



Samsara Discussion Guide

Director: Ron Fricke

Year: 2011

Time: 102 min

You might know this director from:

Journey of Hanuman (2013)

Baraka (1992)

Chronos (1985)

FILM SUMMARY

SAMSARA is a Sanskrit word meaning “the ever-turning wheel of life,” or “wandering on.” This is the point of departure for director Ron Fricke and producer Mark Magidson as they travel the globe, revealing the universality of life. Filmed over five years and spanning 25 countries, SAMSARA takes us to disaster zones, industrial sites, sacred grounds, and natural wonders. Without dialogue or descriptive text, the film challenges us to interpret the story through images and music that are both ancient and modern.

Neither a traditional documentary nor a travelogue, SAMSARA takes the form of a non-verbal, guided meditation. Through powerful images, the film illuminates the links between humanity and the rest of nature, showing how our life cycle mirrors the rhythm of the planet. Expanding on the themes they developed in Baraka (1992) and Chronos (1985), the filmmakers explore the wonders of our world, from the mundane to the miraculous, looking into the immense variations of the human experience.

Their non-verbal approach to filmmaking reveals the essence of a subject, not just its physical appearance. Through the contemplative pace of moving imagery, we are taken on something of a spiritual journey across our earth. Though human realities are varied and landscapes are diverse, we share the same sun, the same air, the same human form. SAMSARA is a stunning reminder that, however large the planet may appear, however diverse we may seem in our teachings and preachings, the natural world and all living beings are part of one magnificent cycle.

FILM THEMES

By presenting opposites, SAMSARA shows how interconnected everything is. Wordlessly, it touches the humanity in all of us and presents the pattern of life itself.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

The scope of SAMSARA is immense, spanning the globe. It ranges from dark destruction to bright celebration. Visual patterns emerge, whether in the cracked mud remains of Hurricane Katrina, the miniscule grains of a Mandala sand painting, the fake fronds of the Dubai Palm Islands, or the white-robed worshippers encircling Mecca. The human and natural worlds are woven together in a rich tapestry of images, illuminating the repetition and reiteration of patterns regardless of their source. These serve as a reminder of our similarities and highlight the cycle of life in which everything is connected, whether plant, animal, or human.

TRANSCENDENCY

The mainstream film industry pummels us with the quick, loud, and clever: more, More. MORE! The barrage of sound and sight is often untranslatable across cultures. By relying on the universality of imagery rather than the limitations of language, and by using slow movements rather than abrupt shot changes, SAMSARA is able to communicate on a universal level, transcending the attributes of a specific society. Instead of relying on words to knit the story together, the film reaches out to the human spirit in people across the globe, from the most remote African tribe to the most urbanized city dweller.

UNITY IN OPPOSITES

SAMSARA attempts to recognize the nature of existence by focusing on extremes, placing opposites against one another. Through the varied natural world - icy glaciers, fiery volcanoes, steaming sulphur mines, and arid desert expanses - we witness the everyday landscapes we inhabit. An array of opposites are presented in the living world: mosques and skyscrapers, strippers and Hasidic Jews, some children are baptized while others scavenge through dumps, remote tribes of people wield manufactured guns, battery chickens face the slaughterhouse, young monks watch their elders create a sand painting. All of these snippets testify to the contradictions of human nature and the natural world.

CREATION VS. DESTRUCTION

Creation and destruction are inherent to life, and SAMSARA only confirms this. There are times when humans construct and nature destroys (as in Hurricane Katrina). There are times when nature constructs and humans destroy (as in battery chickens). Nature can construct and destroy (as in volcanic eruption). Humans can also construct and destroy (as in Mandala sand paintings). There is no life without death, no death without life. The 100 minutes captured in SAMSARA are a beautiful exploration of life's ongoing cycle.

“We’re all so interconnected. There’s a flow we’re all involved in... Life invited all of us to this mud ball that’s floating in space. Life didn’t ask any of us to approve the guest list.”

Ron Fricke

“The film is hopefully an attempt to let you feel like you’re part of the phenomenon of being alive at this moment.”

Mark Magidson

FILM FACTS:

- SAMSARA, a follow-up to 1992's Baraka, won Best Documentary at the Dublin International Film Festival in 2012 and has been nominated for numerous other awards.
- Mark Magidson and Ron Fricke were hoping to film in North Korea, where the notoriously secretive state holds large-scale stadium games every summer. The shoot was, however, cancelled by North Korean authorities when relations with the U.S. soured.
- Samsara is a Sanskrit word, literally translated as "a wandering through" the cycle of death and rebirth to which life in the material world is bound. In the director's words, SAMSARA is "birth, death and rebirth, or impermanence."
- The film's imagery was edited without music. The soundtrack was composed by Michael Stearns, Lisa Gerrard, and Marcello De Francisci, with the composers working on numerous sequences as separate pieces. Fricke and Magidson then connected the music with the footage. The scoring process took around seven months.
- SAMSARA was shot over five years in around 100 locations in 25 countries: Angola, Brazil, China, Denmark, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Ghana, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Israel/Palestine, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Mali, Myanmar, Namibia, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and the U.S.
- In the film industry, Director Ron Fricke is considered a master of both time-lapse photography and large-scale cinematography. He has designed and used his own 65-mm camera equipment for filming projects. Burke worked as the director of photography on "Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith," where he shot the eruption of Mt. Etna in Sicily, used in scenes of the volcanic planet Mustafar.
- In the U.S., 9 of every 10 land animals killed for meat are broiler chickens. Around 9 billion chickens are raised each year. They are allotted 130 square inches of space. The average broiler chicken is 45 days old when slaughtered.
- Mecca is regarded as the holiest city in Islam. Located in Saudi Arabia, it has a resident population of 2 million, which more than triples during the last month of the Islamic calendar. The pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj, is one of the five pillars of Islam and must be completed by every adult Muslim at least in once their lifetime.
- EUPA Factory City in southeast China employs 17,000 individuals who both live and work there, producing 15 million irons each year, as well as microwaves, blenders, etc. Four tons of rice are served daily in the factory's five cafeterias.
- Ron Fricke uses his films to delve into his favorite theme: "humanity's relationship to the eternal."

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Watch BARAKA, the prequel to SAMSARA produced by Fricke and Magidson, released in 1992.
2. Become involved in Earth Day activities in your local community. Earth Day is a time to extend support for environmental protection and is held around the globe on April 22 each year. Visit the [Earth Day Network's](#) website!
3. Follow [Heartland Film](#), a nonprofit arts organization with the mission to "inspire filmmakers and audiences through the transformative power of film," which granted SAMSARA a [Truly Moving Picture Award](#).
4. Check out the [Food Empowerment Project](#). They offer practical information on how to support ethical food production

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.