

A new director finds 'magic' in film

By RICHARD DODDS

Do you remember "This Is Cinerama," a kind of souped-up travelogue that showcased the wonders of the then-new moviemaking technique? "Koyaanisqatsi," an unusual new movie opening today at the Prytania Theater, is something like a meeting of "This Is Cinerama" and psychedelic drugs.

But it's the value of a return to natural, simple things that director Godfrey Reggio is trying to convey in his wordless documentary. He uses a variety of film techniques to demonstrate how contemporary life is "out of balance" — what "Koyaanisqatsi" means in the Hopi Indian language. The film, Reggio has said, can cause "a drugless high."

The 43-year-old Reggio is a New Orleans native who became a monk in the Christian Brothers before his independent ways led him to leave the order when he was 28. It was his later work with Chicano street gangs in New Mexico that indirectly led him on a seven-year project that became "Koyaanisqatsi."

Interviewed by telephone this week, Reggio said, "I was particularly encouraged by a Luis Bunuel film called 'Los Olvidados' or 'The Young and the Damned.' I used that film to organize nine different gangs and to get public support. I felt it had a very great power."

HE HAD NEVER made a movie before, he said, but "frankly, I felt that was the best preparation for doing something different. Had I gone to film school or been a film scholar, then I think I would have been overly influenced by traditional paths rather than going on my own natural intuition."

What Reggio created is a symphony of images that shows how modern life



Scenes of unspoiled landscapes are followed by surreal visions of urban life in "Koyaanisqatsi," a wordless documentary by former New Orleanian Godfrey Reggio, opening today at the Prytania.

in this country — especially New York and Los Angeles — might look to a visitor from another planet. Time-lapse and fast-motion photography turn everyday sights (freeway traffic, rush-hour pedestrians, assembly lines) into a mesmerizing roller coaster of patterns that contrast with the sweeping, soothing and unviolated landscapes that open the film.

"I felt that the film medium has an implicit magic," Reggio explained. "I felt that we could actually develop a vocabulary of image that could be more articulate than the spoken word."

Without dialogue or plot and with a title that doesn't exactly trip off the

tongue, "Koyaanisqatsi" wasn't an easy film to get made. Reggio had insisted that it be a non-profit venture, and that added to the years it took him to raise the \$3 million budget. When it was finally finished but apparently destined to be shown only at film festivals, museums and schools, it received a push into the mainstream market from filmmaker Francis Coppola.

Through mutual friends, Coppola had heard about Reggio's just-finished project, and a screening was arranged so the famous director could take a look. "After the screening," Reggio recalled, "everyone was naturally anxious to see what

Francis thought. He said he was waiting for a film like this to be produced. He thought it had a significant commercial potential, and that if he could help make that happen, he would be happy to lend his name to the film."

The credits now read "Francis Ford Coppola presents 'Koyaanisqatsi.'" Though he had no creative input, Coppola's distribution team helped in marketing the movie, and it's become a surprise hit in many of the cities and foreign countries where it's opened.

THOUGH HE CLAIMS no interest in a career as a filmmaker, Reggio would like "Koyaanisqatsi" to be the first part of a trilogy. He's now writing the script for the second part, to be called "North-south," and he plans to start filming in July — in 30 South American, African and Asian countries.

"It will deal with the Los Angelesization of the Southern hemisphere," he said. "It's a film that explores the life of direct experience conflicted with the life of technological mediation." The final segment in the trilogy would look at "alternative ways of living as demonstrated by smaller countries."

During his early days as a Christian Brother, Reggio lived in Louisiana's Cajun country, and he commented that "life there was much more in balance" than in many parts of America. As for New Orleans, which he visits about once a year, he said, "Life there is on the grid. It's centralized, accelerated and dense."

"But I would also say that New Orleans is much slower than some of the big cities, and in that sense it's much more enjoyable to be in. It's a big party town. People there like to have a good time, hang out and drink — and I like to do those things, too."