



Koyaanisqatsi
Director: Godfrey Reggio
Country: USA
Date: 1983



This midweek season is supported by Film Hub North West Central, proud to be part of the BFI Film Audience Network.

A review by Vincent Canby for *The New York Times*:

"KOYAANISQATSI" is a slick, naive, chic, maddening, sometimes very beautiful movie that, if it were a book, would look great on a coffee table. The film is an 87-minute essay in images and sound on the state of American civilization. As non-narrative films go, it is remarkably seductive, but so are the color photographs in the National Geographic.

The film will be shown tonight at 9 at Radio City Music Hall as part of the New York Film Festival, which otherwise has its headquarters at Lincoln Center. The Music Hall is an apt environment in which to present "Koyaanisqatsi." Not only are the Music Hall's projection and sound equipment first-rate, but the theater, like the film, also has a splashy, surface grandeur to it that is open to all sorts of contradictory interpretation.



"Koyaanisqatsi" is the first feature by the 42-year-old Godfrey Reggio, a former member of the Christian Brothers Teaching Order, who, according to his official biography, more recently has been "interested in the impact of the media in conveying ideas rather than promoting commodities." Mr. Reggio must be something of a promotor to have been able to get the film's financing - approximately \$2.5 million - from an organization called the Institute for Regional Education in Santa Fe, N.M. He was also successful in obtaining

the collaboration of two talented artists, Philip Glass, the avant-garde composer ("Einstein on the Beach"), and Ron Fricke, the cameraman. Together, the three have made a frequently hypnotic "folly" of a movie.

I'm not sure that it conveys the ideas Mr. Reggio has in mind, but it's certainly not boring. At one point or another while watching it, one is sure to be reminded of everything from "Modern Times" and "Fantasia" to "This Is Cinerama" and "Billy Jack." However, more than reminding me of any single film, it recalls the briefly fashionable 1960's idea that going to the movies should be a psychedelic experience. At its best, that's exactly what "Koyaanisqatsi" is.

The film's title is a Hopi Indian word that, according to Mr. Reggio, means "life out of balance," which "Koyaanisqatsi" sets out to dramatize. It opens with images suggesting the earth's creation out of flames and then moves into an extended, lyrical passage composed mostly of splendid aerial shots of the Southwest, mostly of its deserts and particularly of dear old Monument Valley, which remains spellbinding to me even without a John Ford stagecoach racing across it.

Inevitably, the film turns its attention to the uses that man has made of the natural resources and beauties of the earth. Mr. Reggio and his collaborators mean, I think, "Koyaanisqatsi" to be a stimulus to thought, though it seems to be an unequivocal indictment when the title is translated as "life out of balance." The film's real point - I hope - is that life has been out of balance



ever since the earth was made, and the the imbalance is simply another definition of life. Thus speaks Billy Jack.

Don't worry about the "ideas." Enjoy the scenery, natural and man-made, photographed in just about every way imaginable, slow motion, time lapse and fast action, in tight close-ups and hallucinatory long shots. The cloud and sea stuff you've seen before, but the city sequences are wild and rough and emotionally moving. Lights from automobiles traveling on a city artery are made to look like a lava flow, sometimes like self-propelled jelly beans. A sequence in which great buildings are demolished becomes so beautiful that all meaning is drained from the images.

Behind these images is Mr. Glass's ominous score, which is often intentionally, angrily intrusive. At the beginning a chorus of voices chants the film's title over and over and over, until, at last, one learns how to pronounce it without dropping any syllables. In the course of the film the chorus also chants Hopi prophecies that sound suitably exotic until they are translated in the end titles, at which point they sound like raw material for Woody Allen - "If we dig precious things from the earth, we will invite disaster."

"Koyaanisqatsi" is an oddball and - if one is willing to put up with a certain amount of solemn picturesqueness - entertaining trip.

From: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9900EFD8123BF937A35753C1A964948260>