

AN APPRECIATION OF GODFREY REGGIO

Godfrey Reggio is a renowned American creator of a unique experimental cinematic poetry. He was born in New Orleans in 1940 of a Catholic family lineage established in Louisiana near 1750. From a soulful beginning at the age of 14, Reggio passed the ensuing twenty-two years in fasting, long periods of meditative silence, of prayer, vows of poverty, and in choosing to be a monk-friar. He recalls that his service in the Congregation of Christian Brothers makes the Marine Corps look like the Cub Scouts. And it was this traditional Roman Catholic pontifical teaching Order which ultimately assigned him to the province of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

During the ensuing period of his life Reggio served as a teacher at a parochial grade school, a secondary school, and on the faculty of the Christian Brothers College in Santa Fe. Witnessing himself in the secular world as a young intellectually zealous monk schooled in the theology of the Middle Ages, he accepted nothing, questioned everything, even eventually to the structure of the Church. While still loyal to his marching orders as an acolyte religious he began to believe the institution he was a part of had become deadened. Nevertheless, still an energetic outgoing activist in the spirit of Pope John XXIII, “a pope who never wanted to be pope”, Reggio became a founder of La Clinica de la Gente, a facility providing medical care and service to 12,000 community members in northern New Mexico's barrios, as well as founding the Young Citizens for Action, a city-wide project aiding juveniles in the street gangs of Santa Fe.

Finally, following a spiritual crux concerning personal liberation and social activism, Reggio ultimately left the Pontifical Congregation, Ex Claustrum, in 1968, and thereafter helped found the Institute for Regional Education (IRE) in Santa Fe, a non-profit organization focused on civil rights, environmental concerns, media development, radically innovative arts, community organization, and social research. He began working with the New Mexico Chapter of American Civil Liberties Union, co-organizing a novel multi-media public interest campaign on the technological invasion of privacy, the negative impacts of consumerism, and the increasing use of scientific knowledge to control and shape popular behavior. Ultimately, grasping the immense subjective power of visual imagery from the most ancient times, this led to Reggio's realization that cinematic art had become a powerful mind-altering tool and so began his lifelong career in film.

A singular event brought him there. As a religious he had refrained from attending movies, feeling though he was in the world, he was not of it. But another brother

showed him the film *Los Olvidados* by Luis Bunuel saying it might change his life. It did so. Understanding it had less to do with entertainment, but with right outreach effort, it revealed an artistic path. An experience he had never had before. Missionizing the film to the street gang kids he worked among, the movie appeared to be like a church with tremendous impact on those who saw it. It was an epiphany to realize the psychological power of a moving image, the motion picture. It launched a career.

Reggio claims that if there are a hundred people who see a film, there are a hundred different points of view. That his films are not a diatribe with a point of view that has the specificity of subject and predicate. They are to be open to each person individually. There is more in each film than what is put into it, and each has its own voice, which is the value of art, which speaks differently to different people. He understands that some will see these films as merely boring; some will leave right away, some will see them as this or that, even as a celebration of technology, or actually see them as a great questioning. They are not trying to explain something any more than an artist trying to explain a painting. One doesn't explain, he says, it's not so much what it means, only whether it's meaningful. Music does the same thing, as it is not about the meaning of Vivaldi, it is whether it is moving, if it touches you. Like a meta-language, imagery speaks to the spaces between words, which is what art does. With this understanding he gave up using words in his films, not for a lack of love for language, but simply as language remains incomplete in describing our world. His films are not informational, like documentaries. They are about a particular form. The evocative imaginative power of moving images. It is the form.

Moreover, he claims as a filmmaker, to be aware of the positive value of negation. In the sense that a negative is required in order to have a positive. In his films he shoots the negative so to speak, to expose it, intending a reflex to generate something positive, namely when a fresh mental thought image is evoked. In that sense, he believes in showing the positive value of negation. It's not merely nay-saying, it is what it leads to, a powerful positive resonance. He agrees it is not always a popular point of view.

Some filmmakers produce political art with an agenda, like the wide-spread method of social-realism where the camera is used as if it was a gun. To bring the viewer to a point of view, as in propaganda. Reggio's films are not an attempt at that. They are an apolitical observation, to see what is the nature of the form in which we live. Like the 800-pound gorilla of ordinary daily life which is so present that no one sees it. The task is to create a way to smell the future. Reggio believes

revolutionists, basically, are characteristically less interested in changing the form of society and are rather more interested in gaining power. But if they cannot change the form, then they are just for changing who is in charge. The simple radical idea in Reggio's filmic work is the value of changing the manner in which we live, not who is in charge. He says "nine people out of eight" think it's our mind that determines how we behave. But it's the opposite he says. It's what we do every day without thinking that determines the content of our mind for almost all of us.

Reggio's view of technology is not how it affects the environment, not how it affects politics, not how it affects religion, or the economy, it is that now everything is situated in technology. Technology is the new host of life. In that sense, technology is not something we use, it's something we breathe, it is the host of life, it is the new environment. So, we keep seeing technology as something we can use for good or bad. That is an error. Technology has its own autonomy, its own politics, its own determination, its own destiny. It is becoming the environment of life, replacing old nature as the host of human habitation and the remains of old nature pays an enormous price for that.

He maintains that one problem today is that we are trying to create one world, one way, one idea: "the blue planet." A popular environmental idea which he finds somewhat fascistic. The dominant image of our day is one that hides in plain sight, used by everyone from not-for-profits to the UN to every progressive group, church, every social group – the image of the blue planet itself. That image is the quintessential new swastika, and more dangerous because it's widely embraced, it looks positive. Reggio is trying to say our world is actually our vast diverse networked range of relationships, "not all the heady junk about one people, one world". We have to have our own lives; we have to create our own existence. And the beauty of life is that it is held together through the vast web of diversity. Each to create their own life and to live their own world, their own range of relationships. Today it seems the whole planet is threatened because of the inhumane mechanical madness of globalization, where there are no limits to the dangers we are capable of.

Notable in Reggio's opus is that 'War' is the endemic predicate in the way we live. Beyond the war of the battlefield. A war much more insidious, much more pervasive, and a war that appears not like war, it simply looks normal. Thereby we've gone to war with the entire rest of the planet, the animal kingdom, the vegetation kingdom, the very air of the earth itself, the vibrations within the planet, the inner-core where we're even exploding nuclear devices underground,

weaponizing ocean depths. We all have within our bodies “elements” that didn’t even exist a hundred years ago, ingested like the air we breathe. It all seems normal. He believes that just to support this war of living, “the price we pay for this technological happiness is off the charts”, and our life becomes predicated in speed, faster and faster and faster and faster. We’ve outrun our future. To Reggio, the end has already occurred, and we are now living in the aftershock of the event, and to him that’s what he means about being hopeless about this order, so that one can barely have the veracity of hope. Hope is the substance of what you hope for, it is the only term in theology that uses the same term to define itself. It’s the substance of what you hope for that makes hope. So, he is hopeful, but he is hopeless.

He points out a first rule of cinema – there are exceptions of course, but which only prove the rule – is that the actors never look directly into the eye of the camera, except with extraordinary exception, in order to keep the illusion of the voyeuristic event taking place. One is sitting in a black room watching the most intimate acts, from death to love to comedy, taking place as if these people are not aware of you, like you’re peeping through the hole. Reggio wants his films to be in dialogue with the audience. He wants to bring the audience into the plot, so to speak. Where the setting lies between the real and the dream-state. The dream-state, where all of our dreams are colored with the metaphors of life – in other words, nature, people we know, buildings, stars. This is who we are. Our dream-world is populated with the images of our daytime, so they are nighttime images bathed in the light of day, in a sense. But then as we wake up, we are right in that twilight zone between the real and the dream, and if you’ve had a vivid dream, you’re not even sure of what’s real. In his films, we are looking for that very moment where there is this confusion between the real and the dream-state. He is trying to confuse reality and dream. Therein, one is constructing in one's mind all manner of commonality and opposition, noting repetitions and echoes, the images igniting new ideas as they succeed one another so dizzyingly, while remaining approachable and coherent throughout.

Today, Reggio is widely known throughout the world for his wordless filmography, especially the pre-eminent trilogy of *Koyaanisqatsi*: “Life Out of Balance”; *Powaqqatsi*: “Life in Transformation”; and *Naqoyqatsi*: “Life as War”. These three films portray an apocalyptic vision of the collision between urban life and the global environment. They reveal a humanist philosophy about our planet, the encroachment of technology on nature, ancient cultures, and the splendor that disappears as a result. They chronicle the impact of the modernizing world on our physical and psychological environment.

His short film feature titled *Evidence* was a penetrating display of the effect of cinema on the minds of children, and his moving documentary *Anima Mundi*, funded on behalf of the World Wildlife Fund, revealed how much we share the planet with other creatures, a montage of intimate images of over seventy animal species that celebrates the magnificence and variety of the world's fauna.

His film *Visitors*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, provided a unique glimpse of how space aliens might perceive human beings, consisting for the most part of extended slow-motion closeups of people's faces, looking directly into the camera.

And lest we forget, deserving a roar of acknowledgement, it must be told that all of the lavish musical and orchestral soundtracks augmenting and embracing Reggio's wordless films were created in mutual trust with his lifelong friend and collaborator, the great and eminent composer Philip Glass.

The bulk of Reggio's cinematic records, manuscripts, papers, photographs, film rolls, over forty years have been acquired by Harvard University's Houghton Library, the university's primary repository for rare books, manuscripts, and the important Harvard Film Archive. It is one of the world's largest and most significant university-based motion picture collections housing over 36,000 motion picture titles from around the world and from almost every period in film history. The archive's permanent collection remains engaged in documenting the work of important individual filmmakers including Godfrey Reggio, who is prominently named and is so honored.

Reggio's latest film, *Once Within a Time*, was executive produced by Steven Soderbergh & Alexander Rodnyansky, co-directed with Jon Kane with music by Philip Glass and is scheduled to be publicly released in the Fall of 2022.