

Visitors: Film Review

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The Bottom Line

Entrancing images will awe some viewers and leave others scratching their heads.

Venue

Toronto International Film Festival, Special Presentations, Performed with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (Cinedigm)

Director

Godfrey Reggio

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The director of "Koyaanisqatsi" and its sequels offers a film whose themes are much more ambiguous.

What is *Visitors*? **Godfrey Reggio's** latest work, arriving 11 years after the conclusion of his *Qatsi* trilogy (which stretched from 1982's *Koyaanisqatsi* to 2002's *Naqoyqatsi*), resembles those uncategorizable films more than anything else. But it pushes even harder than they did against labels like "documentary," "essay film" or even "avant garde."

The wordless movie, composed of stately black-and-white shots whose thematic connection is left to viewers to imagine, inspires us to ask again just what it is -- aside from being presented in theaters -- that separates what we call cinema from what we group with the video art and installation work that is shown by art galleries. Reggio's rep will bring cinephiles to the art house, but the work's more Rorschach-like content isn't likely to resonate to the extent the trilogy did. Special events like this premiere, in which the Toronto Symphony Orchestra performed **Philip Glass'** score live, will be a hit at performing arts centers, however.

The work's 87 minutes consist of only 74 different shots -- many in slow motion, others addressing a static scene with a slow-moving camera. The photography is a rich monochrome, presented in 4K resolution, whose texture is most pleasing in shots of abandoned architecture.

It begins and ends with shots of a gorilla looking straight at the camera. With a great deal of time in between occupied by portraits of individual *homo sapiens* who descended from apes, one might read the title as a meditation on humanity's relatively recent arrival on this planet and the possibility that our residence here is temporary.

Shots of vacated buildings and amusement parks might seem further evidence for that reading, but others are harder to fit in: what to make, for instance, of close-ups in which hands using a computer mouse, keyboard and touch-screen have had the devices masked out so the hands move in empty, inky space?

More than anything, the film shows us faces. Long takes on (mostly) unblinking, expressionless faces at first, staring directly into the lens, then shots recalling Reggio's 1995 short *Evidence*, which observed the faces of children as they watched a television. Here, for instance, a crowd of adults seems to be watching a sporting event; others might be watching a comedian on TV. After sinking into still faces in the first third of the film, any slo-mo change in expression -- much less an actual cheer -- becomes dramatic.

Glass' music, though certainly not without a formal structure, offers fewer emotional cues linked to images than it did in the *Qatsi* films. It is less attention-grabbing, more meditative -- conducive to the hypothesis that *Visitors* is less a message than a Zen koan.

It's no insult to the score, though, to wonder how this piece of Reggio's oeuvre would play stripped of audio entirely, screening in a pristine white room in a museum. Odds are good that far fewer people would sit through from first monkey shot to last, and that something essential would be lost. But completely removing the associations of the music video (always the low-brow reference point for this high-minded work) could add something to a film that, it's safe to say, has a lot to do with the pure act of *watching*.

Venue: Toronto Film Festival (Special Presentations, performed with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra)

Production Company: The Vivid Unknown, LLC

Director: Godfrey Reggio

Producers: Lawrence Taub, Godfrey Reggio, Phoebe Greenberg, Penny Mancuso, Jon Kane, Mara Campione

Executive producers: Dan Noyes, Dean Chenoy

Directors of photography: Trish Govoni, Graham Berry Tom, Lowe

Music: Philip Glass

Editor: Chris Besecker

No rating, 87 minutes

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