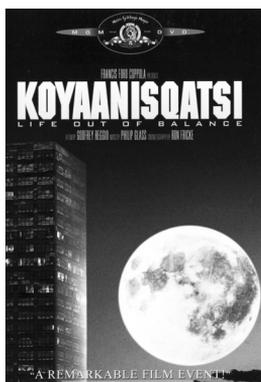


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## TIME, SPEED AND WESTERN MOVIES

Revisiting *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982)



*Koyaanisqatsi* (United States, 1982), 85 min., director and producer: Godfrey Reggio, screenplay: Ron Fricke, Michael Hoenig, Godfrey Reggio, Alton Walpole, music: Philip Glass, cinematography: Ron Fricke.

*Koyaanisqatsi* is a cult American movie and a reference point for many viewers. A strong critique of modernity, a manifesto against industrialization, as well as an artist's view of the brutality of humankind against nature, its enthralling rhythm and music, sublime images and powerful message are still striking today, 35 years after its production. And, in many respects, the movie has become a cultural landmark about the use of modern technology and the destruction of the natural landscape.<sup>1</sup>

It is, perhaps, time to review the movie once more, offering different angles of interpretation and historicization. In this paper, I look at *Koyaanisqatsi* in the context of the American tradition of Western movies, dealing with gendered and racialized perceptions

1 *Koyaanisqatsi* was part of the *Qatsi* trilogy, which includes two other movies, *Powaqqatsi* (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002), both likewise with music by Philip Glass. Here, I focus only on *Koyaanisqatsi*, due to its greater success as well as its novelty.

of nature and Native Americans. Additionally, following the title's meaning (›Life out of Balance‹ is the accepted translation of the original Hopi-language word *Koyaanisqatsi*), I interpret the powerful rhythms of the movie using Paul Virilio's ›dromology‹ (reflecting on speed as a political tool) and Enzo Tiezzi's concept of diverging historical and biological times.

›You may have missed *Koyaanisqatsi*, but about 35 million have caught the film, and in the 1980s it was as much a college cult favorite as *Clockwork Orange* and *Eraserhead*.‹<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the 21st century, journalist and art director Sarah Horowitz described *Koyaanisqatsi* as a movie made of ›time-lapse images of urban life – people going up and down escalators, highways pumping corpuscles of white headlights and red taillights – set to a minimalist score by composer Philip Glass‹.

What kind of movie is *Koyaanisqatsi*? Lacking a conventional narrative or plot, it is difficult to describe the movie adequately, as many reviewers have noted.<sup>3</sup> *Koyaanisqatsi* opens with shots of the landscapes of America's Monument Valley (without a single spoken word throughout the entire film), moving then to a combination of clips focusing on mining industry activities that are heavily reliant on earth-moving machinery. Thus the set changes, and we find ourselves in an accelerated urban landscape, in a crescendo of rhythms, with two important touchstones: footage of the 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing development (St. Louis, Missouri) and a 1970s NASA rocket explosion. The finale is a slow-motion shot of ancient Hopi drawings in a cave, while we hear, as in the introduction, the only human voices of the whole movie: a chorus repeatedly singing ›Koyaanisqatsi‹. The original soundtrack composed by Philip Glass (b. 1937) is a key element of the movie's strength: the music's modulation and resonance heightens the power of the images, masterfully enhancing and escalating their rhythm. The distinctive lullaby style is accompanied by an incessant musical rhythm, which becomes a powerful part of the movie.

It seems indeed, as English literature scholar Jack Solomon has argued, that in *Koyaanisqatsi* the ›postmodern experience is best described as a perceptual montage‹;<sup>4</sup> or, better, as a ›postmodern parody of traditional film documentaries to show us just how senseless and disharmonious the modern world has become‹.<sup>5</sup> But *Koyaanisqatsi* is not a parody. It is a film that portrays the ›squalor of modern industrial civilization‹ and the need to look for ›another way of living‹, which is simply another possible translation of the Hopi word *Koyaanisqatsi*. Design scholar Cameron Tonkinwise discerns in *Koyaanisqatsi* a narrative or trajectory: an ›abstract product lifecycle is shown: from resource extraction (mining detonations) and processing (a foundry), through testing (military weaponry) and factory manufacturing (textiles), to use (shaking a dysfunctional

2 Sarah Horowitz, Into the Cold Clutches of Technology, in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 58 (2002) issue 5, pp. 8-9, here p. 8.

3 For a summary, see Jack Solomon, Our Decentered Culture. The Postmodern Worldview, in: Arthur Berger (ed.), *The Postmodern Presence. Readings on Postmodernism in American Culture and Society*, Walnut Creek 1998, pp. 35-50.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

lighter) and disposal (gutter litter after a fire). Glass curtain wall office buildings are contrasted with the 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing development, an event that Chris Jenks hailed as commencing [architectural] postmodernity.<sup>6</sup>

It is incontestable that the ›avant-garde techniques pioneered by *Koyaanisqatsi* are a cornerstone of environmental film‹,<sup>7</sup> reflecting Dziga Vertov's and Walter Ruttmann's city-based movies of the 1920s.<sup>8</sup> Yet *Koyaanisqatsi* has also provoked criticism: many reviewers ›read it as a simplifying construct that pits corrupt humanity against natural purity‹, or even a ›as a «banal» polemic. These and other assessments suggest that the film merely recapitulates a trite critique of the industrialized world.‹<sup>9</sup> According to this view, *Koyaanisqatsi* juxtaposes the polluted, alienated industrial society against the sublime (American) landscape, leveraging a postmodern vision of primitive societies. In other words, *Koyaanisqatsi* seems to be about ›the feeling of loss and the desire for unity [between nature and humans] that is born of (such) loss.‹<sup>10</sup>

On top of this, naming the movie after a word in the Hopi language inevitably places the film at the center of the Hopi time controversy, namely the debate about the lack of a concept of time in Hopi verbs and the alleged absence of grammatical tenses covering the whole spectrum of time concepts. This has been a long-running discussion, giving rise to a heated academic debate, numerous books, and an extensive entry in Wikipedia. In the film, however, Hopi culture and life remain largely limited to the title and a few shots: *Koyaanisqatsi* does not provide us with any information about the Hopi people, and there is no reference to them apart from the images of the painted caves. Similarly, the (allegedly Hopi or Cree) legend of the Rainbow Warriors, so popular in the 1970s, could be a reference point for the filmmakers, but does not appear in the movie.

## 1. *Koyaanisqatsi* versus Western Movies

In order to appraise the concept of nature and environment behind *Koyaanisqatsi*, we can try to debunk the American views of the *Western frontier* (including Arizona where the Hopi people lived and live, and where much of the shooting was done) and compare *Koyaanisqatsi* to classic western films. The first images of *Koyaanisqatsi* are indeed those

6 Cameron Tonkinwise, *Koyaanisqatsi*, Godfrey Reggio (1982), in: *Design and Culture* 1 (2009), pp. 236-239, here p. 237.

7 Gregory Stephens, *Koyaanisqatsi* and the Visual Narrative of Environmental Film, in: *Screening the Past* 28 (2010), p. 1.

8 See Daniel Morat, Die Sinfonie der Großstadt. Berlin und New York, in: Gerhard Paul/Ralph Schock (eds), *Sound der Zeit. Geräusche, Töne, Stimmen. 1889 bis heute*, Göttingen 2014, pp. 149-154.

9 Matthew Bell, Inhuman Temporality: *Koyaanisqatsi*, in: *Bridgewater Review* 32 (2013) issue 1, pp. 19-22, here p. 19.

10 SueEllen Campbell, The Land and Language of Desire. Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism Meet [1989], in: Cheryll Glotfelty/Harold Fromm (eds), *The Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Athens 1996, pp. 124-136, here p. 134.

of the Hopi people's settlements, but no humans are visible, and we can perhaps agree with media scholar Pat Brereton, who defines the cultural construction of wilderness as »a place of freedom in which we can recover the true self we have lost to the corrupting influence of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity.«<sup>11</sup>

As we know, the classic plot of many westerns embedded nature and the landscape as an essential part of their narrative. The (male) hero goes on a »ride into nature« as a metaphor for the escape from urban oppression into the «freedom» of self-discovery,<sup>12</sup> an escape from (urban and rigid) societal norms. This immersion in nature is undertaken in order to obtain a purer understanding of the self. In this sense, *Koyaanisqatsi* still keeps the promise of a regenerating, pure and pristine natural landscape, but the movie also marks a turning point: we no longer have heroes, but only villains. In *Koyaanisqatsi* we lose the (male) romanticism of the western epics of heroes fighting for progress and civilization; here, progress and civilization are presented only from their dark side – digging, polluting and destroying.

In traditional western movies, the two worlds, the one of (corrupting) civilization and the one of wilderness, are bridged by the male horse-mounted hero. In *Koyaanisqatsi* this not only does not happen, it is neither envisioned nor desired. The two worlds have lost a communication channel. We have the juxtaposition of the majesty of the landscape with the obsession of modern life (openly depicted as out of balance). The violence without a cause found in the exploitation of natural resources has lost its ideological connotation of improvement and the quest for a better life, and is now the pure abuse of planetary resources. As in the American westerns, in *Koyaanisqatsi*, too, »a man went looking for America, but [this time he] couldn't find it anywhere«,<sup>13</sup> confirming the loss of metanarrative and identity.

*Koyaanisqatsi* therefore goes beyond the possibility of reconciling modern Western societies with the natural landscape, arguing the need to reverse the dialectic, inviting Western societies to assimilate Native American cultural values regarding the environment.<sup>14</sup> In *Koyaanisqatsi*, the representation of technology and modernity has not only lost any metanarrative of progress; technology can in fact be interpreted as a tool to shorten life, or to throw life »out of balance«.

However, the movie is weak when it portrays nature as harmony and freedom, because nature is wholly culturally built: »[T]he myth of pristine wilderness is complemented by that of the deep ecological American Indian living a life of primal purity. This myth constructs pre-industrial peoples as a basis in nature for the claims of radical environmentalism, by assuming that they embody alternative lifestyles which hold the key to a more harmonious relationship with nature.«<sup>15</sup> We know that small-scale hunter-gatherer societies exhausted soils with poor irrigation systems, burned

11 Pat Brereton, *Hollywood Utopia. Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema*, Bristol 2005, p. 100.

12 Ibid., p. 104.

13 Ibid.

14 For a corrosive critique of the environmental movement in 1980s USA, see Martin W. Lewis, *Green Delusions. An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism*, Durham 1992.

15 David Ingram, *Green Screen. Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*, Exeter 2007, here p. 45.

forests and killed large numbers of game, beyond subsistence purposes; nor did all tribal groups possess a conservationist ethic.<sup>16</sup> Here the movie has its theoretical weakness, its romanticized ideas.

## 2. Speed and Time

*Koyaanisqatsi* indeed shows the inner workings of industrial production, but in its quest to show – brutally and mercilessly – the intrinsic failure of modernity, the movie is not depressing. It relies on an impressive energy transmitted to the viewer. Speed is the key factor in understanding the movie aesthetically and also conceptually: accelerating or slowing images are the essential elements of the movie's success and of its artistic power. Life in the city is convulsive and accelerated, while nature has a different and slower pace, even an out-of-time aspect, as the movie also shows. Playing with speed is therefore the main driver of the film's appeal, and it is also used to subvert the ›natural‹ order. The clouds mirrored in the glass walls of New York are not only moving faster but also, passing by in reverse, suggest a lost connection with natural phenomena. The clouds moving backwards make us think of the end of cosmic synchrony between the artificial and the natural, a total divergence, in which (accelerated) movement is the crucial factor.

Showing the conflict between the speed of the artificial and the slowness of the natural is indeed not just an avant-garde device, but a more in-depth message of the movie. As the film's director Godfrey Reggio himself stated, ›What we're trying to do in *Koyaanisqatsi* is show that we're living in a world that's engulfed in acceleration.‹<sup>17</sup> We can thus frame *Koyaanisqatsi* as a movie about speed; its authors' critique of modernity is leveled at the very heart of the modernity concept: the use of time and its acceleration. Reaching higher speeds was not only a ›must‹ of modern times; speed was claimed to embody modernity itself, and any slow movement was discarded as obsolete, inadequate and inefficient.<sup>18</sup> The crux of *Koyaanisqatsi* is thus the clash between natural and artificial speed, and the ›film reveals how this triad of elements [availability, sustainability and rush] has been imposed on the cycles and rhythms of both the natural and human world.‹<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Bell, *Inhuman Temporality* (fn. 9), p. 20. Bell adds: ›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.‹

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918*, Cambridge 1986; Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor. Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, New York 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Victor G. Rivas López, A Phenomenological Approach to Earth Oblivion and Human Unbalance in *Koyaanisqatsi*, in: Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka/Patricia Trutty-Coohill (eds), *The Cosmos and the Creative Imagination*, Berlin 2016, pp. 361-379, here p. 361. In a broader sense, the film may now be seen as a

The work of philosopher Paul Virilio on speed as a political factor in modernity may be helpful to understand the *Koyaanisqatsi* narrative.<sup>20</sup> The capitalist acceleration was already sketched by Karl Marx's famous footnote about ›the annihilation of space by time‹, a concept deepened by David Harvey.<sup>21</sup> Others working on time-space compression include Barney Warf, who discussed Fredric Jameson's article published in 1984, i.e. more or less contemporaneously with *Koyaanisqatsi*, and spoke of how, in the era of hypermodernity, it is no longer possible to have a coherent set of geographical and diachronic coordinates: ›The bewildering complexity of postmodern hyperspace exceeds the individual capacity of cognitive representation of the world.‹<sup>22</sup> If we accept this set of thoughts, it is clear that *Koyaanisqatsi* cannot repeat the traditional western-style representation of the Native American. In the past, it was possible to define nature, artifacts and heroes. Moreover, the acceleration of time and the social and geographical pervasiveness of capitalism (including the furious pace at which it exploits resources) carry a loss of cognitive understanding of (post)modern coordinates. *Koyaanisqatsi* (naïvely) retains the classical elements of ›the natural‹ and ›the artificial‹, but there is no (male) horse-mounted hero able to bridge them. The escape from urbanized modernity and the refreshing immersion in the natural landscape of the Monument Valley, so typical of western movies, are lost. *Koyaanisqatsi*'s authors reject modernity as offering nothing but destruction, focusing instead on the sanctuary of a romanticized, pristine indigenous culture. Thus on one side we have (industrialized) people and their assault on the natural world, and on the other only a natural landscape with no human beings visible, just the images of Monument Valley. The only presence admitted is that of the chorus voices.

### 3. Time Dissonance

Acceleration is one side of the coin, but there is also the flipside to be considered: the dissonance between slowness and speed. It is the tension between these two elements which is significant for the movie. Here the authors of the film make two important considerations: speed is characteristic of urbanized modernity, and slowness is characteristic of pre-industrial, ›natural‹ societies. The soundtrack (both in its trance-style

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historical source for and indicator of a new reflection on temporality and ›progress‹ since the 1970s; cf. for this general context Fernando Esposito (ed.), *Zeitenwandel. Transformationen geschichtlicher Zeitlichkeit nach dem Boom*, Göttingen 2017.

20 Paul Virilio, *Vitesse et Politique. Essai de dromologie*, Paris 1977; English translation: *Speed and Politics. An Essay on Dromology*, New York 1986.

21 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford 1989.

22 Barney Warf, *Time-Space Compression. Historical Geographies*, New York 2008, p. 30. See also Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, in: *New Left Review* 1/146 (1984), pp. 59-92.

moments and in its accelerations) enhances this feeling, underlining contrasts, frictions and, of course, speed. Knowing the authors' rejection of the pace of industrialization, their preference for slowness is clear: the slow pace of life is a natural, humanizing pace, whereas speed is dehumanizing, stressful and unpleasant.

There are of course plenty of reasons to criticize these assumptions for being precisely that – assumptions. My aim here is not to discuss the validity of these statements, but to link *Koyaanisqatsi's* concepts with the inspiring, and forgotten, work of Italian chemist and academic Enzo Tiezzi. Tiezzi worked in the 1970s on the clash between biological and human times.<sup>23</sup> Inspired by a meeting with the American biologist Barry Commoner, he writes that the human use of resources is simply too fast, and does not keep pace with biological times. The latter is based on a geological scale, so we have a gap, which has become wider in industrialized societies. This gap is so deep that today we speak of the Anthropocene to define this fundamental change.<sup>24</sup> The accelerated consumption of the planet's resources is therefore critical in two respects: it is too fast for these resources to regenerate (we are consuming in decades fossil fuels which were created over the course of millennia), and it is too fast for the externalities of our lifestyle to be processed (we are producing vast amounts of CO<sub>2</sub>, a lot more than the atmosphere is able to process, and vast amounts of radioactive waste).<sup>25</sup>

In other words, Tiezzi suggested slowing down, emphasizing rhythm and speed as key elements of the discord between humankind and the planet. Both Tiezzi and Reggio held that speed and the lack of synchronization have produced a life out of balance. We can and should criticize the naïve, romanticized assumptions of the movie's authors, but the concept of time and rhythms is nevertheless a valid tool for scrutinizing environmental issues.

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23 Enzo Tiezzi, *Tempi storici, tempi biologici*, Milan 1984. The book was partially translated into English as *The End of Time*, Southampton 2003.

24 For a discussion of the Anthropocene concept and its implications for the humanities, see e.g. Franz Muelshagen, *The »Anthropocene«. A Case for a Climate History of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 9 (2012), URL: <<http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/1-2012/id=4596#en>>; Helmuth Trischler, *The Anthropocene. A Challenge for the History of Science, Technology, and the Environment*, in: *NTM. Journal of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine* 24 (2016), pp. 309-335.

25 Enzo Tiezzi, *The Essence of Time*, Southampton 2002, p. 14.