



## Koyaanisqatsi Discussion Guide

Director: Godfrey Reggio

Year: 1982

Time: 86 min

### You might know this director from:

Visitors (2013)

Naqoyqatsi (2002)

Powaqqatsi (1988)

## FILM SUMMARY

It begins as a slow-motion trip, a deep dark bellowing voice harking from an otherworldly hemisphere. It is as if you are standing on the edge of a canyon, witnessing it in reality rather than through a flickering man-made screen. As if the very things that constitute you, your flesh and blood, are melding into the warm contours of the earth. Crash! Industry, technology, hard cold steel, harsh metallic reflections, grinding gritty human interventions blast forth onto the screen, reminding you of the other half of the world in which you live.

The first of three in the QATSI series, KOYAANISQATSI may be wordless but it certainly isn't silent. Director Godfrey Reggio's message is poignantly transmitted through composer Philip Glass' repetitive, minimalistic soundtrack. The marriage of a slow-motion pan with the soothing low-bowed stroke of symphonic strings counterpoise the time-lapsed rapidity of blatant horns hitting the cold mechanics of conveyor belts, factory floors, and stiff-soled feet on hard pavement.

Reggio wishes to leave the message for us to decipher. The imagery and music are mere guides, yet one can't help but step out of the realm of KOYAANISQATSI feeling as if our extension into the natural world, pushing out past the limitations of the original order of the universe, leads to nothing more than destruction, death, and damage. After witnessing 86 minutes of stunning imagery, the lasting sensation is slightly desperate. Have we Westerners taken the correct fork in the road? Or have we succumbed to an irreversible imbalance?

Over 30 years after its release, KOYAANISQATSI appears both verifiably outdated and futuristically fresh. We have° been exposed to endless hours of slow-motion and time-lapse footage, in everything from feature films to 10-second slots on commercial television. And yet its underlying message, if we listen carefully to the silence between the soundtrack and stare into the stillness between shot changes, is as relevant today as it ever was.

## FILM THEMES

A wordless, minimally musical escapade through the chaos of the Western world, KOYAANISQATSI features the opposing forces at work in order for us to contemplate the planet where we live.

### TECHNOLOGY AS NATURE'S DARK REFLECTIONS

When nature and technology meet, the human intervention at work can appear as a hard slap on the soft face of the natural world. Where there is unity and fluidity in the ocean, every water molecule flowing together, technology replicates this interconnectedness and somehow strips the grace away. Some call this attempt innovative and entrepreneurialistic. KOYAANISQATSI, however, portrays technological advancements as mere shadows of the original source. We replicate the replicated, what we have witnessed in the natural world, contorting it, somehow misplacing our spirits along the way.

### THE LOSS OF CONNECTION

Where do we fit within nature's chaos? Or are we the chaos? We live closer together than ever before, yet we seem to manufacture loneliness, rushing through busy cities in a sea of solitude. We build magnificent and tremendous structures in an effort to mirror the nature's sublime presense, yet many of us have rarely experienced something truly sublime. The film reminds us of the sense of connection and awe that nature can uniquely instill deep inside of us.

### OPPOSITES, IMBALANCES

We live in a world of opposing forces, a yin-yang kaleidoscope. Creation, destruction. Ancient, modern. Light, dark. Movement, immobility. Color, monochrome. Natural, constructed. Through real imagery, KOYAANISQATSI substantiates the surreal. This play of opposites is at the heart of every living being, every riverbed and human head. Yet somehow we have slipped out of this natural balance, trying to overshadow the real with the manufactured, trying to take basic needs. The film begs the question- have we succumbed to an irreversible imbalance?

### THE LACK OF WORDS, THE PRESENCE OF MUSIC

In the absence of words, music takes the role of storytelling device, informing the imagery, directing the viewer. Reggio chose Glass for his surrealistic leanings, his minimalistic soundscape, his ability to paint the airwaves with feeling. A repetitive structure mirrors the world at large, and the steady pace of the instrumentation moves the plot along. By doing away with dialogue and allocating half of the storytelling devices to the soundtrack, the music affects the imagery in a powerful manner, infusing drama in a street setting, defining a scene as soothing or not. A triumphant mountaintop accompanied by a soft symphony. A building toppling to a dissonant synthesizer. A chanting voice closing the film. The human in everything.

**“Koyaanisqatsi:  
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.”**

On-screen text from film

**“Could it be that  
our language  
is no longer  
capable of  
describing the  
world in which  
we live?”**

From The Qatsi Trilogy website

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Which five words would you use to describe KOYAANISQATSI to someone who hasn't seen it?
2. Have you seen either of the other two films in The Qatsi Trilogy? If not, would you like to?
3. How did Philip Glass' soundtrack inform the viewing of the film? Was the soundtrack appropriate for the imagery?
4. In what ways has the world changed since the film was released in 1982?
5. In what ways is the world the same as when the film was released?
6. Did the film leave you feeling more hopeful about or despairing of humanity?
7. Did KOYAANISQATSI portray humanity and technology in more of a negative or positive light? Do you agree or disagree with this portrayal?
8. Did you miss dialog in the film? How could dialog have been included in the film?
9. In which ways did you witness humanity mirroring the natural environment, and in which ways did humanity oppose it?
10. What thoughts/feelings were evoked by the time-lapse imagery? By the slow-motion imagery?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- Since its release in 1982, KOYAANISQATSI has been nominated and won a number of awards. In addition, Philip Glass received an award for Best Music at the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards. In 2000, the film was added to the Library of Congress' National Film Registry.
- Director Godfrey Reggio was born in New Orleans to a family lineage descended from Francesco M. de Reggio, a nobleman and influential government official in Louisiana. He was a Catholic monk for 14 years, during which time he set up many forward-thinking facilities and projects aiding the local community in New Mexico, where he has lived since the 1950s. During his time as a monk, he saw "Los Olvidados" by Luis Bunuel, which was a major source of inspiration behind his filmmaking. KOYAANISQATSI was his first feature film.
- KOYAANISQATSI is the first film in The Qatsi Trilogy, which includes "Powaqqatsi" (life in transformation) and "Naqoyqatsi" (life as war).
- Godfrey chose to use a Hopi Native American word for the title as the language "had no emotional baggage attached to it."
- One shot of a mountain range featured in the film is leftover footage from "The Shining."
- Cinematographer Ron Fricke has directed 4 films.
- Composer Philip Glass was born in Maryland to Jewish parents who had immigrated to the United States from Lithuania. His father owned a record store, and Glass played the flute as a child. Studying at the Juilliard School of Music, the keyboard became his primary instrument. A master of minimalist music, Glass prefers to describe himself as a composer of "music with repetitive structures." When composing the music for KOYAANISQATSI, he divided the film into 12 sections. When Reggio first heard the music, he completely re-edited the film according to the feel of the compositions.
- When the film's soundtrack was released in 1983, it was only 46 minutes long. Glass rerecorded the album in 1998 and released it at 73 minutes long.
- Reggio and director of photography Ron Fricke worked together on a media campaign in New Mexico in the early 1970s. With the \$40,000 remaining from the campaign, Fricke insisted they make a film. Filming began in 1975 for KOYAANISQATSI and continued until 1981. Apart from stock footage of Soviet tanks and a military aircraft, all locations featured in the film were shot in the U.S., and include New York City, Horseshoe Canyon (Utah), St. Louis, Chicago, Washington, the Four Corners, and Los Angeles.
- The cave paintings at the film's start and finish are over 1,500 years old and are located in Utah.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to watch this classic doc.
2. **Watch** the other two films in The Qatsi Trilogy: POWAQQUTSI and NAQOYQATSI. All three films were produced and directed by Godfrey Reggio, with accompanying soundtrack by Philip Glass.
3. **Support** the producers of The Qatsi Trilogy - the [Institute for Regional Education](#) (IRE) - a non-profit volunteer organization devoted to providing the public with information "they would otherwise not receive."
4. **Ask** questions. Consider your impact. Find other like-minded people and take action together, large or small, in order to support a world that you think its worth living in.
5. **Make** one simple effort a day to remove yourself from society's pace and reflect on the natural environment.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**