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Inhuman Temporality: *Koyaanisqatsi*

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upon Avon says, “Where there’s a Will, as an old lapel button I acquired in Stratford—judgment. “To thine about our internal concerns about external judgment. Part of sin, all told. I suppose we never fully outgrow at Bridgewater State. Again, maybe it’s eyed boosterism for the academic experience

TOP 7
I hope this piece doesn’t come off as wide-eyed nostalgia for my pre-adolescent years. Maybe it’s inevitable. Cue “Sweet Caroline.”

BOTTOM 7
I hope this piece doesn’t come off as wide-eyed boosterism for the academic experience at Bridgewater State. Again, maybe it’s inevitable. My “out”: neither is a mortal sin, all told. I suppose we never fully ou­

to the test.

TOP 8
Somewhere, in a storage box, there are audiodiscs of me (fourth-grade me) doing play-by-play coverage of a board game Super Bowl. It was the culmination of a full-on, eight-game season, playing all teams solitaire-style, using See-Action Football, another one of my board-game obsessions. I kept and regularly updated standings—stats too. (What a wealth of these TIME we have when we’re young!) I don’t remember it ever being my dream to BE an announcer; I just WAS an announcer in my head. On some level, I think all sports kids do this (complete with crowd noise). It came naturally—it was all part of our play.

BOTTOM 8
One of the great joys of being a professor is guiding students as they try to get where they want to be. Sometimes the means to that end is video production work. In Videography, it’s making short films (these days: YouTube). In Television Studio Production, it’s simulating news programs, talk shows, and such. You might be surprised just how many students want to be sports­
carrers, doing interviews or play-by-play, tied as they are to our vibrant Boston sports scene. The competition is intense: first for internships and later for paid positions. Feuding that balance between encourage­ment (“Follow your dreams—go after a career that feeds your soul”) and realism (“Do you know how many people want to anchor at NESN?”) is quite tricky. Regardless of the field, my colleagues across the university are daily striking that same balance. It’s an occupational hazard.

TOP 9
I’m a 40-something professor who still loves baseball, and still loves board games. I still love seeing how different companies “opera­
tionalize” statistics into a concise, interactive structure. And I love to play. I recently got a Strat-O-Matic Baseball game featuring the 1967 season, in my ongoing attempt to speed along my New England cultural assimilation. This was, of course, the “Impossible Dream” year in which Carl Yastrzemski won the Triple Crown, and the Red Sox were one game away from winning the World Series. I set up a tour­ nament to play the teams solitaire and “see” them in action. To my horror, the Red Sox are struggling. Yaz is injured. Boston is currently a game away from elimination at the hands of the Yankees. I’m horrified at the prospect of playing Boston right out of the tournament. It’s like rolling the wolves into the D&B campground all over again.

BOTTOM 9
Post-tenure academic life is a funny thing. For instance, after years of portfolio creation and class visitation, I now find myself in the position of evaluating those portfolios and classes. Somewhere along the line, I’ve started to morph from someone seeking mentors to someone attempting to mentor (or at least not scar too terribly). These kinds of changes sneak up on all of us, right? John Lennon was right: “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” Of course, Kenny Rogers was also right: “You got to know where to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em.” That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it. If you know what I mean, and I think you do.

Inhuman Temporality: Koyaanisqatsi
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Withers familiar with Godfrey Reggio’s 1982 motion picture spectacle Koyaanisqatsi know well both its attitude toward human beings and its techniques for manipulating time. The film’s reputation consists of a mere few components: its title is a Hopi word that translates as “life out of balance”; it is a nonfiction, non-narrative feature that uses fast-motion and slow-motion cinematography to contemplate landscapes and cities in the United States; it has a minimalist musical score by Philip Glass that keeps pace with the rhythms of its frame rates and editing; and it protests the impact of human civilization on the natural world. Koyaanisqatsi became an unlikely object of fascination in the 1980s, meeting with surprising success at the box office and enjoying several afterlives: it has yielded two follow-up collaborations between Reggio and Glass called Powaqqatsi (1988) and Naqoyqatsi (2002), inspired countless imitations in television advertising and music videos, and appeared in introductory film textbooks, such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s Film Art (2004). Today, the film continues to find an audience: in December 2012, the Criterion Collection released a box set of the three “Qatsi” films on DVD and Blu-ray, and screenings of Koyaanisqatsi with live musical accompaniment have become part of the repertoire of the Philip Glass Ensemble.

Familiar too are the major strains of criticism of the film. Reviews by Vincent Canby in the New York Times and by Harlan Jacobson in Film Comment read it as a simplifying construct that pits corrupt humanity against natural purity. Canby regarded it as a “‘fully’ of a movie,” in part because its argument constitutes an “unequivocal indictment” of man’s vio­lations of the natural world. Jacobson appraised Koyaanisqatsi more severely as a “banal” polemic. These and other assessments suggest that the film merely recapitulates a trite critique of the industrialized world. Engaging with Koyaanisqatsi’s inhuman temporality, how­ever, means returning our attention to this “familiar” film to take seriously its aesthetic of de-familiarization, an

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The real novelty of *Koyaanisqatsi* is the way it stretches and condenses time, an aspect that remains more startling and strange in 2013 than does the film’s environmentalist critique.

The camera’s knowing, empiricist moment in geological or planetary time. Even when the camera captures images at the conventional rate of 24 frames per second, as it does early in the film, in a series of images of the vast Southwest, the mise-en-scène expresses an alternative temporal scale. In a sequence of shots of Monument Valley followed by a slow pan across a winding canyon, the rock formations and layers of sediment tell time-lapse footage of shifting clouds and fog with slow-motion shots of a waterfall, ocean swells, and crashing waves, adding to the reflection on geological time a sense of the fluid movements that sculpt the landscape. Much later in the film, when *Koyaanisqatsi* presents time-lapse footage of downtown Los Angeles at night, the film echoes the compositions and temporalities identified in its early going with the Southwest. In these panoramas of the city, contemplating high-rise architecture, man-made topography, and canyons, and plateaus; these shots present the world simply “as it is” and yet also accomplish a wonderfully cinematic abstraction, evoking an experience of time known not to humans, but to those desert landforms. The camera later considers the movement of water in a four-minute sequence that intercuts time-lapse shots of shifting clouds and fog with slow-motion shots of a waterfall, ocean swells, and crashing waves. These shots added to the reflection on geological time a sense of the fluid movements that sculpt the landscape. Much later in the film, when *Koyaanisqatsi* presents time-lapse footage of downtown Los Angeles at night, the film echoes the compositions and temporalities identified in its early going with the Southwest. In these panoramas of the city, contemplating high-rise architecture, man-made topography, and flowing movements of automobiles, the camera observes structures reminiscent of the landscapes and bodies of water glimpsed previously. As it regards Los Angeles, the camera re-presents human civilization in non-human time and space: its extreme long shots of skyline and highways remove us from intimate relation to individual persons.

*Koyaanisqatsi*’s director, Godfrey Reggio, purposely aspires to create this alienating effect. His remarks in a 1989 interview suggest his familiarity with the ideas that time can be experienced in more than one way and that temporality expresses ideology: “What we’re trying to do in *Koyaanisqatsi* is show that we’re living in a world that’s engulfed in acceleration.” According to Reggio, the medium of film enables him both to occupy a position inside the Western conception of time and to see that position from the outside. In the same interview, he calls for a “process of re-visualizing,” and he explicitly counterposes his film to a humanist regard for the world: “I’m suggesting that the vision that we need for our day is one that is not anthropomorphized, one that doesn’t put the human being at the center of the universe.” Even as the human subject seems to disappear in many of the most iconic passages in the film, *Koyaanisqatsi* survives in its inhumanity results not from its displacement of the human in its land and cityscapes, but in its protracted and unsettling looks at individual human beings.

To get closer to what we might call the film’s inhumanism, let us turn first to a classic exposition of the de-familiarizing possibilities of motion picture technology. Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is familiar to film scholars who have read and re-read it as a bracing manifesto that champions cinema as the medium par excellence of politicized art. In a passage especially resonant for *Koyaanisqatsi*, Benjamin concentrates on film’s de-familiarizing effects, including slow-motion and fast-motion cinematography:

> With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones… Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person’s posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what it really goes on between hand and metal… Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions.

Benjamin treats the motion picture camera as a tool of aesthetic emancipation from an industrialized “prison-world” of objects and routines. An alternative to “the naked eye,” the camera reveals “a different nature” of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones... Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person’s posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what it really goes on between hand and metal... Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions.

Benjamin’s essay thus seems to ascribe to the camera a kind of de-familiarizing knowledge. The camera, Benjamin further claims, “introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.” Like Reggio’s statements, Benjamin’s notion of the optical unconscious grants to motion picture technology a de-familiarizing capacity, but that capacity entails showing us a positive vision with which we may become familiar.

I contend that *Koyaanisqatsi*’s approach to the human eludes the kind of apprehension implied by both Reggio’s “re-visualizing” and Benjamin’s “unconscious optics”; the film’s work of de-familiarization is most effective when the camera’s knowing, empiricist look encounters some unfathomable knowledge. In the film’s second half, we glimpse inaccessible knowledge in five sequences that feature closer examinations of individual human beings.
The real novelty of Koyaanisqatsi is the way it stretches and condenses time, an aspect that remains more startling and strange in 2013 than does the film’s environmentalist critique.

But the film Koyaanisqatsi is still more hostile to humanism than Reggio’s own statements allow. Its temporal and aesthetic values are not merely an alternative to humanism but are more properly inhuman violations of it. Koyaanisqatsi’s inhumanity results not from its displacement of the human in its land and cityscapes, but in its protracted and unsettling looks at individual human beings.

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sequences, for example, we initially see a single man among the pedestrians on a crowded New York avenue look back over his shoulder at us. Later in this same sequence, the camera offers a perspective on the subject, which the subjects gaze steadily at the camera without quite seeing it; and a middle-aged white man in glasses looks our way. Each of these figures occupies a perspective that cannot be our own, one we cannot know. The dehumanizing but strangely humane address of the human figure in these sequences tells us that we cannot be familiar with them, or with Koyaanisqatsi.

In one especially stunning sequence, for example, we see six shots that emphasize the capacity or incapacity of their subjects return our gaze: one older white man stands as an advertisement for “sightseeing,” though he himself appears unaware of the camera; a young black man acknowledges the camera with a nod as it zooms in to isolate his face; another man shaves, treating the camera as a mirror; a young woman laughs as she either flirts or mocks the camera; an elderly white man gazes in the direction of the camera without quite seeing it; and a middle-aged white man in glasses looks our way. Each of these figures occupies a perspective that cannot be our own, one we cannot know. The dehumanizing but strangely humane address of the human figure in these sequences tells us that we cannot be familiar with them, or with Koyaanisqatsi.

Harlan Jacobson complained, “They . . . ceased to become people,” and Michael Dennehy, in Film Quarterly, concluded that the shot of casino workers exemplifies “contemporary dehumanization.” Jacobson’s and Dennehy’s comments share the wish that Koyaanisqatsi present to us human persons rather than dehumanized or impersonal objects.

Acknowledging the Camera

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TEACHING NOTE

Four Pillars in Understanding Globalization: How I Teach Second Year Seminar

Fang Deng

The end of the twentieth century saw the beginning of a new era of globalization. Economic integration, advances in technology, and global transport networks have forged a “global village.” As the world changes, we also need to change—in both our knowledge and our perspective. Literacy in the twenty-first century is no longer limited to conventional, text-based reading competency—it also includes technology and media applications and extends to intercultural realms of knowledge.

In 2006, I developed a writing-intensive Second Year Seminar, “Globalization: Cultural Conflict and Integration,” as part of Bridgewater State’s new core curricula offerings, and have taught it since 2007. It has been very well received by students; for four years, two sections of the course have been offered every semester and student enrollment is consistently high. The course is designed to inform students about the new era of globalization and encourage them to become globally literate and responsible citizens.

Teaching this course is immensely gratifying to me because it involves innovation. What I enjoy most is the challenge posed by the fact that 95% of students in my class are 19 years old and have never been abroad or had the opportunity to study other cultures—some have even watched foreign movies. So I am challenged to find ways to teach them about globalization and provide them with new and diverse perspectives of the world.

I have met this challenge by creating a three-step process. First, I encourage students to candidly express their opinions on globalization, and then I post their varied opinions on PowerPoint to share how they feel about the changing world. Second, I expose them to some important global events and ask them to explain their opinions on globalization, based on the facts they learn. Finally, I have designed a building that symbolizes our understanding of globalization.

Awareness, the first pillar of understanding globalization, results from an exposure to global trends. In my class, our exposure focuses on economic zones, especially BRIC—the emerging and fast-growing markets of Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Three regions—the U.S. (with 22% share of the world economy); Euro Zone (with 18%); and emerging markets (led by China, with 20%)—are the three legs of the stool that

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