FOREST OF BLISS: OVERVIEW OF A DEBATE

Dai Vaughan: "film is about something, whereas reality is not" (1991:21).

Everything in this world is eater or eaten,
The seed is food and the fire is eater.
W. B. Yeats, from the *Upanishads*

Welcoming *Forest of Bliss?*

(a) *A rejection of realism:* Robert Gardner: "The very idea of finding a way to reproduce some reality that can be called another person is, on its face, a total absurdity."—film can never be a mere transcript of reality

(b) *An embrace of authorship:* the eye of the author dominates without apologies; but, see Chopra: Gardner arguably corresponds with an emic perspective

(c) *Anthropology and the Humanities:* respecting a neglected side of anthropology; adopting a poetic and creative vision; filmic truths.

…cont'd…
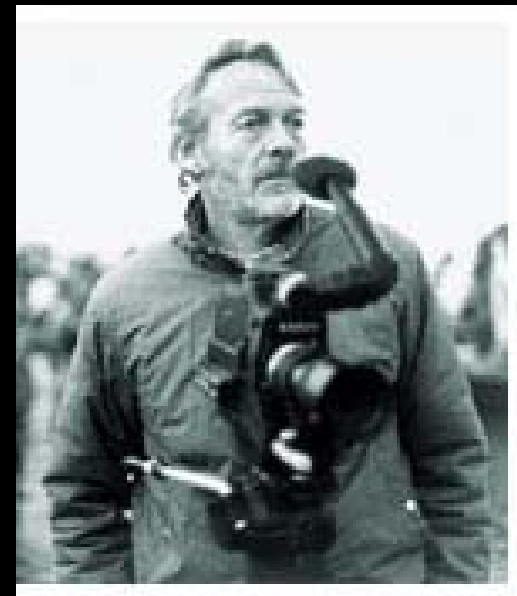
Welcoming *Forest of Bliss?*

…cont'd…

(d) *Against the condescension of narration:*
let the viewer experience, participate,
interpret; disorientation & loneliness of
fieldwork; film is not a substitute for
other ways of knowing an "alien culture"

(e) *Visuality is knowledge:* against the
tyranny of print, word dependency;
evocative & emotional power of imagery;
Loizos (1991: 7): "He is involving us in a
deliberate exercise in reacting without our
usual crutches - orientating statements in
conceptual language;" NOT an
"observational film" this one *is* narrated
(visually); weaning of print…cont'd….

Welcoming *Forest of Bliss?*

→ bamboo, carries water toward the sky; carries dead to the water; bamboo stretcher, carries a body, resembles a ladder, transports a moving body

→ bells, bells, bells: excitement, sadness; herald a coming, mark a passing

→ children, the young, the new, play with kites, as the dead pass by, the two share the same landscape, the same time and space, they are part of a cycle—a kite falls into the water as a dead body on a boat passes by

→ the wood, fashion boats for the living to ferry the dying/dead, to burn the dead

→ a boat launched into the river at the same time as a body is deposited in the river, both on a river journey, the river as a symbol of the passage of time, of the course of life…and the river water is everywhere, in the river itself, but then splashed on statues, transported into the city

→ stairs, journeying, as the river

→ marigolds, offered to gods, strung on dogs, fed to cows

→ death as absence, passing of the individual: empty courtyard, blowing sand, empty scales

→ the cycle of the day, filmed from sunrise to sunrise, to a new dawn, degeneration and regeneration

→ the cohabitation of the sacred and the profane, the pure and impure, the eater and the eaten

→ the ecology and industry of death rituals

Welcoming a Debate:

<u>MacDougall (2001: 69):</u> "The film tends to divide its critics into those who have a view—of historical reality, or Benares, or India, or anthropology—which the film offends and those who, perhaps even despite this, see value in such a radically different kind of film being made."

Condemning *Forest of Bliss*:

(1) Alexander Moore:

"All told, then, a beautiful visual exercise 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. This is an irresponsible, self-indulgent film. There is no excuse for a 1920s movie in 1986. Image is no longer the only vehicle for the message. We have gone far beyond that in the state of the art, in the craft of film communication, for there to be any justification for this mannered throwback. In the days before synchronous sound, such films were legitimate masterpieces. No longer. Technology has left pure imagery far behind, and anthropologists ought to do so too. It is a pity that the magnificent cinematography here was not complimented with audio material of equal richness."

Condemning *Forest of Bliss*:

(2) Peter Loizos (1991: 5): "It is not at all clear how observational filming of an unfamiliar ritual in an unfamiliar culture could possibly yield up its meaning….To see is not to perceive, still less, to comprehend."

(3) Jonathan Parry (1988):
1. cannot understand Gardner's intentions. If *Forest* is a film about death in Benares, it can only be described as lopsided. It overstates the dark side.
2. unintelligible or misleading about the ethnography of Benares.
3. the film will suggest to many Western audiences that Benares and Hinduism are an ineffable world apart which must elude our comprehension. That 'No explanation is possible'.
4 . A dismissal of the commentary-free film.

Condemning *Forest of Bliss*:

(4) <u>Jay Ruby (1989: 9):</u> "As an academic anthropologist who is interested in seeing visual anthropology become an accepted part of the anthropological mainstream, I believe that the chief criteria we should employ in critiquing a film which purports to be somehow 'anthropological' or 'ethnographic' are those of anthropology. Whether it is a 'good' film or an artistic achievement is basically irrelevant. While we need to be competent in our craft, our major concern is not to produce 'good' films any more than it is with producing 'good' books. Our professional identities are not as writers or filmmakers. We are scholars who are producing anthropological knowledge….it is *Gardner's* reputation that is based upon little real substance."

--his works are irrelevant to anthropology

--he cares not about fieldwork, methodological debates in ethnography, theory in anthropology—he is an exoticist

--not a real anthropologist, if challenged calls himself an artist

Condemning *Forest of Bliss*:

(4) …cont'd…

Ruby (1989: 10): "nineteenth-century notion of artistic license. The abbreviated version of this position is that because artists create beauty which is essential to the well-being of our society, they are allowed to behave differently from other people. Artists must be true to their vision no matter what! For many of us that notion of art is morally and politically out of step with the times. Terms like colonialist, imperialist, racist and sexist have been used to describe the attitude."

--if we accept Gardner's "art," why nobody else's?

Condemning *Forest of Bliss*:

(4) …cont'd…

Ruby (1989: 11): "*Forest of Bliss* has been presented as a haunting portrait of the city of death. It even won a British prize as the best ethnographic film of the past two years! I found it to be a jumble of incomprehensible vignettes apparently made to be savored for their formal content and the juxtaposition of the images and sequences."

Ruby (1989: 11): "India is mysterious only to those too lazy to learn something about the place….the images are colonialized. Gardner is using the lives of Indian people, people subjugated and oppressed by the West to make his art."

Some Rebuttals:

Gardner's response (1988: 3) to Moore:

"My response is both simple and direct. I have read what you sent me and I am sorry to say that it contains so many factual misstatements and labors under such a burden of ignorance about the medium it addresses that I see no useful purpose in producing something for, as you put it, 'a debate centered around' my film. The only debate I can imagine might be helpful is one that would decide who ought to tell the 'emperor,' who wrote the review, that he has no 'clothes.' I am sorry to be so harsh, but I wonder if the time may not have come for members of certain orthodoxies in Anthropology to rethink their threadbare doctrines. The article you have sent strikes me as an especially good example of what I mean."

Some Rebuttals:

Edmund Carpenter's (1989: 12) response to Ruby:
I got me a small mind and I means to use it
" …latrine gossip…Is there any intelligence behind this attack?
Perhaps not, but if so, it's permanently lost, for Professor Ruby
can't write, can't think, can't tell the truth."

Carpenter (1989: 12): "Professor Ruby speaks of the need to
'make films as a means to *[sic]* exploring important ideas in
anthropology.' The difference between 'important ideas' and
ideas important in anthropology is often considerable. Don't
blame Gardner for choosing the former."

Favouring *Forest of Bliss*:

(1) <u>Coover and Taylor (2002: 652):</u> "it 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."

Favouring *Forest of Bliss*:

(2) <u>Loizos (1991: 7):</u> "those likely to be hostile to Hinduism and its funerary customs would not be rendered less hostile by explanations about what is going on in the film. Precisely because it is *not* the only available source of information about Benares, neither Benares, nor Hinduism require 'protection'. The genuinely curious viewer has, after all, Parry's ethnography for guidance, and many other scholarly works. We can read Parry on Benares, and we can watch Gardner's film. It does not matter which we do first, and we do not have to chose between them, although we will prefer one or the other for different purposes, and different constituencies."
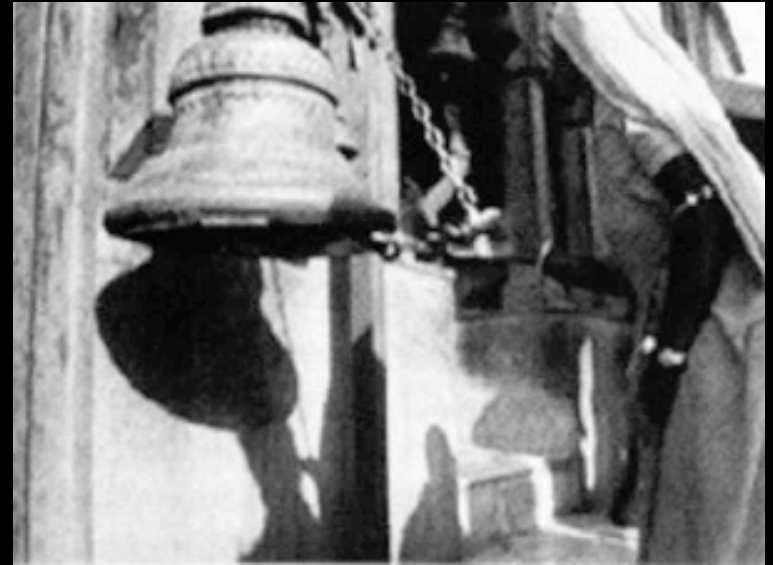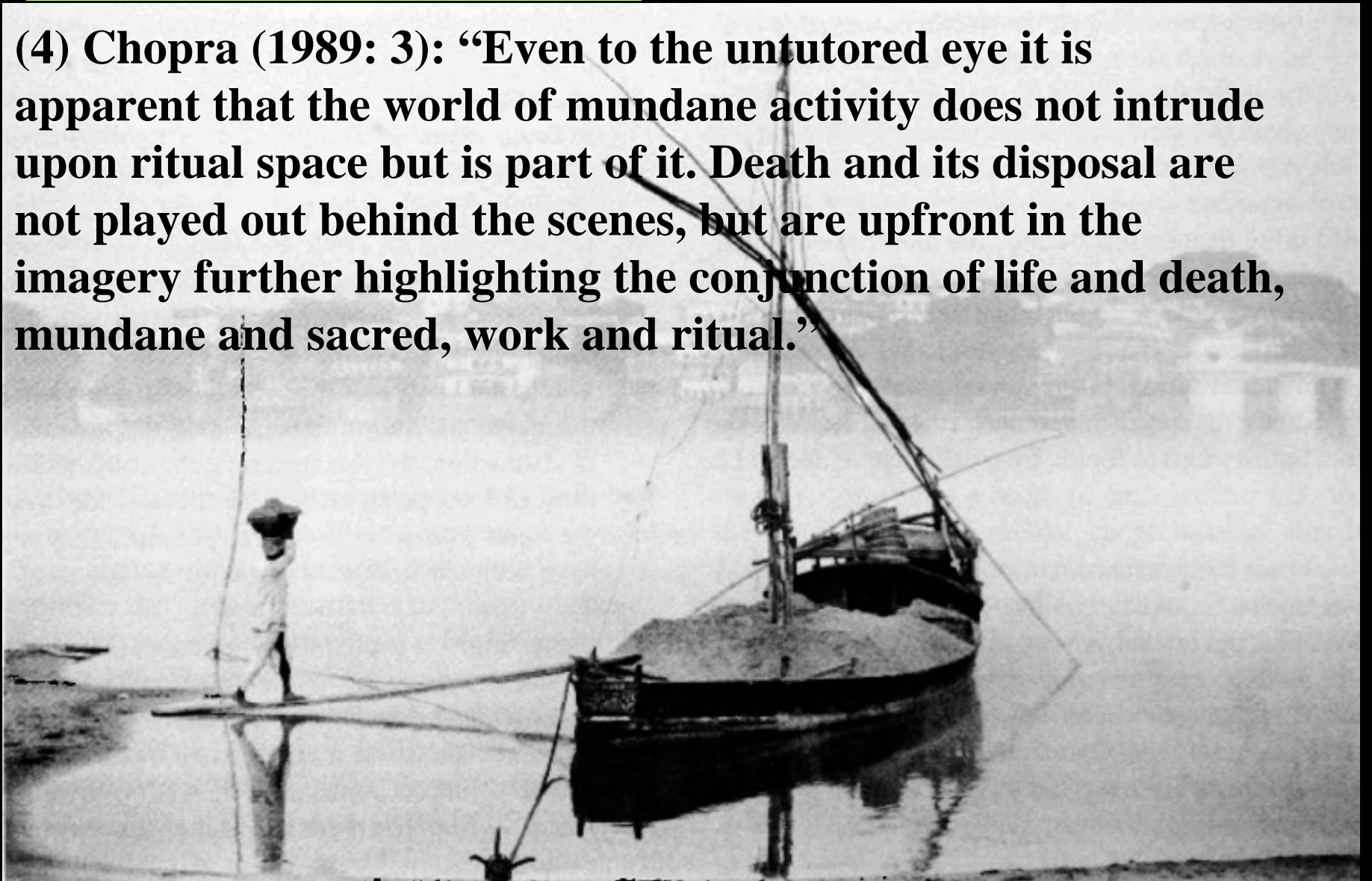
Favouring *Forest of Bliss*:

(3) MacDougall (2001: 71): "I am one of those who has no problem 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 socio-cultural 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. I believe it is useful to see the film as a prototype: an experiment in a radical anthropological practice which explores the largely invisible interrelations of the visible world through visual (and it must be added, auditory) means….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"
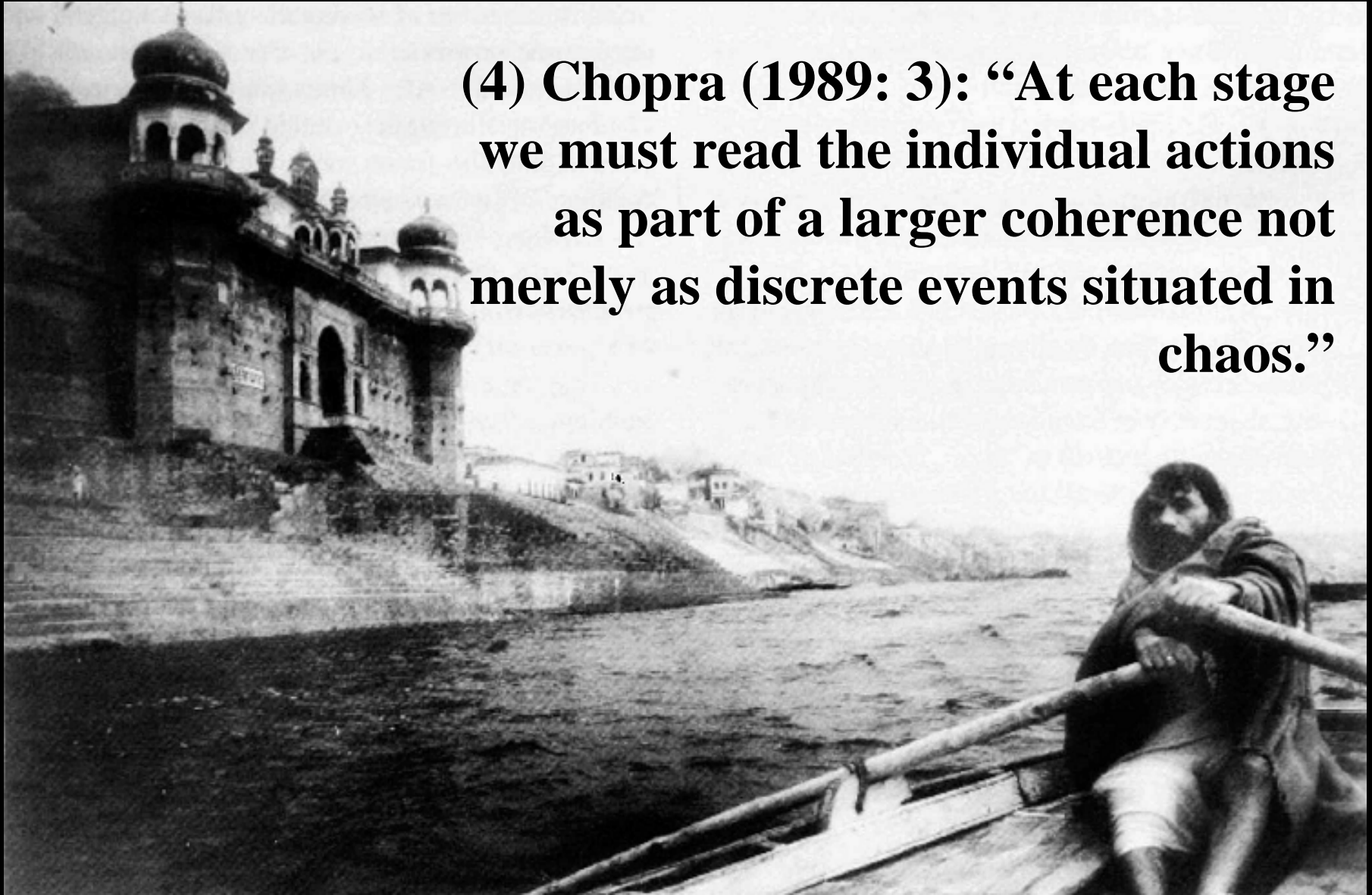
Favouring *Forest of Bliss*:

(4) Chopra (1989: 3): "Even to the untutored eye it is apparent that the world of mundane activity does not intrude upon ritual space but is part of it. Death and its disposal are not played out behind the scenes, but are upfront in the imagery further highlighting the conjunction of life and death, mundane and sacred, work and ritual."

Favouring *Forest of Bliss*:

(4) Chopra (1989: 3): "At each stage we must read the individual actions as part of a larger coherence not merely as discrete events situated in chaos."

Favouring *Forest of Bliss*:

(4) Chopra (1989: 3): "The task, so to speak, is to transform the act of viewing from one which follows the sequence of hearing, understanding and seeing, to a position of primacy in which viewing plays an active role in interpretation."