

Godfrey Reggio: A Call for Another Way of Living by Richard Whittaker

One Friday morning I happened to tune in to KQED's morning program Forum where an interview with Phillip Glass and Godfrey Reggio was underway. They were in town for a weekend showing at Davies Symphony Hall of Reggio's Qatsi Trilogy: Koyaanisqatsi, Powaqqatsi and Naqoyqatsi. Phillip Glass, along with his ensemble, would be performing the music he had composed for the films.

Koyaanisqatsi left a deep impression on me when I'd first seen it in 1983, as did Powaqqatsi, which came out five years later. This full-length, commercial film consists entirely of a stream of images accompanied by music and was revolutionary at the time. Glass' music and the film's dramatic imagery are powerful in themselves, but it's what they are saying and how it corresponds to our lives that gives the film its real power.

At the conclusion of the radio interview, I picked up the phone and called KQED. It was a long shot. Was there any way I could interview Reggio? My request would be passed along, I was told. I figured that was the last I'd hear about it, but a couple of hours later Anita Amirrezvani from San Francisco Performances called. Turns out she knew the magazine. She would recommend me to Reggio. And by the way, did I want a free ticket to an interview with Reggio and Phillip Glass that would be conducted earlier at the Herbst Theater? Of course!

Godfrey, it turned out, was willing to meet with me. Could I track him down backstage after the interview at the Herbst? With his schedule packed already, this would have to happen on the fly. That's how, the next day—and after some improvisation to find an empty room we could use—I found myself sitting across from Reggio himself, an event I could not have even imagined twenty-four hours earlier. It had the quality of magic I know Reggio understands very well, a magic that comes through in the interview itself.

Walking with Reggio down Van Ness Avenue after the interview towards Davies Symphony Hall, it was raining lightly, and cold. Reggio, wrapped in a long black overcoat with his gray hair slightly disheveled, and at six feet six inches tall, cut a striking figure. Strolling along together in friendly conversation, life could hardly have seemed better.

Richard Whittaker: Would you mind telling us a little about your early experience with the church? Because I'm sure that must have a very important place in your thought and outlook.

Godfrey Reggio: Very much. I'm sure more than even I'm aware of. I was not a religious person. I don't think I've ever been, actually. I was born and grew up in New Orleans and was living a very fast life at the age of eleven, twelve and thirteen. I mean it was so intense I felt that it was almost over with at that point. But I was being taught by Christian Brothers and I noticed how generous and joyful they were and I got inspired, like many

young adolescents, by the adults in my life. There was a generosity and kind of an otherworldliness that was almost childlike, which was very attractive to me. So I wanted to be like them. And they said, well, we're looking for vocations, and you can join the Brothers. I asked my parents about it and they were very upset, because I was not a particularly religious person, far from it, but my father, thank God, said if he wants to do that, then we should let him do it. I feel that was very wise on his part.

I had no idea what I was getting into, coming from a very fast life in New Orleans to a religious, self-sustaining community of 130 monks in Lafayette, Louisiana. But the founder said it doesn't matter how you got to the order, the important thing is that you got there. Of course, I wanted to take it seriously, and I did. I stayed for fourteen years. I made temporary vows, final vows; I was a lifer. I was expecting to do this forever, but I was asked to leave my order in 1968. I knew for years that it was coming because I was a pain in the *** of my superiors. My Che Guevara, as it were, was a man called Giovanni Roncalli, John the 23rd, Pontiff of the Catholic Church in the late fifties, early sixties. His reign more or less paralleled Kennedy's time. He didn't ask to be Pope, nor was he even interested, but they offered it to him. He said "accept nothing, question everything, even the structure of the Church." For me this was most important because I felt the structure was in the way of the spirit. So to have a Pope say that, and I belonged to a Pontifical order—not under the Bishop or the Archbishop, but under the Pope—that was like having God tell you to go out there and, not raise hell exactly, but to really allow yourself to question things.

So I was asked to leave my order in 1968. I had become a mouthpiece for some of the younger monks in the order. It was after Vatican II. All the church was in a process of renovation. We wanted—I did and other young brothers—we wanted to question the role we were playing in the modern world based on the directions of our founder Jean-Baptiste de la Salle. The Brothers take five vows: poverty, chastity, obedience and then each order has its own unique vows; we took two: stability in the institute, which means to be faithful to your vows, and teaching the poor gratuitously. Now, although the high school I was assigned to had fantastic kids and I was excited about teaching there, I lived in a community in which a third to almost 40% of the population lived in dire poverty. These people had no access to our school except for a few scholarships, which were offered to the poor. I felt the whole purpose of our order was to offer something to these people who had no access. In fact, the founder of our order was the first person in Europe to teach in the vernacular. Up until that point, only people who had money or who were part of the gentry went to school, and everything was conducted in Latin. Jean-Baptiste de la Salle taught in French in his country and from that practice, unleashed through the order he founded, education changed all over the western world.

RW: Going into the order at that early age, going through puberty under those conditions and with all you've said, that transition must have been extremely difficult, but then I also can hear how you took what you were agreeing to quite seriously.

GR: I did. I took it pretty seriously.

RW: And sometimes that can put one in a difficult relationship, right? —with the institution.

GR: Yes. And with myself, most particularly. Repression played a very large part in my formation. I ended up for several years washing my hands eighty, one hundred times, a day. My hands were in a constant state of bleeding for years from being—in the religious order, they called it scrupulosity. In clinical terms, it would be called crazy! When you

repress your emotions, they have to pop out some way. I was repressing tremendously, and it popped out in a zillion neurotic ways.

RW: But somehow you stayed for years, and then had to pass through another crisis where you were asked to leave the order.

GR: Well, I knew it was going to happen, but the difference between knowing it intellectually and having to live completely on your own outside of community is extraordinary. When I took my final vows at twenty-five, I asked my father confessor, should I take the vows? I told him I knew I was marked for being on the way out, but he said, "That's not your decision, Godfrey. If you want to take your vows, you take your vows" and, remarkably, I got okayed to take my final vows. I never regretted joining the Brothers, nor did I ever regret leaving the Brothers. So I feel like it was a remarkable opportunity for me to, in effect, live in the Middle Ages and not grow up in contemporary America. To learn that the most practical thing in life is to be idealistic is an enormous gift. I have nothing but complete admiration for the Christian Brothers and for what they taught me. It has stayed with me.

RW: Would you say something more about what might go along with what you've called "growing up in the Middle Ages."

GR: I was saying that because I left home so early and really only saw my parents for three weeks out of a year. It was just an extraordinary opportunity for an American kid. The church doesn't do that now because of homosexuality and abuse and madness, but I still feel it's an extraordinarily period of time for young people to be able to make those kinds of choices. We ask nothing of young people today, whereas I was asked to be heroic. That was very meaningful to me. As far as living in the Middle Ages, I'll use a reference to Joseph Brodsky, the expatriate from the old Soviet Union. He was an American poet laureate in 1991, I think. I'm a big, big fan of his poetry and books, and especially his essays, one in particular *Less Than One* which begins with his explanation of the great conundrum of Marx: is it your mind that determines your behavior or your behavior that determines your mind?

Brodsky knew that for most people, clearly, it's our behavior that determines the content of our mind, because we're creatures of habituation. So Brodsky's brilliant insight on how to change one's mind is to change one's behavior, and his response to that conundrum of Marx's was to step outside of the world and yet be in it. That echoes, of course, Christ's statements of being in the world, but not of the world—very meaningful to me. So I'm referring to the Middle Ages in that sense, of being outside of contemporary American life.

What I learned is that it's what I did every day that determined what I was going to think. I've never forgotten that. Every now and then I'll give a convocation address at a university and I try to always caution the students to not let their diplomas become their death certificates. If you give up your imagination, if you give up your ability to create for the wages of a good job, then you might give up that which predicates us as human beings, the ability to create our own lives. So I felt that stepping out of this world, yet being in it would be a way of achieving some relative degree of freedom. I've tried to live that way and I'm grateful to the church for that experience.

RW: I'm struck by your discovery of the importance of the things you do every day. Can you say more about that?

GR: I'll give you an anecdote. I was in Albuquerque in the early 90s and the Dalai Lama was at the University of New Mexico giving a talk. The place was packed. He'd just finished giving his talk and said he'd take questions. A woman jumped up and asked, "Your Holiness, what is the single most important thing that I could give attention to?" Without even a thought, he answered, "Routine."

Now I understood that immediately. In my order, the rule, or routine, was the highest order of attention, that is, being attentive to what one did every day—because what we do is what we become. It's not just what's in our minds. That's an illusion. Our minds are a very small part of who we are. Although we consider our brain our largest organ, it's vastly humiliated when compared to our behavior.

RW: The attentiveness, that's the thing, right? Because my routine is usually just a place for daydreaming.

GR: Exactly. In Sanskrit there's a word *ekagrata*, which means one-pointedness. Let's give it a free form translation. It means the ability to focus on something. That ability to focus unrelentingly is what gives one the ability to walk on water, move mountains and do things that are beyond our wildest imagination. But that's not something we learn. It's something we have to struggle to acquire. We're going to have to go upstream to do that. In my case, I look at it as commitment. Once you commit yourself, everything changes; everything comes to you. There's that great quote attributed to Goethe: "Whatever you can do, or think you can do, do it!" Boldness has genius in it. We're capable, literally, of extraordinary things, being very ordinary people.

RW: You must feel that your life is a demonstration of that.

GR: I feel so. I feel my life and the life of the people I've associated with, my colleagues now of almost thirty-six years—we've created our own lives rather than getting caught in the web of wage labor. It doesn't mean you don't need money. I want to do a film right now, but I don't have any money to do it. But I'm not going to find it through wage labor.

RW: Could I ask you about your connection with the Hopi?

GR: The elders that I knew are all dead now. I was not a Hopi devotee and my films have nothing to do with the Hopi way of life, but I thought I would take the clarity, insight and perspicacity of their language as it approaches our world. I think we see the world through language, and that it is language that determines our human qua human status. That's why I said earlier that one can be free if one can say that one can be free.

RW: That's not really a such a simple statement, though, is it?

GR: No. It's not. I'm not talking about a superficial saying. But when one can act "as if" they are free, then you are free. There's Nietzsche's beautiful statement, "Act as if you know what you're doing." When you get down to it, it's really the condition we all face. What we know is extremely limited compared to what we don't know, and most enormities in life are unknowable. So to act as if one knows what one is doing is very important. I had to do that in making this film. I'd never gone to film school. I just had the intestinal fortitude to say "I know what I'm doing." I acted as if I did, and all things came to me.

Now I had to know the power of my own limits, too, and my limits are severe. I'm not in any way a technical person, and I don't use a computer, not for ideological reasons, but

because I'm so obsessive; I think I'll get sucked right into it like a vortex. But it's certainly the way I made these films.

I had to work through the eyes and ears of other people, and hence the collaborative forms. I'm assembling a whole group of artists that can come together, not just to do my bidding, but to make a vital contribution, which means to go beyond what I can offer them and create something that I could never bring to the film. Hence Ron Fricke's cinematography, Phillip Glass' music, Jon Kane's visual design, Alan Walpole's editing—I mean, without those guys, these are films way beyond my capacity.

So, while I have to be at once an assassin and a mother, and keep the clarity of my own conversation going, I'm certainly willing to live in a critical forum. All of us who work on the project have enormous egos, mine included, but to have vanity of ego would kill the creative process because it's a critical forum.

RW: Most of us have this vision of the artist as a solitary figure and then there's the idea that a camel is a horse made by a committee. So to find what you've found, this spirit of working together, how did you find that?

GR: I don't know how to say this. That's why I love this kind of dialogic arrangement. I find that in the very act of speaking, I'm hearing myself say things for the first time. I don't know. I often feel like I'm a medium for something that I have no right to have. I'm not saying I feel guilty, but I feel that something is speaking through me. I'm not saying that I'm hearing voices from the home office, please. I'm just saying that it's nothing I acquired, nothing by virtue of my capacity. It's something that has happened with me. I can feel things and I want to give articulation to them.

RW: I find it encouraging to hear about this collaborative form you've found your way to and out of which your wonderful films have come. Now I wanted to ask briefly, how did you come to these Hopi words, which are so rich and powerful?

GR: I met these elders through a friend who wrote a little book called *A Day of Purification* with an elder. He said, you know Godfrey, after everything you've told me about what you want your film to be, you should really take a look at this. You should speak to David Monongya, who was Hopi leader. So I got to meet David through this man. At that time he was in his late eighties, a very vital man. He said something like, "Everything you white people call 'normal' we call abnormal. Everything you call 'sane' we call insane."

It was liberating to hear someone articulate that, because I truly felt I was on the verge of going nuts. I couldn't understand the insanity of the world, the lack of concern. I'd been working with street gangs for so long, and I just couldn't understand our inhumanity towards each other. And when I heard David say that, it struck a chord; I felt a confirmation.

While the films, as I said, are not about the Hopi, it's taking the clarity of their language and applying it to our world. So I took consciously this Napoleonic dictum that a picture is worth a thousand words and flipped it around. I wanted to create a thousand pictures that could offer us the power of one word, in this case *koyaanisqatsi*.

As I said before, because I think we see the world through language, I was especially not interested in going to a "civilized" language. I went to an illiterate culture, a culture of orality, a culture of speech, a culture of tradition and I was privileged to see the world,

albeit in a very limited way, through the eyes of these several Hopis: David Monongya James Kuchanga and Michael Owatewama. Then I also worked with a German scholar, Ekkehart Malotki who had mastered the Hopi language. I described what I wanted the film to be and they said, "Gee, here's the word." It was almost lost in the Hopi vocabulary. David Monongya agreed. He said that koyaanisqatsi would be a beautiful word for my film. So with his imprimatur, I felt like I had a theological affirmation of what I was saying.

It was explained to me that the term qatsi means "life." In its compound form, qatsi means "way of life." In fact, the Hopi language is so rich it can really make our language limp when it comes to explanations for things. This term meant "crazy life, life out of balance, life in turmoil, a way of life that calls for another way of living." I'm sure there are many other meanings, but since I was presenting this to white people, not Hopis, I used a dictionary form.

The word koyaanisqatsi has never been spelled in Hopi because they don't spell. They don't have a written language. So I had a transliteration by Ekkehart. And after about two years into the project, the idea of a trilogy came up through Phillip who said that things go best in threes. If you notice on my hand, I have three lines; I put this on everything I do. It's been with me since I was a kid. I can't explain it.

RW: Three? So this just came to you in a way you don't even want to try to find words for.

GR: Exactly. Three is my number. I mean, I'm not saying that in a New Age way; it was more of an intuitive thing: so a trilogy. The second film, Powaqatsi—powaq is where the word powaq comes from. A powaq is a black magician, a dark energy. They make a distinction between white magic and black magic. The M.O. of a powaq is that it consumes the life force of another person in order to further its own, and it operates through seduction and allurements. I thought what better word to describe the relationship between Northern Hemisphere and Southern Hemisphere societies? In effect, the word powaqatsi means predation. It means eating the life of another person.

RW: And without the victim knowing it, right?

GR: Right. And once you know it, it's too late. Taking that word and giving it an application to the modern world we live in, it's the neo-liberal dictums of progress and development, the World Bank, science and technology. This idea of progress and development becomes the powaq. It makes promises—"you're going to get a higher standard of living." That's all predicated on numbers and the things you have. Do you have a refrigerator? Do you have an education? Do you have access to health care? Because of my teaching on Illich, I look upon all those institutions as radical monopolies.

RW: I was just going to ask if you knew Ivan Illich.

GR: Ivan Illich is like my brother. I mean that. He certainly changed my life. We had a very, very close personal relationship, especially in his later years, but all the way through. I met him in 1963. It was so exciting to meet a man of such insight and articulation. He challenged everything that I held while speaking to my feelings in such an articulated way. I couldn't get enough of Illich.

RW: I met him only briefly, and heard him talk several times. It was enough to be quite touched by him, and then I became friends with Lee Hoinacki, who perhaps you know.

GR: Oh, yes. The Dominican!

RW: I just love the man!

GR: [Reggio reaches both hands high across the table to slap hands with me.] Fantastic! Lee is a saint! He is such a brilliant guy. He dedicated himself to Illich. He's a friend of mine.

RW: Well, he's really a remarkable man. Anyway, I think this word *powaqqatsi* is so apropos for our condition. I was going to ask, you know the quote you used "the fish will be the last to know water"?

GR: Einstein's statement.

RW: Yes. And drawing the analogy, we don't really know what's happening to us, this monumental shift taking place. I have a couple of examples of my own where I think I saw something about this. You must have experiences around this, which have informed what you're trying to say.

GR: Everything I'm talking about comes from my own experience. Certainly, I'm not trying to invent the wheel; I pick up things from other teachers, Jacques Ellul or Leopold Kohr. But my M.O. as it were, is more intuitive. I feel these things. Unless you can feel something, you really can't say it. What gives you authorization for articulation, if it's not just rhetoric, is a deep feeling. It comes out of something. I'm not trying, in any way, to be academic about it, though I love teaching. This is beyond that. This is something that I've felt and I've struggled to find the language to express.

RW: I was listening to a radio program where two philosophy professors were discussing the question: if technology produces pills that we can take which will make us happy and healthy, is there any reason not to use them? In other words, to rely on whatever new wonders technology comes up with "to help us"? As arguments were being made in favor, my own voice of protest was barely audible to me. I saw that something had already seeped into me. I had already been infiltrated, so to speak. I agree with your use of the word *hubris* to refer to our imagining that we are in control of these new powers.

GR: Well, following up on what you're saying, which I think I understand very well, I used myself as the subject for my films. All these things that I'm talking about I can see and feel in myself. I become the environment I'm brought up in and so I have the ability, as any human does, if I wish to, to reflect on my own condition. So I've been the basis of my films. I don't say that in any glorious way. I say it just to be honest. I'm basing it on my own experience of the world. I'm not saying it's the right experience, or that it's The Truth, but I don't want to be offering the audience a fraud.

I know that film is so powerful that one can question the probity of free will in the presence of this electronic fire. We have the extraordinary examples of propaganda that came with the motion picture camera. We have the Soviet Union, Germany, Italy, France, England, the United States. The effect of propaganda on people is enormous. The very word "documentary" shares its etymology with the word "docile." And we are very docile beings. We're loaded with fragility. This is also our beauty, but we're highly suggestible, especially in the crowd, and we're sort of living in the crowd by virtue of the mass society that we're part of.

RW: You must not be a big fan of the advertising world we have.

GR: No. I'm not. But I will give you an anecdote. Someone who was very significant in my starting all of this was Jerry Mander. He wrote this incredible book *The Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. He also wrote a book called *In the Absence of the Sacred*. He came out of an advertisement background and started Public Media Center here in town. I came to seek him out before I did any films here in San Francisco. And with Ron Fricke, my colleague on *Koyaanisqatsi*, I did a multimedia saturation campaign using television, billboards, radio, newspapers, lectures for one month. I wanted to use advertisement because people are irrevocably hooked to it. You can't escape it. It's like the wallpaper we live in. I wanted to take something and advertise nothing, have no tags on it. They told me you can't advertise something without a tag on it. It's against FCC regulations. So I made tags so small that they couldn't be seen.

RW: What does that mean, a tag?

GR: You have to give attribution to who is doing the advertising, to who is saying this. But I came to see Jerry Mander first to get his insight. He was so encouraging, so enthusiastic, that it was contagious. I just loved the guy. I don't want to say that we worship different gods, but we've taken different paths.

RW: One of the things that's occurred to me with regard to language has to do with the word "being." It's not a word we talk about and not something at all accessible to the world of science. So if someone were interested, let's say, in learning "how to live"—it sounds lame, but what does it mean to live? Living-existing-being. That phrase has a little more life in it, but the language for this area, where is it? I can't find it.

GR: You know, as you're talking I'm thinking of the "king of the hobos." I never forgot this. He said, "It's not important to be important. It's important to be." This is, I think, what you're saying. I would say it another way. To be is to fly the flag of one's own shadow. I don't mean to be glib about that, but that's what I tried to tell students who are graduating, "don't let your diploma be your death certificate." It's endemic for all of us to get caught into mass ways of living, yet we have the gift of life. There is no limitation on that other than the real power of limit, and limits give us power. It's like isometrics. If I didn't put a schedule for the making of the film, I could still be making *Koyaanisqatsi*. So I think we can be whatever we believe we can be. We don't have to be the models of what is offered to us by the left, by the right, by society. We have the ability to be unique, because originality is who each one of us is. That's our vocation.

RW: If you were to look closely enough, it must be that everyone has this experience, just a poetic experience of being here in the world which we have poor language for, but which is felt as the miraculous fact of life, the mystery and wonder of life. And we don't have a culture that recognizes this or supports it. So it gets lost and people have to make a living. They fall under the mass ways of living and forget. Is this what you're talking about?

GR: Yes. Because nobody teaches you to be an individual. Education could be much more dynamic and interesting. It should be something where people could create things that have never been seen or heard before. We're here as creators. We're really toolmakers, *homo faber*, as well as *homo sapiens*. We become what we do.

RW: Now let me ask you about the films. You're the director and writer. Did you have particular visions? Did you have a camera? Did you...

GR: No. I don't do anything like that.

RW: How did the vision come to you?

GR: By working with street gangs. I worked with street gangs for just over ten years. I realized that if you tell a kid that he's [garbage], he'll become [garbage]. If you tell a kid that he's great, most of them will become great. If you give them a little love, if you offer them another structure in which to find themselves, if you ask them to give rather than to receive, if you ask them to be heroic, basically, then everything is possible!

I experienced that working with street gangs, people who others had thrown the book away on—their families, the school system, the court system. These were people who were on the streets, pachucos—people who were headed to the pinta, the penitentiary. I realized that most of them were fantastic. Sure there are a few people who are messed up, psychotic, if you want, or who have a social pathology. Most people just didn't have a chance, and if you give people a chance, there's no end of possibility. But after working in gangs for that long, I burnt myself out, severely. I had to leave. I realized I was spinning my wheels. It was an unending cycle of poverty that generates this.

So I wanted to speak to that condition, you'll have to excuse me, in a metaphysical way, in a spiritual way, in a way that encompasses politics, because I started as an activist, an ultra-leftist, if you want. But I realized that most of that was aimed at who controls society rather than the structure of society, and that interested me very little. It motivated me to create film and that was terrifying to me because it was something I'd never done.

But I knew that film is like the new religion. I sit around in coffee shops and what are people talking about? Half of the time, movies! Movies are on everyone's mind, but movies are taking you out of life rather than bringing you into it. It's an entertainment form. We can entertain ourselves to death now, by doing nothing. I thought, gee whiz, that's where everybody is. If I could only make a movie, the movie I had inside of myself. It was unspecified in the clarity of each shot, but I knew, for example, that I wanted to show the world as a living entity, as something alive with its own life force.

In the early 60s I had the good fortune to see Luis Bunuel's film *Los Olvidados* (The Forgotten Ones). Brother Alexis Gonzales brought it to me and said, "Godfrey, you should really check this out for what you're doing. It will blow your mind." I said okay, and I saw it. I showed it to some of the members of a street gang I was working with, some of the young men and women, and it became, for all of us, a spiritual experience. It was touching us, not entertaining us. So this film, I guess I've seen it two hundred times. It became our ritual. We all looked at it many times. It motivated me. As a young brother, you don't see movies, no Hollywood movies. The Lady of Lourdes maybe, every four months or so. But to see Bunuel's film, it was like I had received a shock from heaven, or a lightning bolt! It shook me to the core.

RW: How old were you?

GR: I was twenty-three when I first saw it. I started working with gangs when I was twenty-one.

RW: When I saw *Last Year at Marienbad* it was like that. I was seventeen or so, and it was a revelation. Your story just reminds me of how much impact a film can have on one.

GR: It was so strong. I never related to the term "art" or "artist." I live in a very artsy-fartsy community, very precious, Santa Fe, so I have an almost a knee-jerk reaction

to the term, although a lot of my friends create what we call art. I felt that shock and awe, if it has a place at all, it is in the realm of art. Art, like religion, portends the divine. It portends inspiration. It is made, not for oneself, but to connect, to commune with other people. I felt that in Bunuel's film. I felt touched by this man, albeit through a medium of technology.

RW: I heard a phrase the other day in regard to art that I really like, that art of the highest level is the apprehension of truth through feeling.

GR: Oh, beautiful! That's what I was trying to say earlier. If you can't feel something, you can't give word to it. Please, it's not anything I take credit for, but I grew up as a sensitive person, and I might say, quite a stupid one, also. I lived in New Orleans where racism was a way of life. It still is. I could never understand it—kids growing up with quote "nigger" jokes. I love my family, please understand me, but I grew up in a racist family. And, at least in my mind, I couldn't understand this. What is this all about? We're sitting in a church and all these beautiful people have to sit on a bench in the back! Or they have to sit in the back of the streetcar. I never could get my head around it, and if I had not had the audacity or the imprudence to leave home at thirteen, fourteen, I would have never gotten out of it. You have to kind of step out of your world to have a shot at not becoming a carbon copy of the world you live in. So, for me, it was a magnificent stroke of fortune that I, without knowing what I was doing, stepped out of life and entered another world completely.

RW: Into the monastic order.

GR: It wasn't a monastic order. I was in a religious community, what's called an apostolic order, with not only a religious life, but also a work to do in the world. In our case it was to teach the poor gratuitously. The Christian Brothers. When I went in, it was a pretty strict order.

RW: Just to follow up again. You said that the vision for doing this film came from working with street gangs. Then you described watching *Los Olvidados* over and over again. So I gather that something in that made you see that film was the modality to pursue.

GR: I felt it was something I could grab onto, because it moved me so much. I was never interested in having a film career. I made a tactical choice of film. I don't want to deal with cameras or editing machines. I deal in the realm of feeling, and try to give voice to it.

RW: Was it your idea for your films to get rid of the foreground—the story, the plot, the actors—which had always been the main focus, and concentrate only on the background?

GR: Oh, yes. All of that is my idea, and also that it would be image and music. That's what I mean. Those are the things that I do. I mean, when I announced to my crew that Phillip Glass was the composer I absolutely wanted, there wasn't a person in the group who thought it was a good idea. They thought he was the master of the broken needle. I won't name the folks, because they're my dearest friends. They said, "But Godfrey, Phillip Glass, it's just this repetitive stuff. You could have Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin—the Greats of All Time! And I said, well, I don't know these guys, and they're dead. And I just love Phillip's music! It moves me. I said that he could write an original composition, and that I'd be able to talk to him! He'd come up with inspiration, and that's been the basis of our collaboration. When the film was finished, there wasn't a person in the crew who thought the film would ever be seen.

I was doing the film in Venice, California. My friends thought I'd gone off the deep end, was cracking up—seven years on a project that was going nowhere. And I brought it to Santa Fe, and its first showing was at our major theatre, the Lensic. Two thousand showed up! The theater held eight hundred. They had to have additional showings. And the place went ballistic. My crew was so happy and, of course, I was, too.

I'd kept my confidence for this film. I believed in it, and I knew it had to be made with a consummate level of technique if it were to have any chance in the world. I was willing to take on the contradiction of using technology to criticize technology. That got me a lot of early criticism. Many people didn't give me money because they thought that was hypocritical.

RW: There's a particular image in your second film that stands for me as perhaps the most searing image I've ever seen in any film. It's a little girl driving this great cart and whipping this horse. Where did that come from?

GR: Oh, yes. I'm getting goose bumps as you say it, Richard. It comes from Cairo. That little girl is a member of a Coptic Christian community, which is a minority in Cairo and discriminated against heavily. These people live at the dump in Cairo. They're extremely poor. They come out from the dump at about three or four in the morning to start making their rounds through the city. Of course, they don't have motorized vehicles. Kids at the age of eight are already adults there. They have to take care of their siblings, or work. That particular kid was with her father. They were coming back at about two in the afternoon after having been out since four in the morning picking up garbage.

Allen, one of the producers and an assistant director, came back one day very excited. He said, "Gee, Godfrey, we saw this incredible event today. We couldn't get it, but if we go back there tomorrow, I'm positive we can get it!" And that's what I mean about collaboration. He went with Graham Berry and set up and got this kid, who was beating this donkey because the horns were blowing all around her. She wasn't being cruel; it was what she needed to do to move to the side of the traffic. Her father looked dead, but he was sleeping from exhaustion.

RW: Well, that image sort of summarizes Powaqqatsi for me, I guess, that there's this force eating us in life. I don't exactly want to end on that note, but I don't really know what to follow that up with.

GR: No, that's a very searing image. It's kind of a stopper. When I saw that (when we were making that film, we'd carry portable projectors with us and we'd look at the dailies once a week), and when all of us saw it, some of us were just moved to tears. It just took us down. It's not that it just has one message. It has a kind of multi-verse of possibilities. It speaks to many people.