

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: Baraka

USA, 1992. Not Rated. 96 min

Music: Michael Stearns, Dead Can Dance; **Editors:** David Aubrey, David Bartholomew, Ron Fricke, Mark Magidson; **Cinematographer:** Ron Fricke; **Producer:** Mark Magidson; **Director:** Ron Fricke

Baraka is an ancient Sufi word, roughly translated as "a blessing," or "as the breath," or "essence of life from which the evolutionary process unfolds." Ron Fricke's 1992 film BARAKA is a fittingly expansive, gorgeously filmed, meditative exploration of, in Fricke's own words, "humanity's relationship to the eternal." More a non-narrative film than a documentary, it spans the globe, transporting the viewer to 24 countries across six continents in a mere 96 minutes. There is absolutely no narration or dialogue, only a collage of image and sound.

One of the last films shot in the widescreen TODD-AO 70mm format, BARAKA is visually astonishing. It finds room for images as disparate as Jerusalem's Wailing Wall, Kuwait's burning oil fields, the Brazilian Rain Forest, and the conveyor belts of an undisclosed poultry processing plant. The film has such a painterly eye that it only could have come from the mind of a cinematographer. Prior to this film, Fricke was the cinematographer on Godfrey Reggio's groundbreaking KOYAANISQATSI (1983), a non-narrative predecessor and kindred spirit to BARAKA. Fricke then directed and co-produced CHRONOS (1987), a 40 minute IMAX film that anticipated BARAKA'S non-narrative form.

For BARAKA, Fricke and Producer Mark Magidson had a \$4 million budget and three-person crew to

work with. As they shot the film over a grueling 14 months, they circled the globe three times. Magidson said, "It was an all-out effort to make the ultimate non-verbal film in the ultimate non-verbal format." BARAKA, though, is not a film without a message. It tracks how we have altered the world, and frequently juxtaposes the innocent and the sublime with images of destruction and urban squalor.

One of BARAKA'S most distinctive features is its use of time-lapse photography, which Fricke pioneered in KOYAANISQATSI. For BARAKA, he built a special computer-controlled camera combining



time-lapse photography with perfectly controlled camera movements. One of the film's most memorable sequences cross cuts between time-lapse shots of a Tokyo subway, rush hour traffic in Manhattan, and assembly lines in cigarette and computer factories. Throughout, Fricke captures, manipulates, and choreographs such ordinary imagery until he achieves a poetic grace.

A few of the many places BARAKA visits are Ayers Rock in Australia; the ancient pyramids of Egypt; St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City; Tiananmen Square; Big Sur; Davis Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona; the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland; the Galapagos Islands; refuse dumps of Calcutta;

Hawaiian volcanoes; and Mount Everest. Throughout, Fricke augments most of these fantastic landscapes with shots of people simply staring directly at the camera, emphasizing inter-connectedness between the Earth and those who inhabit it.

Composed by Michael Stearns, BARAKA'S multi-layered soundtrack is a spectacle that complements, empowers, and, at times, even rivals Fricke's images. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert suggests that Stearns "plunders the riches of ethnic music and chants and combines those sounds with more Western ideas." Ebert likens the results to a "World Orchestra, with all instruments playing together one giant composition." Stearns also incorporates music from outside sources such as Dead Can Dance, Monks of the Dip Tse Chok Ling Monastery, and the Rustavi Choir.

BARAKA was named Best Picture (International Film Critics Jury Award) at the 1992 Montreal Film Festival. Fricke's most recent project is as cinematographer on Francis Ford Coppola's next film, MEGALOPOLIS. Fricke has also has written a treatment for a sequel to BARAKA called SAM-SARA, which he describes as a "visual quest that explores the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth." Explaining BARAKA'S non-narrative approach and lack of context as far as where it takes the viewer, he has said of the film, "It's not about where you are or why you're there; it's what's there."

— Chris Kriofske