



## SHIFTING LAYERS: THE FILM SCORES OF PHILIP GLASS

# Naqoyqatsi

### Naqoyqatsi

**Director:** Godfrey Reggio  
**Production Company:** Miramax Films  
**Presented by:** Steven Soderbergh  
**Executive Producer:** Steven Soderbergh  
**Producers:** Joe Beirne, Godfrey Reggio, Lawrence S. Taub  
**Co-producer:** Mel Lawrence  
**Line Producer:** Federico Negri  
**Associate Producer:** Steve Goldin  
**2nd Unit Director:** Jon Kane  
**Script:** Godfrey Reggio  
**Photography:** Russell Lee Fine  
**Additional Camera:** Tim Housel  
**Guest Camera:** John Bailey  
**Visual Effects:** Manuel Gault  
**Original CGI Animation:** Manuel Gault, Cameron Hickey, Zachary David Medow  
**Image Reanimation:** Manuel Gault  
**Editor:** Jon Kane  
**Additional Editor:** Bill Morrison  
**Visual Designer:** Jon Kane  
**Music:** Philip Glass  
**Sound:** Steve Boeddeker  
**With:**  
Yo-Yo Ma  
USA 2002  
89 mins  
35mm

The final part of Reggio and Glass's visually rich symphonic trilogy concludes with a title that translates from the Hopi language as 'life as war'. It depicts an interconnected world where nature has been dominated, even overrun, by technology. Reggio employs digital techniques to manipulate everyday images in order to chronicle the way our society is changing. Renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma's performance is the centrepiece of Glass's score, bringing spirituality and humanity to an increasingly cold and technologised environment.

[bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)

### Godfrey Reggio on his 'Qatsi' trilogy

Godfrey Reggio, now 62, made his directorial debut at the age of 43 after a career as a social worker in and around his native Santa Fe, New Mexico. Titled *Koyaanisqatsi*, from the Hopi Indian word meaning 'life out of balance', the film was a dazzling kaleidoscope of images and sound driven by a pulsing, churchlike score composed by Philip Glass. Helped into distribution by the likes of George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola, *Koyaanisqatsi* became a major arthouse hit that much to Reggio's bemusement gave birth to a whole generation of New Age-style conglomerate commercials. *Powaqqatsi* ('life in transformation'), which examined the cultures of the southern hemisphere, followed in 1988. Reggio premiered the final instalment of the trilogy, *Naqoyqatsi* ('life as war'), at last year's Venice film festival.

*What inspired you to make Koyaanisqatsi?*

While I was working for 14 years with street gangs, most of whom were fantastic people who were in trouble with the law, I developed the numbing awareness that the context in which we lived was itself a problem. During that time I saw Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950), a film that could have been made in the barrios of Santa Fe. For me and for many of the gang members I showed it to, the film was a spiritual experience. I realised that if I could be moved so deeply by this medium, it would be worth exploring it.

*How did you learn the ropes?*

I picked it up as I went along. If I'd gone to film school I'd have had to unlearn most of what I'd been taught in order to make the film. I think my naivety helped.

*Did you always see it as part of a trilogy?*

It was only two years into the project, in a conversation with Philip Glass, that the idea of a trilogy emerged. Before that I felt that if I lived long enough to make *Koyaanisqatsi*, life would have been good to me.

*It's hard to imagine the films without Glass.*

He came in very early on. At the time he had just received a lot of notoriety for *Eisenstein on the Beach* and was still driving a taxi and working as a plumber. When I finally reached him, he told me, 'I don't go to movies, I don't know anything about them. Between you and me, I'm not interested.' He kept ducking me but thanks to some mutual friends he was persuaded to come to a screening. I played two pieces of music with the images I had: his *North Star* and Tomita's electronic rendition of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. He said, 'When do we get started?'

*In your youth you joined the Christian Brothers and spent a lot of time in silence.*

It was a universe of time, from the age of 14 to 28. I think those are the most important years of your life, a period when it's possible to be idealistic. My parents let me leave home at 13, in effect to live in the Middle Ages in 1950s America. And I'm forever grateful for having that opportunity.

*Your imagery is very open-ended. Is that influenced by your time in meditation?*

### BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

### SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25\*  
\* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info:  
[sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk](http://sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk)



### BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.  
We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

## SHIFTING LAYERS: THE FILM SCORES OF PHILIP GLASS

### Naqoyqatsi

Thu 8 Aug 18:20; Sat 24 Aug 18:00

### The Truman Show

Thu 8 Aug 20:30; Sat 10 Aug 18:30

### The Illusionist

Fri 9 Aug 20:30; Thu 29 Aug 18:10

**UK Premiere: A Place Called Music + Q&A with director Enrique M. Rizo**

Sun 11 Aug 15:15

### The Hours

Sun 11 Aug 18:00; Mon 26 Aug 17:30

### The Philip Glass Effect

Wed 14 Aug 18:10

### Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters

Wed 14 Aug 20:20

### Dracula (Philip Glass Special Edition)

Thu 15 Aug 18:10

### Visitors + UK Premiere: Once Within a Time

Thu 15 Aug 20:10; Tue 27 Aug 17:50

### Notes on a Scandal

Fri 16 Aug 18:30; Thu 29 Aug 20:40

### Jane

Sat 17 Aug 20:40; Sat 31 Aug 15:10

### Kundun

Sun 18 Aug 18:00

### The Thin Blue Line

Mon 19 Aug 18:10

### The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara

Mon 19 Aug 20:30; Mon 26 Aug 20:10

### Candyman

Fri 23 Aug 18:20

### Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent

Fri 23 Aug 20:40

### Koyaanisqatsi

Sat 24 Aug 12:50; Mon 26 Aug 11:30 BFI IMAX

### Powaqqatsi

Sat 24 Aug 15:20

### With thanks to

Richard Guerin, Director of Orange Mountain Music

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](http://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)

Who's to say? However crooked the paths may look, they're all connected. So I'm sure that preparation became like a mantra. I ended up feeling that the most practical thing in life is to be idealistic, and certainly that's reflected in the films. The films are offered as a gift, not as a point of view, and if there are a hundred people at a screening I'd hope there could be a hundred different points of view. If that wasn't the case it would be propaganda or advertising. Even if there's a right answer and we all have it, that would make it the wrong answer; anything universal portends fascism.

*How did you structure Koyaanisqatsi and Powaqqatsi?*

There's no screenplay per se, but that's not to say there's no method to the madness. I write what's called a 'dramaturgical shaping' – a shaping of the feeling, form and language of the film. If you're making a movie and the principal tool is a camera, what does the camera do? It has motor speeds, lenses, settings, f-stops, different film stock, all of which are important in determining the look or 'language' of the film. So in the case of *Koyaanisqatsi* the principle is pixillation. We would shoot things extremely slow so they would run very fast in projection. And rather than use this as an effect we made it a constant.

*How about Powaqqatsi?*

Though both films rip out all the foreground of plot, character and acting, leaving the background, or 2nd unit, as the subject, they are vastly different. So for *Powaqqatsi* we needed a new visual language. We chose to use long lenses and very high motor speeds. The norm is 24 frames per second; our norm was anywhere from 62 to 130 fps in almost every shot. That gave us another way of looking at the images.

*Describe the trilogy's unifying theme.*

All three films rotate around technology. Not simply the idea that technology is affecting the environment, society and economics, but that technology itself becomes the environment, a host of life, the new nature. Anything we've said about old nature or the divine can now be said about the computer. In fact, the computer is remaking the world in its own image. In *Koyaanisqatsi*, which deals with the northern hemisphere, we have hyper-kinetic industrial grids that we call society. In *Powaqqatsi*, in the southern hemisphere, we have cultures of morality, of simplicity – hand-made cultures under tremendous stress, with development pulling them out of their sockets. Technology is no longer something we use, it's something we live. It's as ubiquitous as the air we breathe.

*The new film, Naqoyqatsi, deals with war.*

*Koyaanisqatsi* was about the north, *Powaqqatsi* about the south, and *Naqoyqatsi* is about the globalised moment in which we live, where the image becomes more real than reality. So no images were shot, they were all created digitally. Our locations were images – images that are so ubiquitous they're no longer noticed. Just as a fish would be the last to know it was in water, Einstein said, so we would be the last to recognise the iconic.

The war this film looks at is the war of ordinary daily living, war as sanctioned aggression against the force of life. So as horrendous, say, as the events of 9/11 might be for those who live in America, they pale by comparison to a war that is so present we don't see it, which is the lunacy of daily living. From *Naqoyqatsi's* point of view we've lost everything of diversity, of individuality, to the new homogenised unity of the technological order. The Los Angelesation of the planet.

*How do you feel now the trilogy is over?*

It's at once exhilarating and terrifying. I've been up against this wall for 27 years, as if committed to an insane asylum. I feel I've shed a tremendous burden, at once heavy and joyful. And I'm looking forward to visiting my vivid unknown.

Godfrey Reggio interviewed by Damon Wise, *Sight and Sound*, February 2003