

Blu-ray Review: Dazzling Visuals Overpower Muddled Messages in ‘Samsara’

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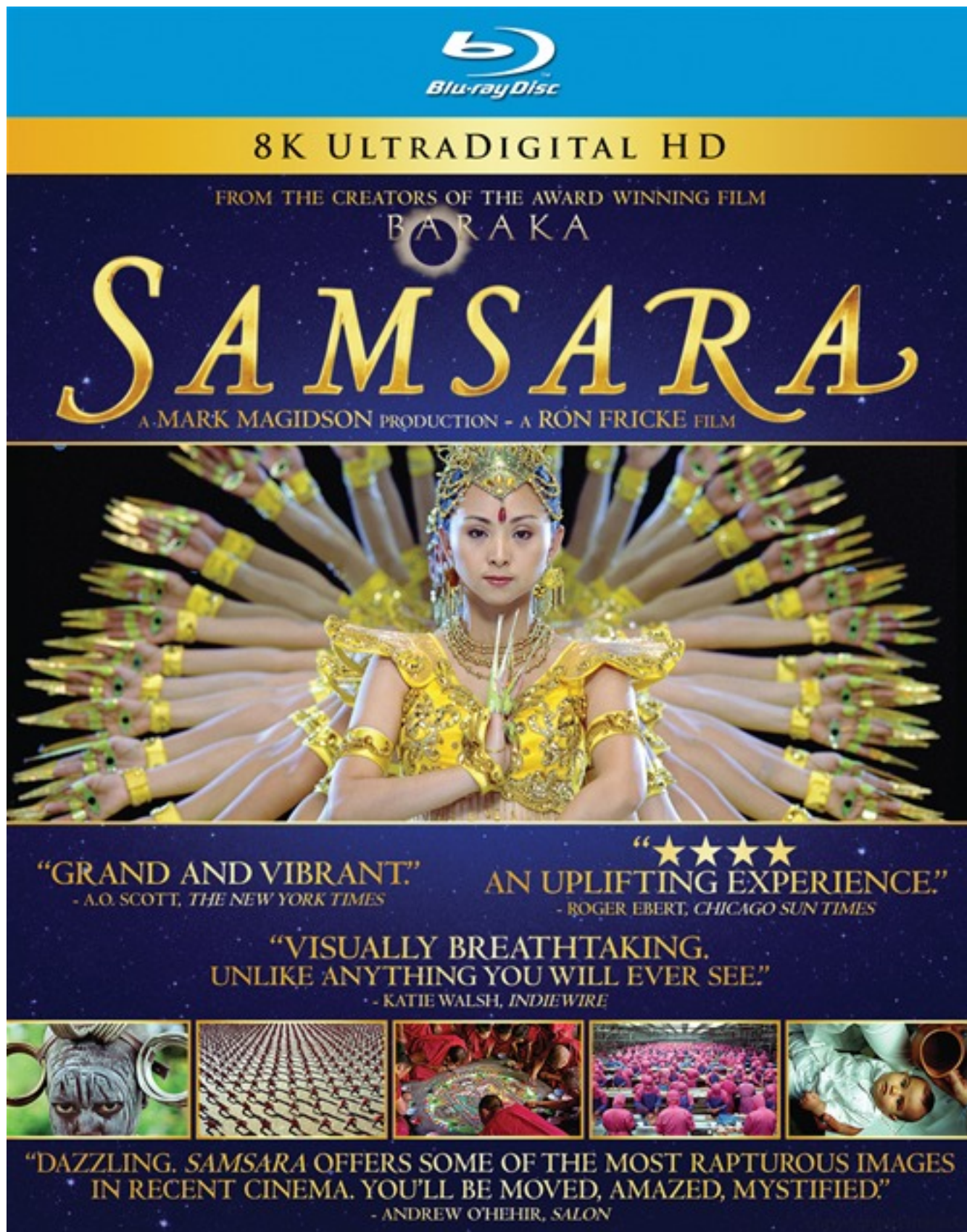
CHICAGO – Blending the spiritual majesty of 1992’s “Baraka” with ominous overtones suggesting a world out of balance (so memorably portrayed in 1982’s “Koyaanisqatsi”), master cinematographer Ron Fricke’s “Samsara” is the sort of rapturous visual feast that his fans have come to expect from him. The key difference here is the spectacular level of clarity brought to each image.

Shot on cumbersome 70mm cameras that were dragged through heavy security across 25 countries, “Samsara” was clearly a labor of love for everyone involved. During its limited theatrical run, the film was screened in a brand-new high-resolution 4K digital projection that boggled moviegoers’ minds with its unprecedented depth of detail. The impact of such an intense sensory experience is often dramatically diminished on the small screen, but thankfully the 8K UltraDigital HD version of the film available on Blu-ray is a mammoth exception.



Blu-ray Rating: **4.0/5.0**

The scintillating perfection of Fricke’s gorgeously lensed vistas are a wonder to behold. The filmmaker’s signature penchant for time lapse photography is fitting here, as the picture regards various manmade structures and artworks that have managed to outlast several ages. Our eternal desire to create images of ourselves extends from pharaoh sarcophagus witnessed in the film’s pre-title sequence to the eerily convincing robots that materialize later on. The rise of synthetic life forms turns out to be a recurring theme in “Samsara,” as technological innovation blurs the line between man and machine. For all of its awe-inspiring depictions of spiritual transcendence—especially the dizzying footage of the Kaaba in Mecca—there’s a chilliness to the imagery that ends up holding the viewer at arm’s length. “Life in a Day,” Kevin Macdonald’s extraordinary assemblage of YouTube-submitted footage shot around the world during a single 24-period, was infused with the sort of innate humanity that “Samsara” ultimately lacks. The impeccable compositions and hyper-clarity bring an otherworldliness to the footage, as if it had been captured on some distant planet or merely created on a computer. The film’s meditative flow is derailed by sequences resembling outtakes from “Food Inc.,” while Olivier de Sagazan’s wildly unsettling performance art is a complete distraction (yet it sure is fun to watch).



Samsara was released on Blu-ray and DVD on January 8th, 2013.

Photo credit: Oscilloscope Laboratories

Regardless of its flaws, "Samsara" still resonates as a hypnotic, often captivating illustration of its title, which is a Sanskrit word meaning "the cycle of death and rebirth to which life in the material world is bound." This cyclical process is unforgettably conveyed in a key sequence of Buddhist monks creating an astoundingly complex Mandala sand painting (Scorsese's "Kundun" mined similar symbolism in this very same practice). The monks regard their meticulously designed work before swiftly wiping it away. Life must go on.

"Samsara" is presented in its 1.78:1 aspect ratio, and is quite simply the best-looking Blu-ray I've ever seen. In nearly 50 minutes worth of featurettes, Fricke takes the viewer through his step-by-step process of making the film, from its conception to the final edit. Producer Mark Magidson is also on hand to discuss his close collaboration with Fricke, and admits that the process of making "Samsara" was more peaceful than their previous efforts ("Chronos" and "Baraka"). Their confidence has certainly increased over the years, allowing them to rely purely on their intuition. David Lynch would undoubtedly approve of their process. Perhaps Fricke can persuade the digital devotee to return to the wonderful world of film. No HD camera can replicate the distinctive power of 70 millimeter. There is simply no app for that.

'Samsara' is released by Oscilloscope Laboratories. It was directed by Ron Fricke. It was released on January 8th, 2013. It is rated PG-13.



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