

Awaiting Naqoyqatsi

The Desert Path of Godfrey Reggio

John Gianvito

1994

Godfrey Reggio is the director of two visionary films revealing the nature and impact of modern civilization on the natural world. He currently has a third in preparation.

There has been little news of film director Godfrey Reggio in the six years since the release of *Powaqqatsi* in 1988, the second film in his proposed Hopi-titled Qatsi trilogy. Conceived as a sensorial fresco depicting global lifestyles in the late twentieth century, Reggio's effort throughout the trilogy is to dynamically provoke meditation on the destructiveness inherent in technology-based mass society. However, unlike the wide acclaim lavished upon his first film, *Koyaanisqatsi*, (the most popular college film rental of the 1980s), *Powaqqatsi* received far less enthusiasm in its limited U.S. theatrical release.

Clearly, there was disappointment by those anticipating a stylistic reprise of the kinesthetic rush of *Koyaanisqatsi*, who were unable to readjust their metabolisms to the more meditative "southern" rhythms of *Powaqqatsi* and a form less transparent and more variegated in its meaning. In Reggio's view, "...the world I tried to look at in *Powaqqatsi* was a much more poetic world. It was a world of slowness, a world of basically handmade creation. As *Koyaanisqatsi* was for me a shibboleth *Powaqqatsi* was more a long poem."

A more polemical attack on the film came from those who perceived *Powaqqatsi* as doing little more than "enshrining poverty," arguing that Reggio's extolling of "handmade creation," as still practiced in some Third World communities, only fosters the kind of attitude that would limit the technological advancement necessary to lift such communities out of poverty.

For Reggio, it is precisely so-called "technological advancements" that have largely impoverished us, by consequence of their intrinsic dehumanizing nature, the runaway scale and dependency they engender, and the environmental fallout from their development and implementation. The crucial distinction between "living simply" and "poverty" is one Reggio feels his critics fail to perceive.

Over the past six years, Godfrey Reggio has turned down numerous offers to direct other people's projects, opting to put his energy into research and dramaturgical development of the final and seemingly most ambitious of the Qatsi films, *Naqoyqatsi*, from the Hopi for "War Life" or "War as a Way of Life." Much of his time has also been spent in the task of seeking financing for the project. -

Given the example of *Koyaanisqatsi*, which took a total of seven years from start to completion, *Naqoyqatsi*, expected to go into production this year, can be assured at least of one thing—its maker has the patience and perseverance to see the vision through.

I interviewed Godfrey Reggio at Harvard University in July 1993.

John Gianvito: Last night you said you view the environmental problem as a false one. I gather you see it as merely one more result of the catastrophe of the technologically imbedded lifestyles we are enmeshed in. But I wonder why you lay blame at the feet of technology and not at human greed, self-interest, and the love of power as the motor behind the beast?

Godfrey Reggio: I think we don't use technology, we live technology, which to me is a critical distinction. It's not the effect of technology on society, it's that everything is situated in technology; it becomes the host. I think the problems we have, of human greed, of power, of lust, of all the so-called sins of humankind, will always be with us; to be human is to be weak. The problems we have today are fundamentally non-human and we continue to see those through the old categories of human analysis. I don't think we've yet come to analyze the nature of the technological universe we live in.

Principally, I think the problem is one of scale, one of density, one of mass rather than of individual greed and power. That's why I chose the ecological movement to focus on. Many people feel the real problem is that we are devastating the environment. That can't be argued about, but the source of that is not going to be mitigated in any way by stopping the pollution of fossil fuels and nuclear energy. We have the technology to solve that, but what would that do? It wouldn't change the opportunity for creating one's own life, of living in a meaningful way. It would only make it less polluting for ourselves. It wouldn't change the nature of the mass society; it would only guarantee it.

John Gianvito: Don't you think an alchemy of the heart has to happen in order to affect a positive change beyond just the dismantling of the technological apparatus?

Godfrey Reggio: I think the question is always the mother of the answer. If we only look inside ourselves for what's wrong I think we miss the fundamental phenomenon of a technological entity that is autonomous in its presence. When something is autonomous it has its own imperative, its own determinisms, its own direction. We feel we can direct this world with good intentions. I'm not questioning anyone's intentions, but because we don't understand the nature of the phenomenon we keep coming up with human answers to questions that are fundamentally not human at this point.

The world we live in is not a human habitat; it's a place designed for the machine. It has a machine logic and ethic to it and has nothing to do with what's good or bad for human beings. You have to reduce the scale at which we live to have an opportunity to be able to express something human and to be able to create it. I'm not saying there's not life in the cracks, that it's impossible to be a human being today, but it's something I would never assume, being born a human, that I'm going to have a human life. To assume that might eliminate the possibility of struggling to find our humanness today.

John Gianvito: You've intimated that possibilities of change might exist only in dysfunction of some kind. Would the goal then be to foster dysfunction, and how would one do that from an artistic standpoint?

Godfrey Reggio: I don't know if I feel good about fostering dysfunction because it will affect us all in the end. We're already suffering so tremendously; to add more suffering on a mega-level would be almost intolerable and I don't particularly feel that when people are affected by some major crisis it necessarily means there's going to be change for the better. What I am saying is that the nature of technique being what it is on a mass scale, it's constantly in a state of disrepair, which means we constantly have to repair it. We live in a society that is endemically unsafe. It's impossible to make it safe and we live with the illusion it is safe because we don't know what's really affecting us. We have no idea.

I find it hopeful that the more technology develops unfettered there is greater possibility for serious dysfunction because the point at which everything is focused is more and more centralized. If dysfunction occurs on a level which is historically unprecedented, which I think is already happening, we're going to experience events that will indicate how out of control our autonomous technology is. If that happens, if there's a permanent reversal in things like water, air, the basic things we need to sustain life, then we will be forced to make systemic changes if only to survive.

John Gianvito: You've spoken of the need for people to summon the strength to break with the patterns and routine of their lives, but part of the difficulty is many people either don't perceive themselves as stuck in a pattern of behavior or that it is necessarily harmful. For instance, I've seen statistics that the average person in the West spends a total of eight years of their life in front of the television. I think if people could comprehend that statistic things might be different, but I don't think people often have the capacity to step outside themselves to recognize this.

Godfrey Reggio: This is the point. We're being asked to live beyond what human capacity is right now. This is not a human problem, it's a technological problem. Unfortunately, to solve it now we need a technological answer.

While that's within our grasp, human greed and power eliminate the possibility of doing it. They could make a car that is not polluting, they could make energy available in a very cheap and non-polluting way, but they don't do it because they can't meter it. They can't put a price tag on it, they can't commoditize it. Even if we did solve the problem technologically in terms of pollution, as I said earlier, I think it would do nothing to solve the larger problem of the human wasteland that the soul has to live in because of the mass society.

John Gianvito: Let's talk about Naqoqatsi. I know that you have been working for a few years trying to raise the money to get it started. Conceptually, how has Naqoqatsi evolved during that time, particularly in light of your expressed intention that it be more accessible?

Godfrey Reggio: I'm trying to take all the things that I and Philip Glass and Miroslav Janik and everyone who has worked on the films has learned and incorporate it into this film. With Naqoqatsi, I'm going to have three films in one. When I say three films that means I will have three complete and full emotional experiences, and as they consort together, one total emotional experience. Recognizing that going through a hundred minutes of a nonverbal film is hard for an audience to digest, this seems to me not a compromise but a way, a path, different from the other two films of the trilogy, an approach that will allow it to be more accessible.

I have been, by my own intention, cautious in the other two films as a student of my craft trying not to be too outlandish. I wanted to be, in effect, conservative, not in a political sense, but in a cautionary sense about not getting too far out there because the form is already out there; it breaks the expectation an audience brings.

In the case of Naqoqatsi, it will have five parts, three films with a prologue and an epilogue. Having worked on the other films for so long now in my life, I feel ready to be much more daring in this one. We've taken as our dramatic focus, the word "extreme." The first film will be about extreme happiness. Since the subject matter is the globalization of the planet, the global village, another turn around the tree in the Qatsi trilogy, all of it focused on the technological world, the first film in Naqoqatsi will be about the promised land, technological happiness, the good life, the promise of things to come. Everything that looks at the hook offered to us, to seduce us on a rational level to this world. So, the first film will be extraordinary happiness to the point where I hope it will want to make the viewer scream!

The second film will be its complete antithesis. It depicts the extreme price we pay for the pursuit of that happiness. Though the public will never know it, for my crew and within the dramatic structure, as a touchstone, the first film is labeled, "One World, One Way, Total Happiness," the second film is called, "All Together, All At Once, The Price We Pay." It will see the earth as object and the price we pay for that. It'll look at sanctioned aggression and violence against all life, total war, way beyond the war of the battlefield. It will look at human habitat as wasteland, how we live with our shit in a way that is bringing us into the sewers we have created.

The third of the three films within one is called, "Gone, or Seeing the Present from the point of view of the Past." Its dramatic focus is hopelessness, trying to instill a sense of complete hopelessness about this world, so in the epilogue, I can introduce, and this will be quite a challenge, "Startling Hope." If one knows what's not going to work and doesn't waste time trying to make it work, then one is setting themselves up in a position to be hopeful about something that can work. I want to present "Startling Hope" as the extreme position. I take a single human event; in watching it transpire and being involved in the experience, the viewer will actually be allowed to feel this hope.

I didn't mention the prologue which will be a poetic nano-second, if I can use that word. A nano-second being one-billionth of a second showing how everything exists in this technological world. In the Prologue, I'll review all human history almost like holy cards. I'll try to look at human history before the coming of the technological age, as perceived in paintings. I'll present that in a very rapid, almost kaleidoscopic fashion, starting the film off with an extreme rush, almost like a tunnel. Then I'll reveal the word Naqoqatsi.

So, I'm very stoked to do it. My crew is about as excited as they can be as well.

John Gianvito: In light of the research you've been doing, is there some way to define the nature of the challenge each of us should be undertaking?

Godfrey Reggio: I think heroic behavior is demanded of us today because of the world we live in. I would like to think and feel we have the capacity to be heroic. Tragedy is one of the things that motivates heroic behavior, as well as great love or compassion. We're living in a time when we can be heroic if we want to. We can be individuals where our flag is our shadow, rather than some nation state, some corporation, or some piece of technology.

To me, the path of being heroic is the path of negation, the positive value of negation, to be willing to understand that human freedom is the ability to say no to technological “necessity.” What we need to do, metaphorically, is to go into the desert and maybe actually negate this way of life so that we can be open and sensitive to something else.

fifth Estate

John Gianvito
Awaiting Naqoyqatsi
The Desert Path of Godfrey Reggio
1994

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/344-summer-1994/awaiting-naqoyqatsi>
Fifth Estate #344, Summer, 1994

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net