well as letting the camera rest on the stillness, sameness, usualness, habitus, culture, beauty etc., which the lifeworld of people living in groups make. After this stillness he introduces the ritualized warfare and tells us that no battle will start unless both dies have their men in the position. The first attempt to battle is stopped but heavy rain and warriors eat their seeds, a sign of connection to the land.

In between the battle scenes, Gardner evokes the children's play as a *miniature of the battlefield*, which in a sense shows that even the game, the play, is the core element of the development of the attitude towards a battlefield as well as training for it. We are reminded of Huizinga's notion of *play* as the key element of development of culture (Huizinga 1955). Gardner makes inserts this sequence to provide us with a sense play as deeply rooted human culture making instinct.

For the second time Gardner, brings us back to the battle scenes. The strategy seems to be that of the shock and awe, fear, and then revenge. As the film unfolds, we get the feeling that this is not a full battle, but a battle between the two tribes, a ritual, a play, binding the two tribes together as people trying to strike an ancient ethical balance in order to live not as people who want to exterminate each other totally: they don't fight to death, they fight to keep the ghosts of their relatives happy, to keep the norms of the community intact, to ensure that they have something to do as human *zoon politicon*s. Later on in life, Robert Gardner confesses that

"by this time in our stay with Dani, I was thinking about how they handled thoughts about their own mortality and how their ritualization of warfare played a part in this thinking. I am sure that the title *Dead Birds* had not yet occurred to me, but I do remember dwelling on the happy coincidence of feathers, mud, decorating weapons, and bloodshed that permeated the scene in front of me." (Gardner 2006: 79).

The battlefield is full of shouting, screaming and screeching. Sometimes a warrior from one of the sides runs deep into the enemy territory, throws a spear and runs back. This whole 'attempt' goes back and forth. Gardner ensures that we are witnesses of a violence which is a catalyst for their peace. They could simply exterminate themselves on that battlefield until the last men, but the wisdom of these communities is deeply humane: avenge proportionally. News of the death is shouted from garden to garden and village to village. This shows the effect that battles have in the lives of these people. It seems that their whole life gravitates around the battles they fight and the ghost of the relatives. Battles are events, places, and phenomena that sustain their culture, their minds and their lives. The narrator intervenes to tell us that to a wounded soldier they put a grass leaf on his wound and try to bring their singing seed back, as each man has his own singing seed.

The film images of battles scenes, the singing, the funeral of a dead boy and the shouting and screaming that follows the end of the battle are images that tend to present the way in which identity of Dani is re-affirmed in and around the ritual warfare. *Dead Birds* ends in those words:

"Soon both men and birds will surrender to the night. They will rest for the life and death of the days to come. For each both await, but with a difference for men, having knowledge of their doom brings a special passion to their life. They will not simply wait for death, nor will they bear it likely when it comes. Instead, they will try a measured violence to fashion fate themselves. They kill to save their souls and, perhaps, to ease the burden of knowing what birds will never know and what they as men, who have forever killed each other, cannot forget." (*Dead Birds*, DVD, 1964/2004)

This ending is particularly striking since it binds the metaphor of the film 'dead birds' together with the Dani myth of birds and snakes, in conjuring up a poetical ending to his film which doesn't provide an explanation which purports to be something which anthropology as discipline would require, but an almost poetical meditation which ends with 'perhaps', with the very words that makes 'conversation' about life flow without pretentious ideological utterances. Gardner himself has claimed that he is a man that looks at the world with a sense of melancholy. For him film is a melancholy way of looking at the world. For him

"film incarnates death...because when I see a film particularly actuality film, or when I look at wonderful renderings of humanity by the great photographers of the world, it seems to me that in those images is the story we can tell without knowing what the whole story is – but we know that it surely will end in death." (Gardner 2006: xiv).

Death plays a key role in almost all Gardner's films. However, Gardner makes his films to converse with us philosophically about the meaning of life and death. He finishes the narration in *Dead Birds* by saying a little about why Dani use revenge and kill, to make us think themselves about our lives. Karl Heider illustrates this point really well:

"One purpose of bringing the first cut back to New Guinea was to give me a chance to correct any real problems, since by then I had been living with Dani for 15 months. I had many small problems, but then – as now- it seemed true to Dani life. My one major concern was the symbolism, especially the bird-as-death motif that Gardner so stressed. It was certainly dramatic and visual, but I was still working through the material culture, the artefacts of the Dani, and thought that Gardner, out of his interest in symbolism, had exaggerated Dani symbols. By then, of course, I knew a great deal more Dani, and was getting a much better grasp of the general themes of the culture. Using clues that Gardner had intuitively picked up on to incorporate in the film, I asked people about birds and snakes and life and death and quickly came to conclusion that I had simply missed what Gardner had worked out. This symbolism was indeed there in Dani thinking and if anything was under – represented in the film. Gardner's combination of ethnographic digging and aesthetic intuition had paid off. " (2006: 268)

Heider goes on to argue that *Dead Birds* was shot before synch sound was available and the introduction of synch sound made possible a shift in the world of filmmaking. The synch-sound enabled filmmakers to immediately include the voices of the people filmed and thus inspire the filmmaker organize his film much easier than before. He could hear how the people sound and this knowledge and feeling put him in a better position to create. Heider suggests "that this technological innovation – an audio tape recorded linked to a silenced camera – was not just incidental to, but was an important cause, of new, immediate sort of film, as well as a major shift in anthropological thinking generally" (Heider 2006: 268-269).

Forest of Bliss

Forest of Bliss (1986) is one of the Gardner films that inspired a very fruitful debate within anthropology. The images of *Forest of Bliss* 'speak with' us in a mode that is not imposing and deductive but conversational and evocative. If we were to do the impossible and pay tribute to hermeneutics and summarize the meaning of the film, we would say that it is a film that depicts the death rituals in the city of Benares in South Asia, without any subtitles, voice-over, commentary which aid our reception of it. The 'subjects' are in the middle of

the frame and their voices, screams, prayers, bodily movements and language is mediated without any intervention from the filmmaker apart from the editing of the shots. Peter Loizos (1993) calls Gardner “a poet, painter, provocateur, certainly not a social scientist, but a filmmaker who can set a room of scholars arguing heatedly” (1993: 323-324).

Once we see the film there are many questions that we are left with: Can than images of other evoke the performance of culture without making statements that lie on binary oppositions and on colonial voices about the other? Have images agency which escapes the process of culture translation but give us more immediate physical engagement? Does the voice of the “muzzle” (Barthes 1975: 66) captured in those images defy categorization and cultural translation?

Robert Gardner’s *Forest of Bliss* doesn’t create knowledge about the other and hence the very reality this knowledge describes, but interrogates the very petrified methodology and translation of the other’s culture. His decision not to create statements in his ‘text’ about the culture of other disappointed certain orthodoxies, as we have mentioned earlier, within anthropological circles. Through images he asserts the autonomy and the materiality of other people’s experiences, their bodily excess which cannot always be assumed to be open to the power of language. He uses film to evoke this ‘excess’ and ensure that the way we view it left to us to decide and reflect. In the *Forest of Bliss* images have complex connotative potential for the viewer. It favours felt experience over explanation, and proceeds more by implication than demonstration. His images possess certain cognitive indecipherability that they frustrate the viewer who is unable to recognize at once parts and wholes, continuities and discontinuities, synchrony and linearity.

MacDougall (1998) points out that *Forest of Bliss* is accused of having no meaning and the wrong meaning. But its real sin is perhaps to fall out with anthropology. There are free floating signifiers that escape from explanation or control. In the same manner there is a level of meaning, a level that goes beyond the process of signification. Barthes called it ‘obtuse’ meaning (1977). The excess, the materiality of the image causes rupture and disturbance in any human endeavour to create signs and symbols of the world. But this excess brimming over the discourse is the ‘lava’ that allows art to enjoy its ‘being’. This excessive lava comes out of and disturbs the well-shaped landscape of the discourse.

Peter Loizos supports Gardner’s intention to question our perception of other cultures by asserting that the “aim is to evoke thoughts in us by sounds and images, but not tell us in formal conceptual terms what to think, or what to make of it” (1993: 323-324). *Forest of Bliss* therefore does not succumb to the objectives of scientific enquiry validated by the Western Eurocentric neo-imperialist discourse nor to the benevolence has that followed some anthropological filmmaking just after the 70’. It is a film largely about the power of images and sounds combined together in a narrative which is not constrained by authoritative and representational doctrine to purvey self-validated and privileged myths. The film does not just show a part of ineffable India which eludes our comprehension, but puts forward to our attention the potentialities that images have in making us tacitly experience its evocation of other places, peoples and things in general. Charles Warren expresses his gratitude to films ability to put forward an evocation of what is close to phenomenological experienced in Benares:

“I accept *Forest of Bliss* as true. This is a work of an artist remarking, assembling, and creating a rhythm plays into my own memory, reality, and creative representation. Benares is film – as much as it is anything – and in its sacred river provides one of the most compelling of all images of film, accepting corpses and ashes and excrement and giving life to a city and a philosophy.” (2007: 30)

Forest of Bliss focuses on three distinct main characters but the narrative of the film is situated within the larger universe of Benares. The film depicts the ecology of life and death, with dirt and cleanliness, flowers and water, fire and bamboo, the sacred and the profane etc. The film opens with an image of wandering dogs that are eating what seems to be other dead dogs. There are no subtitles or voice-over to guide us through the film. We are immediately immersed into the images captured in the city of Benares – city of death. Benares is situated near the Ganges River which is the most important river in Hindu mythology. The Ganges is the place of inauguration into another journey. Gardner immediately focuses his camera into showing us the connection between Ganges and Benares. The first scenes are scenes of a rowing boatman going towards the ghats of the city (stepped embankments along the river) where we see a boat and dead men entering the river. Radikah Chopra, one of those who endorses *Forest of Bliss*, states that “visuals leave it to us to realize that the ‘inaugural’ and the ‘end’ partake of a shared meaning where death is clearly not an end but an inauguration into another journey. Such juxtaposing brings us closer to an understanding of the river itself which provides both the physical and the metaphorical passage for the journey into another ‘state’ of being” (1989: 3). The film shows us scenes of steps in Benares giving us a sense of the season since the steps are exposed and people are cleaning the mud on them which suggests that they were recently under water. On the same time a priest enters the water and starts swimming slowly. He purifies himself and deities throughout the day into the night. The visual motif of the steps introduced in the first scenes is intended to indicate the transition between life and death as well as city and the river. What follows are continuous scenes of *ghats* and their dirtiness and dirt, steps and gory rubbish near the river. We hear the voice of the people and barking of dogs. What is introduced in the first scenes of the film might not attract the viewer to keep watching the film at all since it is not ‘understandable’.

The film unfolds to show images of bamboo poles used to send the dead to the river as well as marigolds, wood, etc. It follows the biography of material used for the dead. Marigolds are focus of many scenes in the film. We see that people use marigolds as offerings to deities in their worshipping temples as well as ornaments for the corpses. We see how they are picked in the field, how they travel to the house, how they are put together in a string, how they are eaten by cows how they used in the temple and in dead corpses too. The garbage gets reborn in the digestive system of cats, dogs, cows and everything else that creeps and flies. Only this trajectory of marigolds in Benares evokes the circle of life and death in the place where Buddha is said to have his first sermon. It provides a metaphor for the journey of life in Hindu belief.

The film takes the viewer through the city of Benares and its routine activities around life and death. We witness cremation grounds, wood gathering for fire, children flying kites, religious priest chanting, hospice of the dying, girls playing hopscotch, an old lady waiting to joyfully die in the holiest place in India, etc. Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor argue that the sound in *Forest of Bliss* is essential to making the point about sacred and profane in Benares, stating that there are “sounds of water throughout the film – as it is sprinkled or poured in rituals, as it slaps against boats gliding through the Ganges, as it is swept over concrete, as it is splashed by a bathing priest. As with images, sound is used to explore and punctuate the relationship between the sacred and the profane. About the third of the way into the film, we see and hear a man cleaning the central courtyard of a hospice, adumbrating what is to come” (2007: 7).

As we mentioned above, *Forest of Bliss* is one of the films that has got many anthropologists debating about what is an ‘ethnographic film’. Reflecting on the work of Gardner and particularly on *Forest of Bliss*, Jay Ruby (1991), has argued that although the film has artistic rigour, it is not ethnographic and does not support anthropology in anyway. According to him some argue that

“because “artistic vision” is important as “ethnographically derived knowledge and insight” we should accept these films as if they were anthropology” (1991: 14). Furthermore, Ruby protests by claiming that “the logic of this argument carries us to the absurd position of having to accept virtually the whole literature and film as anthropology and thus eradicating whatever uniqueness anthropology has a means of generating statements about human condition. If we endorse Gardner’s art, why not everyone else’s” (1991: 14).

It is obvious that Ruby stroke a cord within the anthropological community and thus aligned with the gatekeepers of the discipline. There is an argument in his claim and obviously for a written or visual account to be called anthropological it must be a thick inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life as Tim Ingold (2008) would put it. However, the argument that Ruby puts forward is not so much about the film itself, but it seems to put a hold to any further attempts in ethnographic film which follow the path of Robert Gardner. In the eyes of gatekeeping anthropological community, he became the *enfant terrible* of anthropology.

Such views are expressed in Alexander Moore’s (1988) and Jonathan Parry’s (1998) reviews of the film which gave the bases for Ruby’s critique. Moore is sure that the film is about death in Benares but he is not satisfied with the information that the film provides. According to him the film is “just that, an exploration of imagery, not an anthropological document which can be said to illuminate the universal human condition or to enlighten its audience.” (1988: 3). Jonathan Parry’s argument is similar but focused more on the status of film as ethnography. As an anthropologist who undertook fieldwork in Benares, he claimed the film does not correspond with the ethnography of Benares, pointing out that the film doesn’t “indicate that what is said is important enough to translate and the vignettes of behavior are not consequential enough to present in a such a way as to make them understandable.” (cited in Ruby 1991: 13). On the other hand, favouring *Forest of Bliss*, it has been pointed out that the film

“is undoubtedly the most aesthetically sensuous ethnographic film ever made, evoking a more heightened impression of presence and sensory stimulation than had hitherto, or indeed has since, been achieved.” (Cover & Taylor 2002: 652).

It is important to acknowledge that *Forest of Bliss* has sparked a long debate about the authority of ethnographic film. This debate leads to the debate about anthropology and cinematography as means of representing culture. Gardner claims that his films are “testimony to what Susan Sontag has called “time’s relentless melt’... every transcription in photography (and film) is a reminder of continuousness of life, as long as life continues and, if it doesn’t, of its mortal nature” (Gardner 2006: 307).

A hunter-gatherer with a movie camera

“Robert Gardner was trained as an anthropologist but chose to enter the realm of nonfiction filmmaking”. This sentence is written on the inside cover of his book *The impulse to preserve; reflections of a filmmaker* (2006). “The impulse to preserve” in the first instance strikes as a connotation of the dedication such as that of John Marshall’s who recorded hundreds of hours of footage of lives of Bushmen in Kalahari Desert in Africa. However, what Marshall has done is mainly viewed as

“Anthropological achievement [which] lies not primarily in ethnographic content of the sort that can be summarized or duplicated in anthropological writing ...but in cinematically created understanding of the emotions, intellect, desires, relationships, and mutual perceptions of the participants” (McDougall 1998: 67).

So, the 'impulse to preserve' is translated as an impulse to preserve in cinematically created means of anthropological inquiry. Gardner recorded real life events and real-life people to tell visual stories. His filmmaking consisted of the use of props and elements which are usually used in creating fictional words. Gardner wanted to make worlds that are not imaginary and closed to imagination alone. He pursued his own dream of *poiesis* (to make) which included the path of *mimesis* (to re-present). However, he was really adamant to ensure that what he re-makes is compelling story preserved for the same purpose as poiesis.

In attempting to reflect upon the films of Robert Gardner, Charles Warren (2007), makes an analogy noting that his films aspire to the quality of music which transforms us without giving us explanations. Further in his analysis, he asserts that

"Gardner's films are documentary, observing people and the ways of life and places that the filmmaker has brought himself to and taken an interest in. Watching these films, we know we are meeting the world, here or there, and that it will stick with us as a fact of experience. Yet the films have their own world of worlds, their own look and colours and rhythm and sensibility and emphases." (Warren 2007: 17).

Looking for things to film is the crucial education for a filmmaker that wants to make the world assert itself. For in film people, events and landscapes are transfigured and brought into a new life. Gardner, who was also influenced by Vertov's work, has also edited in his imagination the whole structure of his native sometimes before he got the film shots. In his diary (which was rewritten because he lost the original one in Ganges River) which was published much later as a book he confessed his obsession with finding a falling kite in Benares to evoke the circle of life and death in the city of ritualized death in order to convey a "heightened sense of finality and loss." (Gardner 2006: 334-355). This *hunting* for signs to be used as visual metaphors of city symphony is what characterized Gardner's filmic style. He searches for personalities that have cultural specificities rooted in their landscape. This is his object of film across almost all films.

As discussed above, in his films Gardner juxtaposes 'ethnographicness' and 'filmicness' to make meaningful and lasting visual stories and portraits of peoples and cultures. To be able to create those portraits, Gardner had to *gather* and *hunt* them throughout the world and author them in his style. Gardner is a *hunter-gatherer with a movie camera* looking to make a great conversation with people in this world. His films are evidence that life can be preserved in film, because as Philip Larkin suggests, the "impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art." (quoted in Gardner 2006: 337).

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