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Inhuman Temporality: *Koyaanisqatsi*

Matt Bell

Viewers 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 "folly" 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



Monument Valley

aesthetic that exceeds and complicates the apparent thematic simplicity identified by the critics. 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.

Some of the best-known passages of the film displace the human figure altogether in favor of meditations on non-human measures of 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

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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

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-visioning," 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, humanism survives in Reggio's account of *Koyaanisqatsi*, both in his notion of artistic agency and in his first-person statement of the new vision that "we need."



Downtown Los Angeles

formations and layers of sediment tell us that the camera is recording a fleeting moment in geological or planetary time. More often, *Koyaanisqatsi* performs the work of de-familiarization through slow-motion and fast-motion photography, which visualizes the movements of our ordinary world at otherwise imperceptible rates of speed. A montage of five time-lapse shots taken with an immobile camera shows the play of shadows cast by clouds and the setting sun on magnificent buttes,

time-lapse shots 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



Tableau Vivant

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.

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

from the one we already know. 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-visioning" 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 that inaccessible knowledge in five sequences that feature closer examinations of individual human

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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"



Advertising Sightseeing



Acknowledging the Camera



Flirting or Mocking

beings. These sequences concern the human subjects' awareness of the presence of the camera; in contrast to earlier perspectives in the film—when Reggio's camera floats unseen in desert landscapes or above urban crowds—these sequences present their human subjects in alternately knowing, hostile, pleading, dissociated, or flirtatious relation to the camera. In the first of these

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

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 with 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 figures in these sequences tells us that we cannot be familiar with them, or with *Koyaanisqatsi*.

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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 series of *tableaux vivants*, in each of which the subjects gaze steadily at the camera: two women stand on a subway platform as a train rushes past them, a jet fighter pilot poses at the rear of his airplane, and six female casino workers in orange work uniforms line up beneath the neon signs of Las Vegas. Commentators on these human figures in *Koyaanisqatsi* have criticized Reggio's use of them in the film:

Koyaanisqatsi's inhuman attention to the human figure in these five sequences operates only in part through objectification. As Jacobson and Dempsey indicate, the camera does deny them the kind of personhood available either through narrative—where characters are *developed*—or through a fetishizing admiration, which might confer "dignity" upon them. The camera does something else in these engagements with human subjects that defamiliarizes not only the individuals seen, but also the looks of the director, the camera, and the audience: in these cases, the subjects answer our efforts to become familiar with them in variously inscrutable ways.



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