

Film Title: *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out Of Balance*

Director: Godfrey Reggio

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Principal Players: Various

Genre: Documentary

Exact Segment: Track 10 entire, "The Grid"

Exact Segment Length: 21:40

Exact Segment Start: Beginning of Track 10, "The Grid" (0:00 of the track; 44:09 into the DVD)

Exact Segment End: High speed traffic, accompanied by frenzied vocals and horns, suddenly ends (1:05:49 into the DVD)

Synopsis: A score by the Minimalist composer Philip Glass accompanies fast and slow-moving images of natural and human (urban, industrial/technological) activity. The segment provokes critical reflection on nature, industrialization, and human experience by depicting them from compelling and often unfamiliar perspectives. Said Glass of the film, "It was like looking at the world for the first time."

Keywords: business, consumerism, critical theory, environment, industrialization, materialism, meaningful work, nature and society, objectivity, technology, work-life balance

Setting the Stage: A low voice chants, "Koyaanisqatsi," as the camera reveals cave drawings of human beings, the first and last of many images that comprise the film. Those drawings are presented adjacent to an explosive rocket launch

(at the beginning) and its destruction and dissolution in the sky (at the end), one of many juxtapositions of natural and industrial experience that imply: “1. Crazy life. 2. Life in turmoil. 3. Life out of balance. 4. Life disintegrating. 5. A state of life that calls for another way of living” - the English translation of the Hopi title. The film, the first in a trilogy, begins with mainly natural images, often sped up or slowed down - canyons, clouds, and streams - before turning to human industrialization, the juxtaposition or integration of nature and humanity, and the consequences of industrialization. The segment depicts wordless, musically accompanied images of industrial technology from aerial and/or otherwise removed points of view that render often familiar images or objects unfamiliar. The viewer may feel invited to ask, “What should I think about this phenomenon that I have in the past taken for granted?”

Description of Events in Segment: There is no “plot” proper in the segment. The segment consists of the constantly changing images summarized below.

The images generally involve human beings relating to the human-made environment, depicting industrial machines and/or products of machines that control and/or are controlled by people. In some images, the human presence is invisible but implied, as in the case of office buildings where from a distance we can see lights on inside but cannot make out any people. In other images, we see human beings seeming to act like machines, moving or being moved en masse along sidewalks, escalators, roads, and bridges. Still other images depict human activity as though it were part of an enormous biological organism, as with automobile traffic and pedestrian traffic which, when sped up and viewed from afar, resembles microscopic images of blood coursing through veins and arteries.

1. Buildings (Mid-sections of twin office towers toward evening; Skyscrapers (enter slow, low, horns); Sunsets in skyscraper window reflections; Night traffic below skyscrapers; Moon rising behind skyscraper)
2. Traffic and buildings (Night traffic (enter frenzied winds); Daylight skyscrapers and traffic (enter choir; vocal and instrumental combinations vary going forward); Pedestrian and automobile traffic)
3. Commuters (Grand Central Station main hall; Grand Central Station down escalators; Revolving doors; Pedestrian bridges; Highway bridges; Revolving door; Pedestrian and automobile traffic; Grand Central Station up escalators; Top of escalators)

4. Machines and/or people (Hot dogs; Deli meats; Data entry; Jeans; Televisions; Data entry; Photocopier; Hot dogs)
5. Traffic and gatherings (Up escalators; Night traffic; Video games; Bowling lanes; Movie theater; Shopping mall; Cash registers)
6. Manufacturing and eating (Twinkies; Food court; Diner; Pop Tarts; Deli meats; Food court)
7. Machines and/or people (Cash register; Newsstand; Automobiles; Money; Automobiles; Money; Deli meats; Microchips; Automobiles)
8. Traffic (Lockheed employee parking lot; Street traffic; Highway traffic; Street traffic; Revolving door; Turnstiles/escalators)
9. Transportation (Shuttle train; Woman walking through airport; Camera through office building; Camera through highway; Camera through street beneath skyscrapers)
10. Traffic (Airplane and automobiles; Pedestrians; Traffic and Las Vegas billboard; Beach; Camera on highways, bridges, and tunnels)
11. Various (Camera through skyscrapers; Camera over assembly line; Elevator down; Twinkies; Grocery store; Cash registers; Televisions; Video game; Television programs and commercials)
12. Hair (slow) (Thunderbird man with sideburns; Flower woman with curls)
13. Traffic (Night traffic; Night traffic from back seat; Night traffic)
14. Various (Exploding television sets; Television anchorman; Distressed couple; Highway and bridge traffic; Disco floor; Video games; Traffic; Sidewalk traffic; Traffic)

Ethical Concepts and Issues Illustrated: Reggio claimed about his three films, “They’re meant to offer an experience rather than an idea or information or a story...It is up for [sic] the viewer to take for herself what it is that means.” We should not take him too seriously on this point; although this film obviously does not belong to the genre of so-called narrative realism, the techniques of audiovisual representation employed through framing, editing, musical accompaniment, and so on, do tell stories. However, whereas we naturally make critical analogies between ethical issues that arise in narrative fiction and those in

real experience, here we are aware that we are watching experience transformed. The familiar is made strange, inviting us to make ethical judgments about experience itself. This purportedly critical debate raises at least two important ethical questions: 1) In relation to aesthetics and ethics, whether objective representation and judgment are possible; and 2) In relation to the film itself, whether a “correct” interpretation of it must be consistent with the artists’ intended ethical interpretation.

The artists’ choice of title for the film - particularly the fifth and final translation of it (please see “Setting the Stage” above) and translations of Hopi Prophecies sung in the film about “disaster,” “purification,” and a “container of ashes [which] might one day...burn the land and boil the oceans” - seem clearly to suggest that we should disapprove of the high-speed deluge of automobile and pedestrian traffic, assembly lines, and other seemingly “unnatural” subjects. By depicting industrial activity from compelling and often unfamiliar perspectives, the segment provokes critical reflection on the meaning and value of that activity and its impact on the natural order. For example, it raises questions about the relationships between nature, technology, and human activity; human beings, work, and leisure; consumption, materialism, and human well-being; and so on.

Finally, if indeed much this activity is unnatural, there remains not only the question of what to do about it but also how human activity, which is a product of nature, could be unnatural. As the “Questions for Discussion” (below) confirm, the film, consistent with much philosophical ethics, raises many ethical questions without necessarily providing the answers.

Additional Comments: Consider showing the entire film: Because there are no words in the film, with the exception of the Hopi title word and Hopi prophecies sung as part of the musical score, it is possible (though perhaps artistic blasphemy) to teach a normal class for the first 44:09 of the film, with the film visible and the volume on quietly, until stepping aside to focus on and listen to the segment. Some of the images will fascinate audience members, though only a few will altogether distract them from normal lecture/discussion. Alternatively, the entire film can be assigned for viewing outside of class. The images from the entire film will give the segment’s industrial/ technological/ human/ natural images useful context.

The music is generally energetic: Although the music begins low and slow, and the segment is long, the generally frenzied pace of images and music in this segment will keep most audience members alert.

Koyaanisqatsi is the first film in a trilogy: The other two members of the trilogy are Powaqatsi: Life in Transformation (1987) and Naqoyqatsi: Life as War (2002).

Questions for Discussion:

Questions of critical and ethical interpretation (main questions are in italics):

1. Reggio claims that the film is “meant to offer an experience rather than an idea or information or a story...It is up for [sic] the viewer to take for herself what it is that means.” What in your opinion is the story or message of this segment of this film? Do you think your opinion is the same as Reggio’s?
2. The twin towers that open and appear several more times in this segment are not the famous World Trade Center towers that fell on September 11, 2001. They may bring them to mind, however, simply by virtue of being twin towers. Does reflecting on 9/11, which occurred two decades after this film footage was recorded (some in Lower Manhattan), contribute anything to your interpretation of what you saw?
3. Most of the human images in the segment are of people dressed for work (for example, white collar workers on escalators) or at work (for example, blue collar workers on assembly lines). How do these images make you feel about work? How do these images make you feel about the evident economic disparities between affluent and assembly line workers? How do these images make you feel about the amount of material resources we consume by going about our “normal” activities?
4. The title of this film is Koyaanisqatsi, which according to the end credits is the Hopi word meaning: “1. Crazy life. 2. Life in turmoil. 3. Life out of balance. 4. Life disintegrating. 5. A state of life that calls for another way of living.” In your opinion, which of these definitions most appropriately fits what you saw?
5. *Some viewers of this film interpret it as denouncing the pervasiveness of industrialization, while others regard it as an “ode to technology.” How would you support the former interpretation? The latter?*
6. *This film could not have been produced without the very industrialization that produced modern technology. Can this fact be reconciled with the view that the film may be understood to denounce technology as excessive or immoral? Are we using scientific advances and technology in the best ways?*

7. This segment presents some images of “natural” phenomena interacting with “human” phenomena (for example, the reflection of a sunset in skyscraper windows, or the moon “rising” behind a skyscraper). In your interpretation, what is the meaning of such images?

8. Since human beings are products of nature, it may be said that human-made phenomena (for example, skyscrapers, automobiles, and Twinkies) are natural. If this is so, is anything unnatural? If yes, what?

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