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FILM

Worlds Apart

12.21.12

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Ron Fricke, *Baraka*, 1992, 70 mm, color, 97 minutes.

RON FRICKE'S BARAKA is a curio of 1990s filmmaking. Part nature documentary, part animated panorama, the film and its epic, breathless ambitions failed to ramify. Viewed today, the singularity of *Baraka's* style lends it the dated feel peculiar to projects that fashion themselves as self-consciously cutting-edge. Inspired by Fricke's stint as a cinematographer on Godfrey Reggio's cult classic *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Baraka* was one of the final films to be captured on Todd-AO 70 mm, a lush, high-definition format abandoned to the cost-effectiveness of digital. The camera, computerized and custom-built for *Baraka's* extended time-lapse shots, was Fricke's invention, and the film reads as a eulogy to its powers. Now angled at the vaporous cascade of Argentina's Iguazu Falls, now surveying the airy dome of Saint Peter's Basilica, Fricke's camera glides, swoops, and tracks across six continents. Screening as part of Lincoln Center's late-December ode to 70 mm alongside such stalwarts as Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967) and Steven Lisberger's *Tron* (1982), *Baraka's* sumptuous succession of images fascinates, perplexes, and perturbs in equal measure.

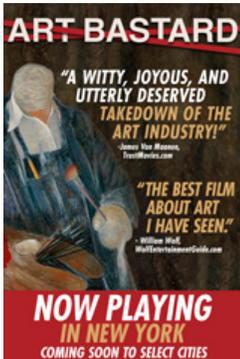
Defining its scope in the broadest possible way—the world, *in toto*—*Baraka's* pretensions are sweeping: to effect, in Fricke's words, "a guided meditation on humanity" that transcends the bounds of language, nation, and religion. The fullness and lucidity of 70 mm made it the ideal medium for Fricke's project, which strove to bracket thorny questions of politics in favor of a seamless, absorptive experience. Stripped of context, each of the film's 152 locations is grounded only by those details immanent in the images themselves. An air of unreality thus pervades *Baraka's* run-time, as if its scenes were less tangible places than stock signifiers of nature and natives, culled from the collective imaginary of a society reared on the Discovery Channel. Fricke's camera movements are minimal, limited to smooth pans and slow tracking shots, and his cuts are frequent. Hypnotic views of mountains, tides, and clouds punctuate rapid juxtapositions of disparate forms of worship—Buddhists in Kathmandu, Hasidic Jews at the Western Wall, and whirling dervishes in Istanbul—as if to imply that everything in the world is composed of the same spiritual stuff. In lieu of identifying the sites imaged, Fricke gives us the eclectic, incongruous instrumentals of world music, where Japanese koto drums mix with bagpipes and Tibetan water music.

It's this exasperating, seductive jumble that both defines and dooms *Baraka*. "It's not about where you are, or why you're there, but what's there. It's like doing a painting," Fricke remarks in an interview on the film's Blu-ray release. His approach to the world, indeed, partakes in that of a painter—albeit less a modernist master than an eighteenth-century landscape artist, enraptured in distanced contemplation of nature's picturesque vistas, their pure aesthetics divorced from the gritty realities of history and power. Yet, confronted with the silent gaze of a sex worker in Bangkok or burning oil fields in Kuwait, abstracting from politics becomes impossible. Fricke's New Age rhetoric, steeped in the pop mysticism of Joseph Campbell, at times cloaks a disturbing conservatism that reinforces notions of the third world as static and ahistorical, removed from the frenzied flow of time that structures life in the West. At its worst, *Baraka* devolves into a neo-imperialist fantasy, its euphoric jaunt around the globe collapsing cultural difference into the easy, untroubled exoticism of a tourist's souvenir.

This willful naïveté is *Baraka's* knell. Enamored of nature's grandeur and the novelty of cross-cultural contact, the film attempts to elide its implication in the global economic order that produces the very inequities that it laments. Symptomatic of the contradictions of well-meaning humanism, *Baraka* neglects the central lessons of post-'60s filmmaking: that no image is innocent, no depiction of the world eternal.

— Courtney Fiske

"See It in 70 mm!" runs December 21–January 1 at the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York.

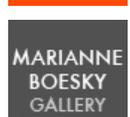
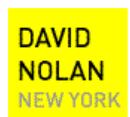
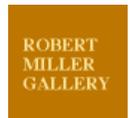


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