

**Death and Life through the Tourist's Gaze: Reflections on Gianfranco Rosi's  
*Boatman***

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**Abstract**

This article examines Gianfranco Rosi's first documentary *Boatman* (1993) from the perspective of the touristic gaze deployed by the film in its portrayal of the sacred city of Benares, India, and the activities that take place there on the banks of the River Ganges, from washing to funerary rites. I situate the film in relation to persistent ethical questions regarding documentary encounters with death, arguing that Rosi's self-reflexive alignment with – and interrogation of – several touristic gazes, opens a set of primarily political concerns. These are elucidated in dialogue with the thought of philosopher Roberto Esposito on biopolitics and the 'immunitarian' paradigm. Through this lens, the documentary's self-conscious adoption of touristic perspectives may be understood as revealing and challenging an exoticising fantasy, animated by contagion and immunity, that frames Benares as a space exempt from the modern biopolitical impulse to protect the boundaries of individuals from the shared fabric of the commons.

**Keywords**

Gianfranco Rosi

*Boatman*

Benares

Roberto Esposito

biopolitics

immunitarian

touristic gaze

Italian documentary cinema

### **Death and Life through the Tourist's Gaze: Reflections on Gianfranco Rosi's *Boatman***

Gianfranco Rosi's first documentary, *Boatman* (1993), is shot in black and white on film and takes place in and around the River Ganges on the banks of the sacred Hindu city of Benares, India. Promoting the convergence of spectating with journeying, the documentary evokes a multivalent voyage. Whilst *Boatman* was shot over the course of five years of return visits to Benares, it is edited to suggest the arc of a single day—beginning with a descent towards the river bank, and culminating with a movement back into the bustling streets of the city—thereby pointing towards a temporality associated with the roots of 'journey' in 'a day, a day's travel, a day's work' (*OED Online* 2018). Rosi spends a large part of the film aboard the boat of Gopal Maji, a charismatic ferryman for tourists, mourners and the dead, who takes the filmmaker on an excursion across the porous boundaries between the animate and the funerary. In these waters, the living bathe, make religious offerings, sing, launder their clothes, wash farmyard animals, and engage in commercial and social exchange; whilst dead bodies, or the ashes of the dead, are placed ceremoniously into the same river amidst songs, chants, and other rituals of mourning. *Boatman* thus centralises the existential inflection of 'journey' as the passage between life and death, a passage that is perpetually rearticulated in the Ganges. The river's interface with a lively touristic economy is another significant point of focus in the film, with shots of tour guides providing educational fragments about the space for *Boatman's* viewers, and tourists' perspectives repeatedly incorporated.

It is Rosi's deployment of a multi-layered touristic gaze that I want to bring into focus in this article. At least three iterations of the touristic gaze interact in

*Boatman*: the spectator of the film tours the Ganges, pursuing the director's viewpoint, which is also situated, self-consciously, as touristic, and the director searches out the vantage point of other tourists, whose views he both mirrors and swerves away from. The refractory motility created through the reverberations and divergences that occur between these layers—and particularly the latter two—echoes the etymological connection between the tourist and the reflexive. 'Tourist' derives from the Latin *tors*, meaning 'a tool for describing a circle', or simply relates to a 'turn', and through this 'turning' intersects with the movement underpinning the 'reflexive', which denotes that which is 'capable of turning, deflecting or bending' (*OED Online* 2018). The reflexivity yielded through scopic layering is magnified by Rosi's editing decisions, which interrupt and undercut several proclivities that animate transcultural perceptions of death and life.

In what follows, I begin by situating *Boatman* in relation to historical and filmic debates about ethical concerns and cultural customs surrounding the visualisation of death, pointing to the ways in which Rosi's exposure of his film's specular framework and his deployment of the tourist's gaze connect with strategies that often subtend documentary encounters with death. I then examine Rosi's framing of the embodied and linguistic expressions of the five tourists he encounters at the Ganges, suggesting that it is politics, rather than ethics, that assumes pride of place in Rosi's framing of the gaze. In dialogue with Italian biopolitical philosopher Roberto Esposito, I contend that these tourists' heterogeneous negotiations of scenes of death and life are structured by an underlying biopolitical logic. Whether the tourists embrace or seek to detach themselves from the river, implicit in their viewpoint and bodily stance is the sense that these waters offer an alternative pathway to an 'immunitarian' sociopolitical context that they associate with European and US societies and that is characterised by the

isolation of individual bodies from the commons. This exotic fantasy of contagious commonality, I shall show, is destabilised by the director, who recursively underlines wider social, religious, economic and historical tensions and tendencies that the tourists' gazes overlook. As such, the journey elicited through *Boatman* is ultimately one punctuated by lacunae, reflexivity, and the retention of a certain ambivalence.

### **Death and Visuality**

Speaking about the intimate co-presence of death and life along the Ganges in interview, Rosi has stated that Benares 'is the only place in the world where alive people and dead people dwell in the same grounds', reflecting that 'for us, death is such a taboo. In India, death is [...] part of life' (Rosi cited in Titze 2014: n.pag.). These comments chime with the historical claim that visible public and familial rituals surrounding the event of natural/non-accidental death have faded away in contemporary Europe, to the effect that death, to quote Michel Foucault, 'has become the most private and shameful thing of all (and ultimately, it is now not so much sex as death that is the object of taboo)' (2004: 247). For Foucault, this change with regards to death is coterminous with the rise of biopower in Europe from the late eighteenth century, a time in which the management of life became central to power, politics and the economy. Vivian Sobchack has suggested that with this removal of 'natural' death 'from common—and public—sight', and with the related medical-technological extension of life, death has become something that is increasingly seen to be 'exotic and strange' (2004: 230). The touristic, transcultural perspectives to which Rosi's documentary draws attention carry something of this existential sense of death as foreign.

Rosi's reference to the 'taboo' of death also intersects with certain tendencies and debates in the history of cinema and visual culture. Sobchack writes that until the time of the AIDS pandemic, indexical treatment of non-violent, 'natural' death in documentary film from Europe and the United States was rare; that, historically at least, documentaries tended to replicate 'social taboos surrounding real death' by avoiding 'explicit (that is, visible) screen reference to it' (2004: 231). In dialogue with the work of Phillippe Ariès, she suggests that 'natural' death has seemed 'unrepresentable' in 'secular' and 'scientised' cultures because death is perceived to be 'the last grasp of sign production and the end of representation' (Sobchack 2004: 233). Yet other theorists have averred that visual culture more broadly has often compensated for, rather than reproduced, social proscriptions regarding death; that mediatised relationships with death and the dead have proliferated in popular and artistic culture even as 'natural' death has become more private in society.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in reference to mortality's long association with the still, photographic image in visual theory, Emma Wilson reminds us that 'cinema in its matter and make-up is concerned more than other media with the line between the still and the moving, between the living and the dead' (2012: 5).<sup>2</sup> Rosi's documentary thus navigates a thick fabric of overlapping social restrictions and customs related to death and visibility, yet in broaching the border between the dead and the living *Boatman* simultaneously confronts an existential porosity that is constitutively—and formally—cinematic.

*Boatman* is prescient of Rosi's later cinema in the sense that death is an important theme in his other documentaries too.<sup>3</sup> In *El sicario, room 164* (2010) the necropolitical terrain of northern Mexico in the time of the 'War on Drugs' is suggested through the drawings of an alleged former *sicario*, and the relationship between the violent infliction of death and the production of cinematic narrative becomes a central

point of comparison. *Sacro GRA* (2013) takes respite from the vibrant layers of a living city to capture the movement of the dead in a graveyard under the cover of night, and in so doing the documentary highlights the mirrored relationship between the *polis*—with its subterranean pockets—and the necropolis. It is *Fuocoammare (Fire at Sea)* (2016) that provides the most significant point of comparison with *Boatman*, for this film returns to the combinatory images of water, death and travel, albeit in a manner that moves away from *Boatman*'s almost ethnographic register towards the urgency of the migrant crisis. The 'immunitary' biopolitics that I suggest are evident in *Boatman* take on a more pronounced presence in *Fire at Sea* in the form of the national borders linked to the European body politic and its particular approach to the governance of life, which is rooted in the preservation of some at the expense of others. Viewed together, *Boatman* and *Fire at Sea* subtly evoke, in different ways, the presence of a biopolitical logic wherein 'whether the danger that lies in wait is a disease threatening the individual body [...or] violent intrusion into the body politic [...] what remains constant is the place where the threat is located, always on the border between the inside and the outside, between the self and other, the individual and the common' (Esposito 2015: 2).

In each of his documentaries, Rosi carefully arranges the position of his camera in relation to the material spaces of death and violence he confronts. He often frustrates, interrogates, or deconstructs common representational pitfalls in the screening of death, including sensationalism, voyeurism, exoticisation, and the forced or distorted imposition of meaning upon the dead and the dying. In *Boatman*, some of these issues encircling the indexing of death are exposed and tempered by Rosi's self-reflexive deployment of the touristic perspective. An association between the director's gaze and a touristic viewpoint is forged near to the beginning of the film. At first, Rosi's camera

meanders closely through, and pauses upon, a dense crowd of people as they make contact with each other and the water—scenes that Rosi films from Gopal's boat. Beyond presenting images of tactility, aspects of the film's opening teasingly hint towards a kind of 'haptic visuality', to employ Laura Marks' term for the ways in which spectators perceive the image as something that tangibly invokes contact, 'the tactile and contagious quality of cinema' understood 'as something we viewers brush up against like another body' (2000: xii).<sup>4</sup> Yet, a distance is also inscribed early on, which separates the filmmaker, and spectators, from the scenes of embodied contact brought into view. Rosi moves from capturing the people immersed in the water to multiple shots of tourists who are watching the same aquatic scene, and who occupy the same set-apart perspective as the director. Like Rosi, the tourists remain in their boat, rather than immersing themselves in the river, and view the people in the water from behind the lenses of their cameras.

**Insert Figure 1: The touristic perspective. (dir. Gianfranco Rosi (dir.), *Boatman*, 1993. Italy. Screenshot.**

This alignment of perspectives at the start of the film opens up the act of looking at death (and indeed life) to scrutiny.<sup>5</sup> Put in other words, rather than concealing or naturalising the gaze, this early sequence brings into view a scopic regime that proceeds across transcultural lines that are animated by separation.

Rosi's emphasis on the touristic perspective plays on both the death taboo and the tourist's (potential) exotic investment in Benares. On the one hand, in the Ganges, death is open to the sight of the public, and the sense of death as visual spectacle is even promoted through the tourist economy, factors which would appear to lessen the sense of taboo, as Rosi himself has mentioned. One example of this comes near the start of the film, when Gopal directs Rosi's filmic gaze towards the dead body of a child that

floats on top of the river near to their boat. Gopal's gesture is off-handed, playful, almost comical—we are given permission to linger on the corpse. On the other hand, Rosi's attention to the transcultural filtering of these deathly images works to preserve some trace of the taboo that seems suspended. His emphasis on the gaze and its transnational character evokes the intrusive form of sight and visual replication that one often associates with the tourist's prying camera, thereby underscoring the risks of voyeurism and revealing Rosi's awareness of this concern.

Sobchack has argued that this sort of exposure of the specular framework is a common strategy mobilised by documentarians in their attempts to conform to 'ethical normativity' when filming death, and she enumerates six categories of the gaze that are deployed to this effect.<sup>6</sup> Yet the inscription of ethics is not the main function of the refractory framing of touristic gazes in *Boatman*. It is the contours of politics, or rather biopolitics, that play a more prominent role. This becomes apparent when one moves from looking at the director's initial alignment with the touristic gaze to consider the other touristic perspectives that Rosi locates along the banks of the Ganges.

### **Biopolitical Inflections**

In the first fifteen minutes of *Boatman*, Rosi incorporates shots of five tourists, and these sequences are characterised by the tourists' loose use of 'biomedical' terminology. The notion of contagion, communicated with reference to ideas of 'germs', 'disease' and bodily exposure, is particularly prominent. The biomedical ideas that are explicitly or obliquely referenced in the tourists' statements resonate, or coincide, with the biopolitical thought advanced by Esposito, in whose work the interrelated terms of contagion and immunity become the interpretive keys through



which to conceptualise modernity, community and violence. Summarised succinctly: for Esposito, an immunitarian politics rooted in the protection of individual bodily boundaries (whether the body in question pertains to an individual or nation) becomes prominent once life becomes the very material of politics. This immunitary reflex comes into effect in the face of the perceived threat posed by the excesses of the commons and its contagious, dissolving and, ultimately, deathly qualities. Across his works, Esposito seeks to engender a lexical movement away from the immunity paradigm and towards a conceptualisation of radically non-immunised life, due to the ways in which immunity produces something of the very harm that it claims to react against.<sup>7</sup> Rerouting Esposito's theory across touristic, ocular lines, I shall now suggest that the biomedical terms used by the tourists of Rosi's *Boatman* reveal a comparable investment in ideas of contagion, the commons and immunitary individual preservation.

In the first of Rosi's tourist shots, a man whom we later learn is a former doctor emerges from the water and converses with the camera that meets him. He states:

[...] Sure there are germs in the water; sure there are dead bodies; sure there are dead children [...] babies, adults [...] it must be teeming with germs [...] so is life; everywhere is teeming with germs [...] we have to accept it. You go into a crowded bus, car, cinema in the West, the atmosphere is teeming with germs [...].

**Insert Figure 2: The doctor bathes in the river. Gianfranco Rosi (dir.), *Boatman*, 1993. Italy. Screenshot.**

The doctor thus describes the river in loose biomedical terms, centralising the notion of 'germs' and associating it with crowded public spaces both in what he refers to as 'the West' and (implicitly) the 'non-West'. Through these comments, an association is

woven between the risk of disease, of contagion, and the idea of that which is common or shared—an association that is repeated across Rosi's tourist shots.

The doctor's point, demonstrated physically through his movement in the water and confirmed verbally, is that we should 'accept' the contagion brought on by the commons, that we should not cordon off individual life from the threat of infection, or indeed from the presence of death. In making this suggestion, the doctor goes against the modern biopolitical impulse, whereby 'to become the object of political "care", life had to be separated off and closed up inside progressively desocialised spaces that were meant to immunise it against anything arising from community' (Esposito 2015: 140), so that 'the porosity of external borders to contaminating toxic germs' was 'reduced' or 'eliminated' (123). The doctor implicitly embraces Benares as a spiritual space in which the immunitary proclivity of modern biopolitics is deactivated.

A more pronounced sense of commonality is articulated in the second tourist shot. This next tourist is the first of two Italian men that Rosi encounters. A linguistic commonality isolates Rosi and these men from broader circuits of conversation and works to reinforce the affiliation of the director with a touristic perspective. This first Italian tourist sits, cross-legged, on the edge of a boat docked on the shoreline. He has long necklaces, fashioned from beads and other materials, hanging across his naked chest, and he wears a towel wrapped around his waist. The tourist initially converses with Gopal, with Rosi acting as translator. He then speaks directly to the camera, proclaiming that his 'heart and blood are always with India', and explaining why this is the case:

It's been eleven years now that I have been doing yoga and now, since I arrived [...] they treated me like a son [...] when I wanted to eat I would ask for food and they would give me food, they would give me everything, do you

understand? They would give me their life, their soul, they would give me their heart, they would give me everything, understand?

This sense of donative social relations coincides with Esposito's reflections on community. Esposito states, for example, that 'in the community [...] subjects don't find anything else except the void, that distance, that extraneousness that constitutes them as being missing from themselves; "givers to" inasmuch as they themselves are "given by" a circuit of mutual gift giving [...]' (2010: 7). A similar 'gift-giving' is clearly underlined in the Italian tourist's comments. In his writing, Esposito traces this idea of the gift back to the very meaning of the 'munus' that lies at the etymological centre of *communitas* in order to theorise a form of community that is not based in anything substantive but is rather rooted in the sharing of loss (18–19). Relevant to my reflections on *Boatman* here is Esposito's conjoining of this loss with death and death's relation to commonality. Esposito locates these thoughts in the work of French thinker Georges Bataille: seizing on Bataille's idea of a 'community of death', Esposito relates that 'in Bataille, death represents the nullification of every possibility in the expropriating and expropriated dimension of the impossible: death is our *common* impossibility of being what we endeavour to remain, namely, isolated individuals' (121). When read in dialogue with the thought of Esposito and Bataille, the Ganges becomes an extension of this tourist's vision, and valorisation, of the donative loss that animates social links.<sup>8</sup>

The third tourist that Rosi encounters is also from Italy. This man, sitting fully clothed and frail in the shade, recounts that a parasite is eating him alive (speaking with Rosi, like the previous tourist, in Italian). He tells the director: 'Now I ask myself: why on earth did I come to India. Do you know what it means that I was 80kg? Do you know

how much 80kg is? I had a 34 inch trouser size; I was bursting with health. Then [...] I got the amoeba. In three months, I shrunk like a sock [...]'. Once again, the exposure of the body is emphasised in the tourist's relation to his surroundings, with this tourist seeming to embody the very reasons behind the fear of germs—the sense that these germs relate to disease and, ultimately, to death. The tourist proceeds to talk with nostalgia about Italian pasta, fantasising about an Italian meal that he could make with the resources available to him locally in Benares. The sense of loss brought on by the parasite is intensified by the man's expression of hunger for food associated with his place of origin, even though the tourist declares his love for India and his appreciation of its 'acceptance' of people in all conditions. Rosi's decision to include this encounter works to retain something of the immunitary fear of contracting a disease. Esposito writes that 'bodily confines are exactly what act as lines of defence against whatever threatens to take life away from itself, expel it to its outside, or reverse it into its opposite', and describes the body as the terrain of a conflict between life and death, 'the frontline, both symbolic and material, in life's battle against death' (2015: 113). This third tourist shot reveals a body that can no longer defend itself according to these (biopolitical) terms.

The body is also emphasised in the fourth and final tourist encounter, a shot involving two women from the United States, who sit fully clothed on a boat and watch the local residents in the water from a distance. Unlike the other three tourist shots that I have discussed, these women do not speak to Rosi's camera directly and do not seem aware of its presence. Rosi pauses and eavesdrops on their conversation, replicating the very distance that the women themselves maintain with the environment that surrounds them. As Rosi's camera settles on these women, they are talking about a moment in which local women are washing their long hair in the Ganges, with large amounts of

soap thickly lathered. One of the observing tourists reflects: ‘maybe the alkaline content keeps the germ count down’. Thus, ‘germs’ are once again a prominent component associated with the touristic gaze. The fact that their comment is about hair is significant. This is in part because of hair’s material association with the confusion of the boundary between death and life, due to the myth surrounding the hair’s supposed—though scientifically contested—growth after the biological life of the body ceases. In this sense, implicit in the women’s focus on hair is a negotiation with (and resistance towards) the contagious imbrication that animates Benares in general—in the ways it blurs the line demarcating the living, healthy subject and the dead or dying. Interspersed with the theme of hair is a focus on property—on what is individually owned, and what is shared—for one of the tourists speculates that it is the lack of plumbing in local homes that produces a communal bathing and hair washing out of necessity. This is significant because property and immunity are closely bound together in Esposito’s theory, with the proprietary impulse working to erect the prophylactic boundaries of the individual. Evoking a marked separation through both their physical stance and their comments, these women call to mind Esposito’s definition of *immunitas* as ‘something that interrupts the social circuit of reciprocal gift-giving’ (2015: 113), in contrast to the donative perspective embodied by the first Italian tourist.

What these women miss, and what Rosi’s editing makes clear, is that the hair washing undertaken by the local women echoes the organic metaphor that infuses the aquatic necropolis itself. Repeated educational references are incorporated concerning the deity Shiva across Rosi’s documentary, vocalised by Gopal the boatman and others, describing the ways in which the river Ganges flows down from the God’s matted hair to the earth. The long hair of the local women, lathered up to resemble a matted

textuality, and poised just above the surface of the water subtly recalls the image of the God.

**Insert Figure 3: Local women wash their hair in the river. Gianfranco Rosi (dir.), *Boatman*, 1993. Italy. Screenshot.**

Through the images he sutures together, Rosi therefore underscores the imperceptiveness of the touristic viewpoint at this juncture, evoking its dissonance with the meanings that infuse this liquid spatiality. In so doing, Rosi also implicitly points to the risks of his own visual stance—of what it might miss or assume as it approaches life and death—in light of his alignment with the tourist’s scopic frame. In turn, this dissonance also functions as a caution to the film’s viewer, who is both educated by the information that Rosi curates, and reminded of the potential limitations of their own gaze as it follows the director’s.

Rosi’s editing also interrupts the fantasy of contagion and corporeal openness that is expressed in relation to the Ganges by all of the tourists captured (albeit in notably distinct registers). Through their common focus on contagion, the tourists implicitly posit Benares as an exotic space outside of the modern biopolitical paradigm that marks Europe and the United States. Put in other words, Benares seems to offer an escape from this logic, whether this compels or perturbs. Rosi interweaves the tourist shots I have discussed with sequences that point to the ways separation permeates and conditions the imagined site of contamination. For example, repeated references to the rigid structures of the caste system work to fragment the haptic contact between bodies, severing their supposed togetherness. In one instance, Rosi includes a shot of the boatman relating the story of his caste’s transformation from the untouchable to those who can be touched, an elevation in status that is achieved through the spiritual likening of the boatman and the God Rama, both of whom are responsible for carrying, or

ferrying, people. If one of the meanings of contagion is ‘contact’, then the issues with contact underscored through Gopal’s story undermine the touristic imaginary.

Another example of Rosi’s disruption of the touristic perspective occurs with the spectral funerary economy that animates Benares. The film’s soundscape and vignettes point to the fact that the dead do not enter the water in the same way. Cremation, viewers learn, is expensive, and as such not all can afford this preferred choice of passage. The very poor are thrown into the water without ceremony and without the necessary weights to stop them from floating up to the surface. In this way, some of the dead are more visible than others, and this visibility occurs across economic lines. Therefore, the supposed expropriative dimension of the commons and its imagined selflessness are undercut by the ways capital circulates through loss. In both the example of the caste system and this funerary exchange, Rosi’s editing thus works to challenge and extend the perspectives expressed by the tourists, providing supplementary fragments that undermine the exoticising impulses that underpin these transcultural encounters.

## **Conclusion**

Rosi has stated in interview that ‘the distance in documentary is the truth. The distance that you can have with your character in your documentary is where the truth lies in the story’ (Rosi cited in O’Falt 2017: n.pag.). I have suggested that it is the different layers of the touristic gaze that create a distance in *Boatman*, and explored some of the refractory and biopolitical ‘truths’ embedded in the documentary’s capturing of death and life. I argued that the self-conscious association woven between the director’s perspective and the tourists’ perspective at the film’s beginning plays on European

historical and visual taboos while also underscoring and mitigating the risks of voyeurism and spectacle through an acknowledgment of the scopic framework. Examining next the viewpoints and embodied positions of the tourists that Rosi brings into focus in the documentary's first fifteen minutes, I claimed that the tourist's gaze is animated by the provisional contours of a biopolitical mode of thought that is characterised by an interplay of contagion and immunity. Implicit in the different tourists' perspectives is a sense that the Ganges, or indeed India, lies apart from, or offers a release from, an immunitarian sociopolitical operation that is premised on the withdrawal of individual bodies from the perceived 'excess' and 'dissolution' catalysed by the shared fabric of the commons. Through its use of perspective and its editing decisions, Rosi's film both examines and challenges the tourists' viewpoints—viewpoints with which his own often intersects—pointing in particular to the limits of their joint articulation of a contagious commonality.

This article was written shortly following Rosi's Cambridge residency in the summer of 2017, some years before the current public health crisis, yet as I review the final version now, the river Ganges has assumed tragic new meanings linked to COVID-19. In recent months, the transnational media has described the River Ganges as 'full' with deceased bodies, with journalists speculating that at least some of these deaths were brought about by the pandemic. These bodies are thought to index uncounted losses—those deaths falling outside official mortality figures in India, figures thought to be significantly lower than the real toll. It is not only the setting of Rosi's documentary that has gained new inflections in our present, but also the theoretical concepts deployed here. The central biopolitical concepts of immunity and contagion are currently tied to, amongst other things, urgent material issues and global inequalities surrounding vaccination—a context in which some lives are immunised



whilst others are left vulnerable and exposed. A revision of these biopolitical concepts in the light of the current pandemic lies beyond the scope of this article, which is centred on Rosi's documentary, though it is worth noting that theoretical work on this task has already begun.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these arguments are summarised in John Sutton Baglow's 2007 article 'The Rights of the Corpse', including Charlton's McIlwain's argument about the ways an expanded presence of death in popular culture accompanies the decreased visibility of 'natural' death in society (on this argument, see also McIlwain's 2005 book *When Death Goes Pop: Death, Media and the Remaking of Community*).

<sup>2</sup> Wilson is referring, in particular, to Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006), and to Mulvey's engagements with the theory of Bazin and Barthes. Wilson takes a different approach to these questions in her book—one that does not treat still images as 'a reminder of the irrevocable loss and passing of the moment indexically fixed' but rather perceives such images to carry 'a trace of embodied experience, of sensuousness, of engagement with the world, up to and beyond death' (2012: 6).

<sup>3</sup> Death and water are also apparent in his earlier projects. As Rosi related in a Q&A during his 2017 residency at the University of Cambridge, he undertook an initial project on Miami, which looked at the relationships between the retirement community, water and death, that prompted a viewer to make a comparison with Benares. This catalysed Rosi's trip to India. For an insightful discussion of Rosi's framing of living and dying in his documentaries *Fire at Sea* and *Below Sea Level*, see Wilson (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Marks explains that 'haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space [...] optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object' (2001: 162).

<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that I distance my analysis from existing summaries of the film that implicitly or explicitly conflate Rosi's camera and editing choices with the movement of the river. For example, Katja Esson writes that 'what ultimately makes *Boatman* so compelling is that its form fits the winding stories it tells so perfectly, flowing over you and sucking you into the many currents of the holy Ganges [...]' (2017: n.pag.), while in his blog Dennis Grunes notes that '[Rosi] invests the camera with continuous motion through crowds of people, thereby conjuring the sense of a flowing river even before we are in Maji's rowboat on the river' (2009: n.pag.). While these are evocative and useful comparisons, and ones that the film certainly invites, the naturalization of the filmmaking process through the use of aquatic metaphors runs the risk of masking the subtle distances and separations that mark Rosi's camera and that work to submit the gaze to analysis and deconstruction. Rather than merging with the 'currents' or 'flow' of the river, it is the reflective and refractory quality of water that Rosi echoes in his reflexive treatment of the gaze.

<sup>6</sup> These are: the accidental gaze, the helpless gaze, the endangered gaze, the interventional gaze, and the humane gaze, and the professional gaze.

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<sup>7</sup> This is apparent towards the end of Esposito's *Bíos* and in later texts, most notably *Third Person*. In the present essay, I focus more on the relationship between *communitas* and *immunitas* in Esposito's thought, as I believe these frameworks to be the most relevant to Rosi's tourist encounters. Yet I mention Esposito's later work here because it underscores the extent of his critique of modern 'immunity' and his attempts to disassemble its logic. Some of the tourists of Rosi's film could be seen to be involved in a similar attempt to escape this modern logic, yet because this desire is bound up in the exotic and the transcultural this attempt falls short, as we will see and as Rosi himself underscores.

<sup>8</sup> This has obvious parallels with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, and particularly Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1991), which also draws on Bataille's work to think through community.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Paul B. Preciado's article in *Artforum*, 'Learning from the Virus', which explores the resonance of biopolitical thought with the present pandemic context. Preciado stresses *inter alia* that our response to COVID-19 cannot only rest in immunitary withdrawal but must be linked to the creation of an expanded idea of community which works against different forms of immunitary violence. Such an understanding of community, for Preciado, is at once connected to healing from the present pandemic and resisting other urgent contemporary issues, including ecological destruction.