

Movie maker Reggio,  
composer Glass combine  
amazing music, images

# The power of 'Powaqqatsi'

By Michael Healy  
Los Angeles Daily News

**'P**OWAQQATSI' is, quite simply, one of the most magnificent visual and aural film spectacles ever made. Hold that firmly in mind.

The movie is a collaboration between director-writer Godfrey Reggio and composer Philip Glass, who also worked together on "Koyaanisqatsi" (1983). Neither feature is much like anything else seen in commercial movie houses.

Both films relinquish one of the movies' basic components — language — and present images of real life, adjusted by camera techniques (slow motion, fast motion, stop action and so forth). The pictures that result have a strangeness and new intensity to them, and Glass' always intense, obsessive music adds further commentary on those pictures of adjusted reality.

Here's another way of looking at the everyday, Reggio seems to say. Throw out the assumptions built into language; just open your eyes and ears.

This revitalization of the ordinary (traffic on a freeway, the crush of human beings on a New York street, the empty grandeur of Monument Valley) is the most striking and compelling effect of Reggio's approach to movie-making. But along with the pure artfulness of his movies comes an attempt at social and political commentary as well. Reggio's message, unconstrained by the logic of language, is wide open to interpretation.

"Koyaanisqatsi," a Hopi Indian word meaning "life out of balance," juxtaposes scenes of serene natural beauty and grace with jazzed-up, nervous urban humanity. The works of man are at odds with the fundamental constructs of nature.

Or are they? The herky-jerky scenes of city life have such an ebullient high energy to them that they are some of Reggio's most delightful and humorous creations and don't seem to teach the lesson that the film's title implies: that we humans are on the wrong track. Instead, man's mad liveliness looks like an improvement on nature's cold calm.

Still, this tension between the human and the natural gives "Koyaanisqatsi" a kind of minimal dramatic structure that pushes it in the direction of a narrative film. Those in the audience who are not content to sit back and be awash with new sights and sounds, who need the tether of a story line, could find a spider silk-thin one.

The concerns of "Powaqqatsi" are nar-



An Arab boy treks an Egyptian highway in the unusual 'Powaqqatsi'

rower, less cosmic than they are in the earlier film, and the two aspects of reality Reggio examines here are both within the world of the human. It comes as something of a surprise when the title is defined at the end of the film as another Hopi concept: an entity who lives at the expense of others' lives.

Since all the locales of "Powaqqatsi" are in the Third World, this title would seem to refer to the injustices of the developed nations sucking the life out of the undeveloped. But one would be hard pressed to predict the meaning of the title from the heroic, stirring, gorgeous film that precedes it.

Glass' music here is fortified with tribal drums, tambourines, whistles and even a children's chorus, all of which lend deep and earthy emotional power to his simple, elegant and often-repeated themes. The music is primarily played fast and with fury, but the visual images that accompany it are more often than not slowed down.

The many forms of work the pictures capture are ennobled by this slowing down. Physical struggle becomes a state-ly dance.

The astounding opening sequence is of Brazilian miners climbing a muddy mountain, their bodies slick with water and sweat as they carry sacks of wet earth to some unseen destination. Crazy, ecstatic music contrasts with the glum gravity of the hard work, the burdensomeness of it all, so that joy and suffering blend into something that transcends

both emotions.

When one worker is shown passed out, being carried above the heads of the rest, it is hard not to think of traditional images of Christ's Passion, the way of the cross. This transformation of drudgery into ecstasy, and of the particular into the universal, touches something right at the heart of human existence, something beyond words, beyond man's capacity to name it.

In this way the film approaches the condition of great music as it affects the emotions immediately.

And, on a less vaunted level of interpretation, "Powaqqatsi" is a great travelogue, a humane glimpse at unpretified pictures of how the rest of the world lives. It is an endlessly evocative piece of work but challenges an audience's seemingly natural wish to fully comprehend what is going on in a movie all the time.

That isn't possible here, so don't worry about it. A relaxed, attentive viewer will be stirred by the power and glory of "Powaqqatsi" with little effort at all. It is the easiest difficult movie imaginable.

## Powaqqatsi

Director: Godfrey Reggio  
Music: Philip Glass  
Photography Directors: Graham Berry, Leonidas Zourdoumis  
Released by: The Cannon Group  
At: Varsity, Palo Alto

Glenn Lovell



... is on assignment.