

Essence of Life. Godfrey Reggio and Philip Glass on Koyaanisqatsi (directed by Greg Carson), 25 min., USA 2002

Part I: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9YrftlXQZA>

Part II: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS_4neKx3C8

Part III: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIJ-QyW3hfo>

Part I:

Reggio:

These films are meant to provoke. They're meant to offer an experience rather than an idea or information or a story about a knowable or a fictional subject.

Glass:

If you can put yourself back into 1978 and looking at those images, several generations have grown up looking at those images, but in 78 they were extremely startling, and it was like looking at the world for the first time.

Reggio:

They're meant fundamentally to stir up enough to actually create an experience of the subject. It is up for the viewer to take for herself what that means. And so for some people it's environmental film. For some people it's an ode to technology. For some people it's a piece of shit. For other people it moves them deeply. It depends on who you ask. If someone's trying to figure out why they're watching the film, they're probably not going to get into it. It's more like taking a journey. It is the journey that is the objective, not the end place where we are going.

Glass:

Earth, air, fire and water. Those are the four elements. And in the alchemical system, those become the basis of all matter. And we can say that the text, image, music are the basis of any kind of interdisciplinary art form, whether it's opera or film or a dance.

Reggio:

I think there's a thread in everyone's life. In my life, I entered a religious community of men at the age of 14, stayed till the age of 28, grew up in effect in the Middle Ages, which was remarkably insane and beautiful at all at the same time. In other words, it wasn't bad or good. It was bad and good at the same time. This and that. And I felt it gave me a very special preparation for life. The order that I was in prepared me to live a life of humility and service and prayer, and that certainly goes against the grain of say 1950s New Orleans culture which is, let's say like *dolce vita*. So at the tender age of 13, I felt like I had explored that enough and I was ready to move on through idealism like any adolescent. And I was inspired by the life of other people whose lives moved me. These were religious men that taught me. So I joined their order. How it influenced my films? I can't say in a specific way. I've always been, I guess I've been interested or motivated in what stands behind the surface of things. And when you're religious and doing meditation and mental prayer and trying to go beyond words into some deep feeling with something that's willful, then this helps you to prepare. I guess I had a great preparation for discipline and focus in that mad time. I had come in touch with this extraordinary film by Luis Buñuel called *Los Olvidados*. And that film moved me, gave me the equivalent of a spiritual experience. That film moving me so much, I felt that I would take that concern into a more plastic form of mass culture through film and through the vehicle of the I.R.E. The I.R.E. is term chosen by the members. It means the Institute for Regional Education. We started out

to do a mass media campaign on the use of technology and surveillance to control behavior. It was sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union. And the project worked beautifully in a non-narrative form of visualization being presented on television at prime time, billboards at high traffic density areas, radio at drive time with jingles and all of which was to gather the attention of the public, which was in an omnipresent gaze in the medium. So if we wanted to get something happening, we would try to put something in that medium, say like a bank or a liquor company or cigarette companies.

TV:

...that few if any of us can understand. Extensive information gathering on every American. Human experiments with drugs and psychosurgery, electronic surveillance, the era of the computer, invasion of privacy, growing government and corporate power over our lives. a people plagued by dehumanization, loneliness and violence. Dramatic perhaps, but we are losing control of our technology and our lives.

Reggio:

And that led to the formation and development of the I.R.E. out of which came our second project, Koyaanisqatsi. We wrote a book the organization colleagues and myself. It came into the Sunday supplement as it went out to 125,000 people immediately was sent to prisons all over the country because it had a lot about prisoner rights and stuff. It's just another way of getting information to the public in a manner whereby it's almost unavoidable. We tried to take this campaign nationally. It failed. As a result, we wanted to continue in the in the in a mediated form because it seemed very efficacious, and film became the next journey. I also met Ron Fricke during that time. He was the cinematographer and collaborator on the moving image stuff for television that was done, the PSAs. And I was amazed at his dedication, his artistry, his fanatical attention to detail, unquestionably a master of the highest form and yet without all of the pollution of the industry. He was an original, an authentic guy out there lensing, a painter, a great sense of color, composition, a mechanical genius. But add to that the brilliance of an eye that's artistic and the sensibility of a very compassionate person who's super disciplined, and you have this monster cinematographer director. He's also a director now. So he's a terrific he was an absolute godsend for this project. Ron Fricke is a legitimate American genius. Both he and I and our colleagues became so excited during the first period of shooting that I approached my angel and said, "Look, I mean we must take this that we're pushing the envelope, we're trying to do something with no words.", because we were all getting very involved and focused on this. And if we did it in 35 we'd have a chance really to come out and make and be viable in the marketplace as it were to slip the grid with some freak show. And the angel went for that and Ron Fricke and I worked together for almost six years to put that together. To be truthful to work with the likes of Ron Fricke, Philip Glass, my other collaborators, I feel like a blind man getting to work with those that can see. I don't touch anything. I do now have to know about all these things in order to do my job better. But I deal through sensibility, through word in a medium that's not about words. And at the end of the day, nobody cares what my sensibility is. So I'm very lucky to deal like a blind person, like a illiterate person, like a deaf person through the tremendous talent of these other collaborators. I offer the locations. I talk about how I want to see them, how to approach the subject, how to take the background and make it the foreground. Those are my ideas. But how to realize that I can only put them there. I expect people like and get from people like Fricke an artistic response. He is as involved in the life of this film as I am. Philip Glass is as involved. No one person, no two or three people made this film. It's the work of many, many, many people. And without the soul of Fricke in there, it wouldn't be present.

Part II

Reggio:

What I tried to show is that the main event today is not seen by those of us that live in it. We see the surface of the newspapers the obviousness of conflict of social injustice, of the market welling up, of culture, but to me the greatest event or the most important event of perhaps our entire history, nothing comparable in the past to this event is fundamentally gone unnoticed. And the event is the following: the transiting from all nature or the natural environment as our host of life for human habitation into a technological milieu into mass technology as the environment of life. So, these films have never been about the effect of technology, of industry, on people. It's been that everyone – politics, education of the financial structure, the nation state structure, language, the culture, religion – all of that exists within the host of technology. So it's not the effect of it that everything exist within it's not that we use technology, we live technology. Technology has become as ubiquitous as the air we breathe. So we are no longer conscious of its presence. So, what I decided to do in making this film is to rip out all the foreground of a traditional film. The foreground being the actors, the characterization, the plot, the story. I tried to take the background, all of that that just supported like wallpaper move that up into the foreground, make that the subject ennoble it with the virtues of portraiture and make that the presence. So we looked at traffic as the event, we looked at the organization of a city as the equivalent of what a computer chip looks like. We looked at acceleration and density as qualities of a way of life that is not seen and goes unquestioned. Life unquestioned is life lived in a religious state. I wished for Koyaanisqatsi not to have any name at all the discussions were early enough on about the trilogy. I thought that we shouldn't have a name, that we should have an image. Why use a word to describe something that we're trying to say is undescribable or unnamable. It's not for lack of love of the language that these films have no words. It's because from my point of view our language is in a state of vast humiliation it no longer describes the world in which we live. And in that sense going to these films Koyaanisqatsi, since I was forced to take a word, I felt that I wanted a word that had no cultural baggage, that had no preconceived meaning surrounding it. And to take a word as inscrutable from a non-literate language from a culture of orality I felt was fantastic. They have a whole different take on things. Everything that we call normal, they call abnormal. Everything that we call sane, they call insane. That was music to my ears, because I was not trying in these films in any of them to make commentary on Hopi's way of life or their culture. This is not an ethnographic film about hopes, it's not a collaboration with Hopi particulars. It's the opportunity to find inspiration in another person's point of view, about the life that we all live. So, in that sense it's a salute to a language that is more powerful in its descriptive capacity to describe the world in which we live. So Koyaanisqatsi means... First of all qatsi itself means life. It means way of life life way. So Koyaanisqatsi means crazy turmoil out of balance disintegrating, a way of living that calls for another way of doing it. It means a way of life that's out of balance, a way of life that's crazy, that's in turmoil, a way of life that calls for another way of of living. We're at a moment of great transition in the world called the day of purification. And from that purification will come a more balanced harmonic life. Koyaanisqatsi was like a plague that had happened to them in the Under World, and that they tried to come into this world, to avoid. The definitions at the end are my commentaries, but they're faithful to the root or the etymology of the word. Would people understand what that word means? I don't know. Is it important that they take my understanding trying to be true to the etymology of the word that's not important either? In most cases music is background to support plot characterization and to splay out an emotive theme, to create an atmosphere in the film. And the composers usually are highly professional and do their work under the director's indication and give that to the director, and the director usually cuts it up. There are exceptions, but that's generally the way it works.

Glass:

When I first met Godfrey in 78 he called me up and he said would I be interested in scoring a film, and I said, "I don't write Movie music" – which of course is a kind of funny right now because I've done a bit of it since then. And he said, "This is a little bit different."

Reggio:

I talk more about mood and feeling. I leave the scape of of mathematical Contour to Phil. I try to get them on the platform. They let me drive them crazy and I talk to them, write them papers give them sheaves of notes, pictures, bring them to my studio, practically weep in front of them, and they come back with beautiful things.

Glass:

This mutual friend called and said, "Look, this guy is from Santa Fe and he's going to stay here, and you look at what he's brought, so why don't you just look at him and he can go home?" So we got together and we had the afternoon to ourself. What I saw basically was – I guess – the first 40 minutes of the film. Things like the cloudsapes were there of Koyaanisqatsi and maybe the pictures of the Four Corners.

Reggio:

It's more about a symbiotic, a symbiosis, a chemistry. And Philip, you know, I'm sure in some way I probably rave on and he turns it off. But that's okay, he lets me rave on.

Glass:

Actually Godfrey did a very smart thing: He said I'm going to show you the movie, what I've done. I'm going to show you to twice: once with an electronic score that I've gotten, and once with your music. And he showed it to me both times he said, "Well as you can see, your music works much better." So what could I say, basically I had said yes. So I was interested and I said, "Oh this is something I can do!"

Reggio:

Philip's ability to his quickness of mind, his interest, his ability to be enthusiastic, his capacity to produce was overwhelming. He's disciplined to the point of being totally inspiring. I mean it was the perfect person. He was on for the ride.

Glass:

When he first gave me a cut of it, I divided the cut into sections and I timed the sections were about 12 or 13 or 14 or maybe more different moments, and then I wrote music for each section and I put it together. Then Godfrey listened to that music and he completely reassembled the images. So it didn't fit at all the way I thought it was going to. So basically he I tried put them together and he pushed them apart in a certain way. And I think he was right though. What he did in effect was he took of the ambience of the music instead of the structure of the music. And he cut to the ambience and not to the structure. So he cut to the feeling of the music and not the way the music was built, which turned out to be the right way to do it.

Reggio:

What I find in Phillip is an enormous extraordinary sensitivity. When I say Fricke is a genius certainly Mr. Glass is a perceptual musical genius. And here I get a chance to work with these two Giants.

Glass:

So, we spent about 3 years, we had a very leisurely pace. No one was waiting for this movie you know, no one knew what it was going to be and we ourselves had no idea who would look at it. And that was a tremendous advantage because we had time to look at things to rewrite things, to recut things. In fact we got into the habit of working interactively. He would show me images, I would show him music, we would recut, I would recompose, we come back together again, we look at it again, we go through the process again and every one of the sections of *Koyaanisqatsi* went through that process numerous times so that we can say that truly the image and the music began to function organically together.

Part III

Reggio:

The power of these pieces is that you can induce the meaning out of it that it stimulates in yourself. It's like a trialectic relation between the music, the image, and the viewer. The viewer is active participant and it's about going over the head of the viewer. We're trying to go right into the solar plexus, right into something that is more akin to direct communion rather than going through the metaphor of language. So what better narration to have than that which can go directly into the sensibility and hence the soul of the viewer.

Glass:

I came away from that experience very much prejudiced to thinking that that was the best way for image and music to work together and I still think it's true.

Reggio:

The idea is to take these two mediums and create a fusion. Not to make commentary, not to use it as a club to make a point, but to have it operate. They operate on their own tracks, but they find a level if it's efficacious where there's a fusion that takes place between those mediums.

Glass:

It's about observing accurately the distance between the image and the music. And this is a very different way of looking at it. For example, if you see a commercial like a soft drink commercial or a beer commercial, what's happening the pop of the can or the sound of the music, they're happening right on top of each other. There's no space in between them. And there's not supposed to be a space, because by doing it that way, that's the propaganda aspect of it. There's no room for you as a spectator to get in the middle. And the reason we don't like commercials – though we give prizes for them and people make a living at it and so do I, I mean my music is used in commercials, too – the reason we don't like them is because there's no place for us in it, you know. So starting from that extreme example, which is which is an everyday occurrence if you just turn on your TV. And the question is: What happens when they're in that space? Let's say there's a distance between the image and the music. And when the spectator crosses that line, that's when they personalize the event. That's when it becomes theirs. The transaction between the music and the image happens during the time that the listeners is traversing the space between the music and the image. (You want to know all my secrets, don't you? I work so hard and I'm going to give them away on this video. Are you kidding?) Well, I'll tell you something. And as a practical matter, let's take a part of a film like *vessels*. Remember that's the... we call it *vessels* because that was kind of sky, where you see all the airplanes. And first I looked at the image of the airplane said, "Well, what is the right music for this?" And I looked at the planes, and what struck me as I looked at it that the planes are these enormous huge things, and yet when you see them in the air they seem so light and airy. And what I wanted to do was find a music that said that. That's what I was trying to say. And so I chose voices. I took

voices which is nothing is lighter and airier than voices and I put the voices against the image of the planes. And boom, you had it. And then I began writing music for voices, I wrote a vocal composition to be listened to while we looked at the planes. And then it made us look at the planes in a different way. So in other words, the music has a powerful ability to tell us what we're seeing. The interesting thing about the grid is that the world doesn't really look like that. And yet it does. The world doesn't really go along at... how many times faster than real life are those images moving? I mean, I can't even get 100 times, 200 times, 300 times. The cars become lights that are moving. And you say, "Well, this isn't real." And yet, of course, from some perspective, it is real. And it's certainly real from the perspective that we have when we're looking at it. In other words, we start to what Godfrey is showing you in that image and this is what I got out of it was that the world has a lot of ways of appearing to us. The way we see it is a cultural thing. It's a condition thing.

Reggio:

In the image that the people were seen taking the wieners out of the whatever that big squirting machine is, where they come out, the same stuff that makes bologna fundamentally makes hot dogs. They changed the formula a bit. And the same thing with the ladies with the Twinkies. I mean, hot dogs and Twinkies are Americana and so I felt that they would certainly fit in there. Someone asked me, what the film was about once, and I said it's about awesome beauty, terrible beauty or the beauty of the beast. Some people say, "Well, is the film so celebratory of technology?" Well, I didn't want to show the obviousness of injustice, of social deprivation, of war, of etc. I wanted to show that which we're most proud of, our shining beast, our way of life. So, it was about the beauty of this beast. I think, in terms of the feeling of the piece. I can't think about what people are going to think about it, what are the critics going to say. I'm trying to bring some resolution and realize that myself. It's a struggle. It's a process that gets us this. It's not like I do write a scenario and I do have a point of view. But at a certain point, the words have to just disappear off the page as the image and the sound become that which you're responding to. And it tells you how to shape it. It speaks to you. You're trying to stay in touch with it, which you've helped to create.