

**64. KRAKOWSKI
FESTIWAL
FILMOWY
64th KRAKOW
FILM
FESTIVAL**

**kino+online
26.05–2.06.2024**

About the world out of balance

I will never forget the feeling of illuminating astonishment that accompanied me when I saw Godfrey Reggio's 'Koyaanisqatsi' for the first time. It was in the mid-1980s. Poland, which had been closed off behind the Cold-War Iron Curtain and crushed under the Soviet heel for a few decades, was immersed in the void of crisis, poverty and utter hopelessness. I was a teenage student of a secondary school in a small town where the cinema was one of few attractions. Just like many of my peers, I could not imagine any future for myself. At that time, travelling to the West was an unattainable dream. Stunned by the film, I suddenly realised that unfortunately, the hope brought by much-desired globalisation, consumerism and faith in progress and technocracy was yet another dangerous illusion.

'Koyaanisqatsi' premiered in America in October 1983. The documentary opus of a 43-year-old debuting director attracted attention because of its bizarre title, which, in the language of the Hopi tribe of Arizona, meant 'life out of balance' or 'life in chaos'. The immensely expressive visual form and serious social and political message of the film came as a total surprise to the critics and the audience. Soon, it turned out that this remarkable picture was the product of the work of a very exceptional man.

Godfrey Reggio was born in New Orleans. At the age of 14, on his own will, he joined the Christian Brothers, an enclosed catholic order. He prayed, remained silent, fasted, and lived in asceticism for several years. In the 1960s he co-founded La Clinica de la Gente, a centre offering medical and dental assistance to the poor, and the organization called Young Citizens for Action, in which he worked as a volunteer in the streets of Santa Fe. He helped people living on the margins of society – the homeless, drug addicts, juvenile

offenders, illegal immigrants or teenage mothers. He left monkhood before turning 30 and then became interested in film and images. In 1972 he established a non-profit foundation, the Institute for Regional Education, and two years later, the American Civil Liberties Union. He protested against the media manipulation, social engineering, subliminal advertising and the invasion of privacy. He promoted environmental awareness and a return to lost spirituality. He claimed that *the most practical thing in life was idealism*. While working on educational short films, he met camera operator Ron Fricke. At this point, the two came up with an idea to which they both devoted the next seven years of their lives.

'Koyaanisqatsi' is a visual essay in a documentary form. Devoid of any commentary or other conventional film elements, such as a screenplay, plot or classic narrative, it makes an impact by means of evocative images and music. The main and only character is planet Earth, the site of a clash between two distinct realities – primeval nature and human civilization. In the first part of the film, we can see glorious images of intact nature. The second – as a counterpoint – is a collage portraying the urbanised world of technologies created by people. The film was shot in 22 carefully selected locations in 10 American states. The images recorded are characterised by aesthetic sophistication and hyperrealism. Shot from a distance and from above using different types of lenses in long takes, they create the illusion of supremacy of the camera's eye, which can see better and can see more. The form derived from photography offers a different perspective upon the world, possibly more objective. Random people, whose portrayals are staged or improvised, play a different role when they look into the lens and, engaging into an involuntary interaction with the viewer, become a link between the film reality and the real world. Editing tricks intensify both impressions. Impressionistic sequences are slowed down or accelerated, which amazes, fascinates and hypnotises the viewers simultaneously. The score makes an integral part of the film adding a very powerful emotional charge to the images. It took Philip Glass three years to prepare it. He started working on the production when about sixty percent of the film footage was completed and he was stunned by it: *I was looking at the world as if I were doing it for the first time in my life*. A revolutionary move was to divide the movie into parts of a different duration, theme and character as, following the composer's suggestion, the images were to co-exist with music in full symbiosis. The brilliant illustration thus created would soon become one of the best in cinema history.

The unfinished film drew the attention of such renowned directors as George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola. The author of 'Apocalypse Now' partially financed its production and helped in the film promotion and release. 'Koyaanisqatsi' enjoyed a huge success across the world, received a Golden Bear nomination at the Film Festival in Berlin (1983) and a number of other accolades, including the audience award of the Warsaw Film Festival (1988). It was hailed as the most perfect fusion of images and music since Walt Disney's 'Fantasia' of 1940. Since then, Glass has composed soundtracks to all of the director's later films.

Just after the premiere, Reggio, who was then pronounced a film guru, healer and even a prophet, embarked on the making of the second part of the Qatsi trilogy – the Trilogy of Life. Thanks to the patronage of George Lucas, 'Powaqqatsi' – Life in Transformation, could be made with great panache. For many months, the film crew travelled the world visiting 15 countries on four continents. The film focuses on people, the inhabitants of the southern hemisphere – native tribes and residents of metropolises, their everyday life and culture. The premiere of the third and final part, 'Naqoyqatsi' – Life as War, took place fourteen years later, in 2002. Employing the most advanced computer techniques, it is a dreary vision of the world completely dominated by technology.

Thirty years after the premiere of 'Koyaanisqatsi', Reggio returned with another non-narrative and formally extremely sophisticated film illustrated with Glass's music. Just like his debuting masterpiece, it stuns and fascinates audiences forcing them to reflect above all. The producer of 'Visitors' is the renowned director Steven Soderbergh. In September 2013, 1500 people participated in its world premiere with live music performed by a symphony orchestra made of seventy musicians under the baton of outstanding Michael Riesman, which became the most important event of the International Film Festival in Toronto. After the screening, when he was asked about his intentions, the director replied that humans were not able to understand themselves until they saw themselves through the eyes of representatives of other species.

The film is a sequence of 74 black and white takes, each about a minute long, shot with exquisite precision and then significantly slowed down. We do not know whose faces we can see in big close-ups, where the desolate places portrayed in the film are located, what operates the hand shown in an abstract ballet interaction with an invisible keyboard or where the statuesque gorilla with a grim look that cannot be ignored comes from. All the

takes serve as special effects as, rather than an objectively existing reality, they record a technologically modified sublime artistic creation demonstrating the enormous difference between the perception of the world by a 'naked' human eye and the same eye armed with the camera lens. The message contained in the images of unbelievable quality is reduced to pure essence, devoid of colour because of its distracting quality, decelerated because then you can see better and you can see more. Watching 'Visitors' is a very direct and intense contemplative experience. The most fascinating emotions are recorded on the faces of anonymous persons filmed from up-close against a black background when they are looking straight into the camera lens, i.e., at us. In the 1960s, when Andy Warhol carried out his famous screen tests in a similar way, he was not mistaken when he said that the camera laid bare the emotional condition of a human being. Now, it turns out that this mechanism works both ways and it is no less interesting to observe what happens to us when we are watching the recording of an experiment. One should take the trouble of answering simple questions as to what one can see, feel and understand during this confrontation.

Just like the symbolic last scene of 'Koyaanisqatsi' – the explosion of the Atlas Centaur LV-3C which was launched for the first time from the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida on 8 May 1962 – traditions, prophecies and myths of the Hopi People and the next films made by Reggio are above all warnings. They alert us to the consequences of tipping the delicate balance between nature and civilization, globalization and consumerism, blind faith in progress and global technocracy that transforms the richness and diversity of the world into uniform ersatz. The film, whose aesthetic formalism has continued to be copied relentlessly for several decades to meet the needs of cinema, television and advertising, grips the viewer. All those who think that today its message seems bombastic and banal should mind the director's words: 'For some people it's an environmental film, for some people it's an ode to technology, for some people it's a piece of sh-t.' Godfrey Reggio's films have taught me to be sensitive and attentive while observing reality. Many times have I shown them to my loved ones – family members and friends, as well as university and film school students I have worked with. They have always presented us with an opportunity to reflect upon or converse about 'the world out of balance' that we can see disintegrate before our very own eyes nowadays.

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