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## FILM REVIEW

### Echoes from our Past, Repeating in our Present and Future Film Review of *Samsara*

By Jim Perretta, PhD

In my high school physics class, I wrote an essay which posed the question: Have our lives improved from modern technology? Now, I also wonder: Are we more evolved than our forebears who did not have computers, cell phones, artificial organs, and other modern devices? How much technology do we need to have a good quality of life?

In his unconventional documentary *Samsara*, director Ron Fricke (*Baraka*, 1992) takes you on a non-linear journey across twenty-five countries in five years of his explorations. This entire journey has been edited down to 102 minutes without any helpful dialogue or narration - just a voracious camera, state-of-the-art time-lapse photography, and an evocative soundtrack.

The term “Samsara” has multiple meanings and applies to many of our world’s Eastern religions (e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism). One interpretation of the term is the endless repeating cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. No matter how much we may strive to break out of this endless repetition and suffering, we cannot.

Fricke holds you captive in your seat, enthralled by visual wonders including natural ones (e.g. vast oceans, canyons, and deserts) and human-made ones (e.g. majestic temples, churches, and skyscrapers, and fragile sand mandalas). Images of lavish urban playgrounds are juxtaposed with those of ravaged shantytowns and storm-struck settlements. Images of embracing parents and infants are juxtaposed with those of endless weaponry, anonymous-looking sex-dolls, immobilized pigs crammed into close living-quarters, frenzied chickens in a slaughterhouse, and scores of waste products.

Many viewers may wonder how Fricke chose to film and construct *Samsara* – where, how, and in which particular sequence. What are his social and political biases? What kind of “message” is he trying to promulgate regarding modern human civilizations? My own opinion is that Fricke is as biased as any one of us is – but we are free to interpret whatever we choose to in his curious and thought-provoking collage-of-a-film.

My own biased interpretation of the film *Samsara* is influenced by my reading of one of my favorite authors, Hermann Hesse (Nobel Laureate, 1946). Hesse’s unforgettable short novel

*Siddhartha* features a chapter also entitled *Samsara*. A sample line from the Bantam paperback (translated by Hilda Rosner):

*“Slowly, like moisture entering the dying tree trunk, slowly filling and rotting it, so did the world and inertia creep into Siddhartha’s soul....made it heavy, made it tired, sent it to sleep.”* (p. 76).

In watching Ron Fricke’s *Samsara*, you will likely feel uncomfortable. You may be unsettled by the lack of plot or narration. You may feel restless from endless reminders of the wanton desecration of our planet. You may feel benumbed by the endless striving of humans – for riches, for connection, for some sense of permanence. You may wonder – what legacy will we leave, as a species, on this planet? Will we leave just a faint echo, as if we never existed?

The only path toward healing may be accepting (rather than denying) the endless repetitions of prior generations and of our own lives. There is no way past suffering – one can only embrace it. In order to take this step, however, one must be fully aware and mindful, free of illusions, and courageous to stand firm, even though we will inevitably lose our fragile sense of “reality” or “permanence”.

*Reviewed by Jim Perretta*

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