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A Day in the City of Death

"Forest of Bliss" (by Robert Gardner) – A Film Review

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Benares is often referred to as the City of Death. This attribute is contained in the most ancient and intimate name for the city: *kashi*, 'the shining one,' 'the luminous one,' 'the illuminating one.' Kashi or Benares throws light on the existential cycle of life and death. To the visitor, foreign or Hindu, Benares appears first of all as a City of Death. Hardly anywhere else in the world is one confronted with death – and with corpses – as frequently as in this Great Cremation Ground, another attribute of Benares. Here, death is woven into the visible fabric of daily life with a thread stronger than anywhere else. It is not surprising, therefore, that to this city a most intense documentarist of death has dedicated a film study of his own.

The cinema owes to Robert Gardner a number of memorable encounters with death. His two most widely known films, "Dead Birds" and "Rivers of Sand," both contain magnetic scenes of death. Among the Hamar of Ethiopia Gardner filmed an impressive interment of a deceased woman, and in New Guinea the ritual warfare of the Dani became the background for a melancholic reflexion on the transiency of human life. In "Forest of Bliss" Gardner continues this vocational tradition, with, however, a different artistic approach.

The title "Forest of Bliss" is yet another epithet for Benares. Until fairly recently, the parts south to the inhabited town were indeed forested, an ideal place for the gatherings of all sorts of religious people. According to legend the name was given by god Shiva himself who is supposed to have said: "Here, my *lingas* are

everywhere, like little sprouts arisen out of sheer bliss. Thus it will be called Forest of Bliss." The vision of Benares as a forest of *lingas* is certainly not exaggerated, they are literally everywhere.

Religious devotion to the phallic shrines of Shiva one encounters also in Gardner's documentary. In an early scene in the 90 minute film, which covers a single day in the holy city, the camera follows an old temple priest from his home to the Ganges, where he takes a purificatory morning bath. On his way back this old man meets several people, talks and jokes with them, gives alms to beggars, and pays his daily homage to shrines and religious images. Among these are some *shiva lingas* which he adorns with flowers. In his own temple, toward the end of the film and at night, the same protagonist plays a *damaru* drum in praise of goddess Durga, gives *tika* to his female devotees, and performs a sacred fire rite. He is one of three characters in the film that are singled out as people with individual contours. The second of these is another old priest, slender, quiet, and gentle, who performs various religious acts. The third individualized character in "Forest of Bliss" is the Dom Raja, a betel-chewing, fat and ugly man, who lives and makes his living near the burning *ghats* as master over the cremation rites. As we see him relaxing during a body-massage; snoring, with a cigarette in his sleepy fingers; giving orders to his underlings; quarreling with visitors; devouring food or buying the armrings of a deceased woman – this despicable man gains profile as an impressive theatrical type.

All the other people of Benares that the camera happens to focus on remain impersonal performers of diverse professional actions: boatmen rowing, coolies carrying wood as fuel for the cremation pyres, flower pluckers for the local manufacture of ceremonial garlands, or aides in the hospices for the dying, – all these people, related in one way or the other to the death trade, disappear as persons behind their functions.

This impersonal quality of the film is enhanced by another feature. Over long stretches the film is carried on by structural elements, such as dogs, logs, birds, boats, flowers, faeces, cows, rows, kites, and biers rather than by human actors. These elements may appear alone on the screen or in varying combinations: a dog gnawing at a corpse; another dog defaecating next to a flower; a flower as a garland around a dog's neck; a dog contemplating a corpse floating in the river on a bier; a cow eating a flower or a string of a