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## ***Baraka***

### Film as Meditation

A seventy-minute film shot in 24 countries without dialogue or narration may sound at best like an intriguing montage of related sequences, but probably not one that could be sustained with compelling interest. Yet *Baraka*, a new film that offers an overarching, uncompromising, and genuinely eloquent view of our planet, impressively succeeds. Though large in feeling, the film achieves its aim through a highly personal selection of vivid and expressive images flowing through us like a universal river. It is a monumental work.

"Baraka" is an ancient Sufi word that can mean the breath of life from which the evolutionary process unfolds. And in one sense, *Baraka* responds to this process through a cinematic exploration of ritual. If we consider an authentic ritual to be a medium for heightening our inner experience--at the very least that of an interconnectedness, while potentially going beyond the strictly personal, loosening our identity to time and place -- then one of the thematic undercurrents of *Baraka* may be "all life as ritual."

Sequences ranging from actual ceremonies of the spirit to intimate portrayals of labor, of joy, of feelings altogether inexpressible in words (and not limited to humans) recommend to us their familiar meanings. But in following the movement of the film, we may also open to a kind of "ritual meaning," where each subject--even the inhabitants of the vegetable and mineral kingdoms--participates in an immeasurably vast and subtle unfolding of life, a life that moves beneath the surface of our self-sufficiencies, eternally and patiently calling to us. This is felt like a current that vibrates through the film. Its possibility arises more from the overall intention behind the edited flow of the images and sounds than from the content of the cinematography--which by any measure is superlative.

As an example, the riveting and spectacular footage of a snow monkey in a pool in the opening sequence--one of the most arresting scenes I have ever witnessed on film--is nevertheless seamlessly incorporated into the persuasive stream of impressions.

There are also portrayals--as producer Mark Madgison says--"of devastating choices that are part of our past," genuine terrors of our human condition, such as the wrenching echoes of the holocaust or conscience-less "manufacturing" processes (shown here here through the processing of chickens), routinely practiced by modern "advanced" people that descend to a level of callousness that is emotionally difficult to bear. Yet these, too, seem necessary to face for the sake of opening toward a more comprehensive vision that can transcend our normal self-centered view.

The director and cinematographer, Ron Fricke, has the extraordinary sensitivity and the developed eye indispensable for allowing such an appearance of vital yet subtle movements that can penetrate our personal armor and momentarily awaken another side of ourselves. Perhaps the film could help us, if only fleetingly, embrace a larger life whose possibilities seem inaccessible in our usual states.

The remarkable editing (by Fricke, Madgison, and David Aubrey) should be singled out--it is not always recognized that editing is the core process in filmmaking, especially true in this type of film.

Ron Fricke was the photographer, co-editor, and co-writer for *Koyaanisqatsi*, a breakthrough and very significant film. He went on to direct *Chronos*, one of the most artistic of the large-format, "IMAX" films. *Baraka* is Fricke's latest effort, and in combining his directorial talent with those of the other disciplines, it is clear that his development hasn't flagged. In this current film, the editing pace seems more secure and more fluent than, say, *Koyaanisqatsi*, his first well-known work, and matches to perfection each moment of the film. Nor does *Baraka* indulge in the sometimes gratuitous choppiness of *Koyaanisqatsi*, a Hopi word meaning "life out of balance", which to some, including myself, seemed at times a "film out of balance"--i.e., art imitating life. When fast cutting appears in *Baraka*, it serves as a balance, like a scherzo in a symphony (in this case, a discordant scherzo, surrounded by the larger harmony of the whole).

The music, by Michael Stearns, is one of the essential currents on which *Baraka* is carried. Incorporating a gamut of familiar and otherworldly sounds--including mantras of Somei Satoh, gothic sounds of Dead Can Dance, David Hykes and the Harmonic Choir, and the Monks of the Dip Tse Chok Ling Monastery, as well as Stearns' original music that not only integrates the score, but provides moments of penetrating empathy and power (as in the dramatic conclusion)--the music is extraordinarily well-attuned to the emotional and cinematic demands of the film. Overall, it was far less overbearing yet even more effective than Philip Glass's brilliant but sometimes obtrusively edited score for *Koyaanisqatsi*.

On another scale, of all the films I can remember that have attempted to realize in practice the correlation between a musical composition and a film--considering the images, music, and sound all together as streams of impressions through linear time--*Baraka* is the most accomplished and mature. Stylistically it is not a chamber piece, but a symphony: from the stunning opening chord--a transcendent vision of a total eclipse of the sun, instantly releasing the viewer from the stability of time and place--through the overall composition of the film into dynamically balanced "movements," to the starry worlds of the finale, a series of unequivocal major chords.

As for the film's ending, undoubtedly much will be written about the filmmakers' bold and original use of time-lapse techniques applied to the night sky. But just as in a symphony, this closing sequence of "chords," both powerful and entirely fitting, do not convey the film's finest impressions.

Yet in this correspondence lies the film's limitation: the overall effect is curiously evanescent. This situation derives not from some defect, but from a property integral to this genre of film. It appears to slip like a dream into some region inaccessible to convincing verbal descriptions. If asked to say in a few words what the film is about, a viewer might easily convey an impression of vagueness, which could put off one who previously had restless experiences watching films with no story, no dialogue, and no narration. I believe this notion of *Baraka* would be unfortunate if it prevented someone from going to see it.

A frankly meditative film like *Baraka* is not my favorite kind of cinema, but I respond strongly to a work of this caliber. Though personally I prefer more interior and

concentrated development of a character or a theme, *Baraka* doesn't develop its material like that because the way it understands "material" is somewhat different. Indeed, the work evolves like a musical score, and the themes of the personal, the global, and the transcendent ring their changes throughout without themselves changing. It is a noble experiment that arrives.