SUBLIME CINEMA: EXPERIENTIAL EXCESS AND EMBODIED SPECTATORSHIP

IN GODFREY REGGIO'S QATSI TRILOGY

by

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Abstract

Certain aesthetic experiences resonate so profoundly that they can trigger extreme psychophysiological and emotional responses in the spectator. In this thesis I will explore how Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), *Powaqqatsi* (1988), and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002) exemplify that the stylistic excess of non-verbal cinema can produce a sublime degree of experiential response by way of embodied spectatorship. I will use the observable elements of special effects, cinematography, and music in each film to locate sublime responses as palpable points of affective rupture where audiovisual stimuli results in psychophysiological emotional responses (visual hapticity, synesthesia, kinesthesia). The broader goal of defining "sublime cinema" is to a) reify how this mode of filmmaking relates to aspects of the Digital Age we are all a part of, and b) work towards an analytical methodology that might be applied to other experimental films in order to gauge at which point audiovisual content becomes fully embodied experience.

First I will sketch out the genealogy of Reggio's filmmaking style, reevaluate Kristin Thompson's conceptualization of excess in relation to non-narrative cinema, integrate Vivian Sobchack's research on embodied spectatorship, and unpack the sublime in order to define it cinematically. Second, I will focus on how special effects and cinematographic techniques (slow motion, time lapse, digital manipulation, and camera movement) activate the sublime aspect of an image. Third, I will hone in on the sonic aspect of sublime cinema, and how Philip Glass' scores propel the image with the aid of biomusicological phenomena (rhythmic entrainment and chills). Lastly, I will discuss how Reggio's most recent film *Visitors* (2013) expands on the architecture of sublime cinema by focusing on the reciprocated gaze of its filmed subjects.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Adam Bagatavicius.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"The power of these pieces is that you can induce the meaning out of it that it stimulates in yourself. It's like a trialectic relation between the music, the image, and the viewer. The viewer is active participant, it's not that we're trying to go over the head of the viewer, but right into the solar plexus, right into something that is more akin to direct communion rather than going through the metaphor of language."
– Godfrey Reggio (as quoted in the *Essence of Life* documentary)

Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), *Powaqqatsi* (1988), and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002) exemplify how stylistic excess can be a unifying component of cinema that is capable of producing sublime responses by way of embodied spectatorship. The trialectic relation between image, music, and viewer that Reggio identifies in the preceding quotation will be mirrored by the structure and tone of this thesis as a means to examine where those sublime responses might manifest in relation to audiovisual content. The goal is to isolate sublimity as a palpable psychophysiological element that erupts from key moments along each film's trajectory, to allow deeper consideration of how sublime transformations can be formally generated through special effects, camera movement, and music.

In this thesis, I will argue that the documentary content and technological focus of these films mirrors sublime aspects which the viewer experiences in everyday reality—where technology has inherited the omnipotence and sacredness once reserved for supernatural deities and natural phenomena. In order to formulate a distinctly filmic definition for sublimity, Kristin Thompson's treatment of excess, Vivian Sobchack's work on embodied spectatorship, and various schools of thought on the sublime will provide a theoretical lens through which the *Qatsi* trilogy can be analyzed. The larger objective of this project is to provide a stepping-stone towards the development of a practical working methodology for sublimity that might be applied to other non-narrative films.

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1.1 From City Symphonies to Spiritual Circuitry

"[…] in contemporary society we can see not a decline but a profusion of the sacred; dispersed across the social, natural and technological landscape, the sacred becomes feral."
 – Bronislaw Szerszynski's, *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (171)

Beginning in the 1920s with Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921), Walter Ruttman's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), and Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), a genre of filmmaking emerged that became known as the city symphony: an experimental style of documentary which rendered urban environments with unprecedented kinetic editing and formal interplay (Barrett para. 1-2). Comprised mainly of landscape shots and lively close-ups that invoke the sociocultural spirit of urban space and its quotidian rituals, the city symphony's streets and structures end up coming across as anthropomorphic limbs, and elements like machinery or traffic stand in for main characters and events. The genre briefly re-emerged in the 30s' and 40s' with offerings like *The City* (Ralph Steiner 1939) and *Rhythm of a City* (Arne Sucksdorff 1947), and a preoccupation with vast symbolic landscapes can be evidenced in the fictional works of filmmakers as diverse as Terrence Malick, Werner Herzog, Michelangelo Antonioni, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Agnes Varda, Stanley Kubrick, and Abbas Kiarostami. However, the formal techniques and thematic scope of the city symphony was rejuvenated in a distinctly non-fictional and non-narrative way with Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi.*[1]

Reggio grew up in a devoutly Catholic environment in New Orleans, Louisiana before joining the brotherhood at the age of fourteen, stating that his "Che Guevara was Pope John

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[1] Over a decade earlier, Werner Herzog's *Fata Morgana* (1971)—with its sprawling shots of the Sahara Desert—comes close to embodying a similar yearning to let landscape 'speak for itself,' but differs tonally by adopting a non-humanistic sci-fi approach to the material rather than Reggio's socio-politically charged style. It also differs sonically with its inclusion of narrated creation myths and songs by Leonard Cohen rather than the trademark non-verbal style of Reggio's films. Although still a trailblazing experimental documentary for its time, *Fata Morgana* failed to have the same widespread impact as *Koyaanisqatsi*, perhaps in part due to its lack of substantial financial backing power. The latter had the extra promotional push of Francis Ford Coppola, which enabled it to reach mainstream cinemas.

XXIII" (Patterson para. 7). He led an ascetic lifestyle for fourteen years while training to become a monk within the Congregation of Christian Brothers, became involved in social activism and community work with Chicano street gangs in the barrios of New Mexico, and then defected from the church after becoming aware of their hyper-conservative nature (para. 8). His first life-altering exposure to cinema occurred during his days with the brotherhood, and came in the form of Luis Bunuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950). He says in a 1992 interview with Scott MacDonald that, after being exposed and deeply touched by Bunuel's film (which was shot in the barrios of Mexico City), he "used it as a tool to help organize the gangs [of New Mexico] into a super-family called Young Citizens for Action," and felt that if he "could be touched that deeply by this medium, it was worth exploring" (381). *The Seasons of the Year* (1975) by Artavazd Peleshyan also profoundly moved him; he praises the Armenian director by saying: "If fire is the medium, I make sparks, he makes lightning bolts" (Patterson para. 9).

In 1972, he continued to dilate his social consciousness by working with the American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico to design media campaigns that combatted the rising issue of surveillance and privacy post-Vietnam (para. 10). John Patterson observes of this media campaign that:

> The avant-garde TV spots had almost no words, just images ... And in their violent juxtapositions and clashes of images they contained the germ of Reggio's film-making career: a social conscience crossed with the leanings of a poet and a coruscating Jesuitical rigour. (para. 11)

Although that media campaign deflated, the path that it set Reggio on – one riddled with profound spiritualism, social activism, and critical inquiry into the machinations that belie modern civilization's propriety – led him to become an experimental filmmaker who raised the city symphony from the ashes of decades past with *Koyaanisqatsi*.

His first film took seven years to make (1975 to 1982) and ample magnanimous "angel support" (MacDonald 1992 385) to fund. Using the poetry of natural and technologically modified landscapes in the Westernized world as a cinematic language unto itself, Reggio's first film in the *Qatsi* trilogy took an incisive look at America's intense relationship to technology and consumerism through a spitfire assembly of images depicting strip mines, nuclear test sites, processed food factories, and mass media, while also paying attention to naturally occurring phenomenon, which Mitchell Morris eloquently calls the "poetics of erosion": how forces of wind, water, ice, and gravity ultimately form soil, mountains, and lakes over time (Morris 125). *Powaqqatsi* followed as the second part of the trilogy, turned the camera to developing nations,[2] and focused more exclusively on the laboured survival, cultural traditions, and religious practices of human forms in the less-industrialized regions of the Southern Hemisphere. *Naqoyqatsi* closed off the trilogy nearly two decades later, and emphasizes how the ubiquitous saturation of media and technology has usurped the natural world with a digital one, and mutated the way humanity inhabits this planet. Philip Glass composed hypnotically repetitive, serialized scores for all of these films, and each film's title is a Hopi word that translates to (in order of their release): "life out of balance," "life in transformation," and "life as war." The principle formal crux of all three films is to foreground what would usually be second unit background elements (i.e. landscapes and music) as main events (MacDonald 1988 139-40). Ron Fricke, the cinematographer of *Koyaanisqatsi*, would later go on to expand the global ambitions of this peculiar genre by directing *Baraka* (1992) and *Samsara* (2011).

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[2] More specifically, *Powaqqatsi* includes footage from: Brazil, Egypt, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Nepal, Peru, Jerusalem, and detours to Berlin and Chartres.

It is important to note that Reggio made two short films in between *Koyaanisqatsi* and

Naqoyqatsi titled *Anima Mundi*[3] (1992) and *Evidence* (1995). The former focused on lauding the

animal kingdom, and was commissioned by Bvlgari for the World Wide Fund for Nature, and

the latter looked directly into the eyes of children as they watch Walt Disney's *Dumbo* (1941) in

order to witness the trance-like effects of modern technology, specifically the sedating qualities

of a television's cathode ray tubes. In order to retain a tighter analytical focus, the *Qatsi* trilogy

will serve as the main guiding light throughout this thesis, while Reggio's recent feature length

film *Visitors* (2013) will provide a concluding coda as to where the genre might be heading.

Given Reggio's background as a reformed Christian Brother, monk, teacher, and activist,

there is without a doubt a certain spiritual, didactic, and sociopolitical spark imbued in his films

that cantilevers the ambiguous experimentalism of his radical formal approach. This weaving

together of airy spiritualism and fiery activism plays a big part in generating the alchemy which

elevates these films to a sublime and emotionally riveting level, but more will be said about the

constitution of the sublime further in.

Since Reggio's revitalization of the city symphony genre, the trademark techniques used

throughout the *Qatsi* trilogy—such as (at-the-time) cutting edge time lapse photography and

hyperkinetic camera choreography—have been re-appropriated by commercial advertisements,[4]

nature documentaries, high profile television shows such as *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan 2008-

2013) and *Mr. Robot* (Sam Esmail 2015–), as well as the opening credit sequences for *House of*

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[3] A Latin title that translates to either "world soul" or "the soul of the world."

[4] An ironic fact, since consumer culture is one of the central things that these films are trying to highlight as a destabilizing force in our natural environment. Reggio examines this co-optation and assimilation of technological trends directly in *Naqoyqatsi* by using the same virtual technology that has been weaponized by commercialism in order to comment on it.

Cards (David Fincher 2013–) and *Sense8* (The Wachowskis 2015–). Robert Maycock observes

of *Koyaansiqatsi'*s widespread impact that:

> Its speeded up sequences of traffic and pedestrians, and clouds growing and shrinking, have passed into the common consciousness. This happened not so much because many people saw the film, but rather as a result of its influence on other film-makers and particularly on the directors of music videos and advertisements. It is hard to go through an evening's television anywhere in the world without manically whizzing road systems or self-building mountains of cumulus showing up during at least one commercial break. (138)

It is my hopes in this thesis to consider how innovative these techniques were before they were

co-opted by common (media) consciousness to sell products, and to focus on that incendiary

point of departure when Reggio first gave the city symphony second life.

This reconstituted form of the genre has alternately been characterized as non-verbal,

poetic, categorical, essayistic, docufiction, or simply experimental. None of these labels

adequately encapsulate a genre as elusive as the modern city symphony: non-verbal might imply

entirely 'silent'; non-narrative can suggest a total lack of teleological momentum or emotional

attachment; David Bordwell's categorical cinema (355) might come across as too clinical

sounding, undercutting the profound strength of these films; experimental or avant-garde cinema

can be too general or broad a designation; essayistic cinema comes close in its incisive intention,

but is too concretely defined as verbally didactic (Corrigan 220); more esoteric labels such as

elemental, ecstatic, epiphanic, or epic cinema might come across as too 'buzzwordy' or

pretentious. Even the original term of city symphony no longer indicates the way that similar

cinematic techniques and non-narrative modes of representation have been used to capture

subject matter other than cities as the proverbial symphony.

For the sake of providing this thesis with a referential and theoretical backbone, I argue

that "sublime cinema" is a more appropriate term to encompass this rarified breed of

filmmaking, not only due to its radical form and excessive stylistic content, but also the modes of embodied spectatorship that such radicalized components elicit. As one of the only cohesive, multi-part bodies of work within what will soon come to be defined as sublime cinema, the *Qatsi* trilogy will be adopted as a skeleton key to unlock the preceding argument, and illustrate that even when the subjective experience of sublime moments cannot be neatly articulated, their potential trigger points can be located along the axes of cinematic form and content to generate inquiry into the nature of sublimity and experiential viewing procedures.

1.2   Excess

"Excess is not only counternarrative; it is also counter-unity."
– Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess" (57)

Kristin Thompson's thought-provoking treatment of excess from 1977 foregrounds how certain moments in conventional narratives incorporate stylistic elements that seem to overflow from a film's linear narrative construction. By exceeding the normative bounds of a given narrative, she claims that such moments of stylistic excess serve to disunify the narrative of a film in relation to the rest of its elements. While her central claims are valid with regards to narrative cinema, they are insufficient to define the kind of excess that gives films like *Koyaanisqatsi* its trademark shape and style. Although excess can fragment a conventional narrative, I would like to invert Thompson's line of argumentation in this section by considering how excess gives *non*-narrative cinema a sense of unity and cohesion.

Applying Thompson's model directly to non-narrative cinema highlights a few aspects of her theory that must be reevaluated. When excess is used consistently, whether with regard to lavish (even grotesque) style or an overwhelming bombardment of content, rather than championing counter-unity, it in fact does the opposite by supplying a film with its main

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unifying glue. Even the most garish images and musical motifs that leave spectators with headaches and sore eyes can still do so because they strive for stylistic unity and a sense of intuitively apprehended closure.

Similarly, Thompson writes that: "Excess forms no specific patterns which we could say are characteristic of the work" (55). When excessive formal aspects are consistently woven together as trademarks of a non-narrative film, how are they *not* characteristic of the work itself? To add, do patterns by their very nature not denote excess of repetition, and through the analysis of that repetition, culminate in the central meaning and aesthetic germ of a film?

Thompson argues that excessive components imply "a gap or lag in motivation" (57), and diagnoses them as "problematic" or "unclear" elements (60). Within the framework of non-narrative cinema, gaps or lags in motivation become the essential motivation, and these diagnosed elements could simply be called "ambiguous" rather than disunifying. For instance, in Reggio's films the constant barrage of Glass' score and the visceral transformations the image undergoes by way of special effects serves the twofold purpose of reinforcing these kinds of ambiguity while binding the entire film together through stylistic excess.

One aspect of Thompson's treatment that provides particularly interesting food for thought when connected with non-narrative filmmaking is the way excess reveals the "underlaying arbitrariness of the narrative" and how narratives make use of logic, but are not inherently logical (62). What this passage indicates without explicitly spelling it out is how automatically the viewer pieces together narratives in search of meaning. This narrative assembly has become such an intuitive part of movie going that it is practically pre-rational, and like the underlaying arbitrariness of the narrative's logic, has also become a seemingly arbitrary process. The alchemical formula of *Qatsi* (and perhaps sublime cinema in general, as it will

come to be defined in sections 1.4 and 1.5) takes this notion one step further by blurring fiction with non-fiction, and targeting the arbitrariness of the world's real-life quotidian routines and our daily consumption as its subject matter. Remoulding these mundane details in a formally striking manner is another part of what gives such films their sublime power—their ability to defamiliarize an object or place and refresh the viewer's experience of it.

In the early years of Soviet cinema, Boris Eikhenbaum declared of art's strange utility that it: "lives by being abstracted from everyday use in that it has no practical application…If art does employ everyday things then it is as material—with the aim of presenting it in an unexpected interpretation or displaced form" (Petrić 7). During that same era, "FEKS (Factory of the Experimental)" was heralded by Yuri Tynyanov as a way to establish "freedom from genre, the optional nature of traditions and the ability to reconcile opposites" through "'poetic' rather than 'prosaic' interpretation of the cinematic construction" (258). Lastly, the "the formalist method of 'defamiliarization'" and "making-it-strange" ties these formulations together into one technique that was championed by Viktor Shklovsky as a means to "transform ordinary objects into symbolic visual signs" (11). Reggio, perhaps unwittingly, takes up the mantle of this formalist legacy, and holds up this transformative technique of defamiliarization in a way that poeticizes the entire world. When Tynyanov observes that FEKS "brings nearer and clarifies the genesis of the epoch in which the audience is living and...helps them to orientate themselves" (258-9), the same could just as easily be said of Reggio's filmmaking.

From this angle, the excessive subject matter that binds the *Qatsi* films together is also paradoxically that which unifies our actual lives *through* its fragmenting impulse. Excess and overstimulation abound—at bus stops, malls, highways, nightclubs, casinos, bathroom stalls— and bombard us to a point of numbness. A virtual reality of advertisements and commodities are

embedded in the waking reality of populated spaces, amounting to what Vivian Sobchack calls a "crisis of electronic representation" (161). This crisis state fragments and proliferates each user's identity as they juggle the fast-paced schizophrenic tempo of urban existence, where the bombardment of commercials cannot be turned off, and identity doubling occurs every time fractured pieces of the user are exhibited through social media interfaces like Facebook.

At the same time, the omnipresence of this technology and the mass surveillance across the globe *interconnects*, and accompanies the user everywhere; the very fabric that stitches those disparate advertisements, products, and constructed desires together is cohesive. As in sublime cinema, the aesthetic and material excesses found in our day-to-day lives are unifying red threads—technology has become secularized monotheism. Sobchack expands:

> It is thus not surprising that today what seems for many, to hold identity together is coherence of another kind: the ongoing affirmation of constant cell phone calls, electronic pages, palm pilot messaging—these standing less as significant communication than as the exterior, objective proof of one's existence, of one's 'being-in-the-world'. (156)

Spiritual impulses manifest in the secular world through technology, and are a way for people to reinvent how their identities are broadcasted. Each new gadget is a refraction of this proverbial cyber-god's likeness, and all of these methods of communication keep users (one could instead venture to say 'addicts') dangling on a precipice between entropy and eternity.

In the end, the fragmenting and unifying impulses of excess in the real world form two symbiotic halves of the same perceptual process. By striving towards a greater sense of community and connection through technology, we also distance ourselves from intimate physical engagement by filtering personalities through screens and sealing ourselves off in

hermetic bubbles of microdata. We cannot help but acknowledge and accept the ongoing flood of

technology as our new habitat.[5] Reggio further explains in an interview with Nikola Danaylov:

> We're all becoming the planet we live on...the planet we live on is a technological
> environment. This idea of singularity has to do with becoming at one with
> technology, we can even call it a 'cyborg state'. To me, we are in the cyborg state,
> not approaching it. It's not the cyborg state of science fiction, it's the cyborg state of
> the fiction of science. ("Singularity")

Reggio's films are time capsules of this mediated post-modern experience, and not a far cry from

the motivation of their prototypical lineage in city symphonies like *Man With a Movie Camera*,

where Vertov's Kino-Eye and Futurist postulations strove to capture a technologically

perfectible human eye, and to literally embody this technology. Contrary to Thompson's claims

about its disunifying properties, excess is the stylistic and philosophical binding agent used by

these filmmakers to achieve their creative vision.

1.3   Embodied Spectatorship

"Phenomenological analysis does not end with the 'thick' description and thematization of the phenomenon under
investigation. It aims also for an interpretation of the phenomenon. That discloses, however partially, the lived
meaning, significance, and non neutral value it has for those who engage it."
– Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* (160)

Bodies make sense of texture just as critical perception shapes meaning through text.

Structural experimentation and non-narrativity does for a film's formal approach what non-verbal

communication does for its content in terms of opening up a wellspring of potential meanings.

When a film's text is rendered as texture, it becomes more accessible and challenging to the

senses because it cannot be interpreted through the same narrative spyglass as mainstream

cinema. The viewer's personal journey and all the synaptic sensory flares that are sparked by the

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[5] It is startling to think that new generations grow up not knowing a time before Marshall McLuhan's global village
manifested as the Internet, except through archival footage and documentation of earlier years which themselves are
transmitted through technological reproduction.

idiosyncratic shape that their journey takes become the integral meat and potatoes of the experience. Since this thesis will focus on textural rather than textual analysis, and because writing so adamantly about a subject that evades the written word will be the most arduous part of this writing process, it will be helpful to establish a foundational theory for embodiment that can be used to locate and fish out textural information. I can think of no better means to do this than by referencing Vivian Sobchack's innovative writings on embodied spectatorship and alternative modes of perception.[6]

Sobchack focuses on the convergence of five senses in the lived body as a hub or locus for experiential cinematic interaction. Her discussions have a preponderance for sensual filmic readings, and she annunciates her personal preoccupation with the 'body contact' spurred by films like *The Piano* (Jane Campion 1993) throughout her groundbreaking book on phenomenological spectatorial strategies: *Carnal Thoughts*. The neologism "cinesthetic" that appears in the title of that book's third chapter ("What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh") fuses together the notions of cinema, synesthesia, and coenesthesia, and is a key formulation that will help make sense of these challenging films. Synesthesia means experiencing one sense involuntarily through another (i.e. specific musical frequencies or chords triggering an ecstatic or repulsive flash of a certain colour), and can also be used metaphorically to describe one kind of sense-impression with another (i.e. the waves sound

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[6] On a crucial side note, the reader will notice a glaring lack of reference to the phenomenological inquires of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Siegfried Kracauer, and Ludwig Wittgenstein throughout this thesis. It must be mentioned that I am not turning a blind eye to these foundational theorists (upon which Sobchack's own formulations are built) for lack of interest in their seminal texts. I have made the concerted decision to select Sobchack as a theoretical champion for embodied spectatorship because her use of language is eminently accessible and targets film studies more head-on than other phenomenologists. In addition, the evocative nature of her descriptions and terminology strikes a readymade parallel with my own intentions in this thesis. Sobchack's style will allow me analyze *Qatsi* more succinctly than if I had spent countless pages contextualizing the germination of each theoretical root.

blue, the ocean looks salty). The lesser-used medical term conesthesia has been defined according to Sobchack as:

> The perception of one's whole bodily state as the sum of its somatic perceptions and refers to a certain pre-logical unity of the sensorium that exists as the carnal foundation of that hierarchical arrangement of the senses achieved through cultural immersion and practice. (68)

Both of these fascinating terms unhinge sight from the top of the sensorial hierarchy in the cinematic experience, equalizing the value and cross talk between it and the other senses in a way that will prove to be useful throughout this study when discussing how image, sound, and touch interrelate and co-here.

One of embodied spectatorship's defining traits is the way the participant derives sensual 'breakthroughs' and valuable experiences from their decidedly active investment in the perceptual experience. While the film-going experience can take a person off guard with the sensations it invokes, embodied spectatorship is still an eminently active form of spectatorship; one could even say they are one in the same. Non-narrative texts—and this much might be said about any experimental film, not just what I will frame as 'sublime cinema'—often open themselves up in a way that invites the spectator to render potent meaning from ambiguous elements as a recombinant factor of the film's excessive properties.

The less narrative action there is in a film, the greater the emphasis becomes on abstraction, sensual affect, and a desire to dig through the materials of construction for meaning. Some examples from experimental filmmaking include scratches on celluloid used by Len Lye in *Free Radicals* (1979), insect parts in Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963), as well as stock footage, audio, and optical printing in David Rimmer's *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1972). This inclination for active spectatorship does not imply that participants who find these films to be

excruciatingly boring or who fall asleep during a screening are doing it the 'wrong way' or are simply not 'activating' enough; tepid or frustrated responses are just as valid as those of an avid fan of the genre, and might even result despite a concerted effort to be a rapt audience member!

However, the more the viewer allows their synapses, sense-impressions, and sense-memory to fire off, the more meaning *can* (that is not to say with full certainty *will*) be cultivated from what they are seeing, and the more what they are seeing seamlessly fuses to what they are hearing, feeling, touching, even tasting or smelling. No singular art form exists or 'grows up' in a vacuum, and neither do any of the five basic human senses, which arguably makes Sobchack's "cinesthetic subject" a return to humankind's more instinctive, originary perceptual design.

One basic scenario to expand on how centrally anchored and co-shaping the senses are: a blind person is still able to navigate through the world by compensating for their lack of sight by reconfiguring how they use their other senses—they displace the lack of one perception by cranking their other senses into overdrive, transmuting the supposed 'vitalness' of eyesight into what we might consider to be a form of auditory and/or haptic sight. A deaf person may do the same thing with the aid of visual cues and vibrations, just as a physically disabled person is not necessarily inhibited from having a full-bodied lifestyle thanks to prosthetic limbs and other movement-enabling devices. The efficacy of our five senses is not limited to the way they are supposed to function in a "by the books" way; they can be remodeled based on necessity to fill in the gaps of survival, just as a foreigner who does not speak one lick of a country's native tongue can quickly adapt to circumstance and become fluent in order to survive. The alignment of humankind's five senses and the functionality of sensory processing can be retrained. Even *non-human* sensory processing can be explored beyond the limits of what scientists would have deemed feasible two decades ago, as affirmed by research in Damanhur that has made

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interspecies concerts between humans and plants a possibility with a device that translates a plant's electromagnetic variations into sound frequencies that adapt and react to the sonic stimuli of its surroundings ("Music of the Plants").

Using this as an analogy for movie going, there are modes of spectatorship and formal representation that are only burgeoning for the first time like tadpoles from the obscurity of new technical innovations. Similarly, there are newfound primordial species only now being discovered at the bottom of the ocean in the melting pot that is 21st century media and DIY culture. As we move from text to texture as a paramount means of conveying ourselves and interpreting the media-saturated world around us, there are not enough words to unpack the ripe dawning of this Information Age, despite the exponential rise of global population and the curiously dwindling presence of predominantly used languages.

The analytical portion of this thesis will zoom in on the way three of our fives senses (sight, sound, and touch) are triggered by the textural qualities in the *Qatsi* trilogy, and amplified by "how the electronic is experienced phenomenologically and simulated" (Sobchack 154). My discussion of Reggio's films will also extend Sobchack's framework in three ways:

1) By taking this synergy of the five senses—and their synesthetic/coenesthetic intersections—into the realm of the sublime, and considering where excess erupts from those points of sensory convergence, and how these eruptions are mediated by technological interfaces,

2) Honing in on the tactile and kinesthetic capabilities of Philip Glass's scores, especially since the tactile capacity of music is something Sobchack never addresses,

3) Using this embodied foundation to further invert Thompson's overarching claim that excess is disunifying.

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1.4   Sublime Methodology

"The sudden appearance of the machine in the garden is an arresting, endlessly evocative image. It causes the instantaneous clash of opposed states of mind: a strong urge to believe in the ritual myth along with an awareness of industrialization as counterforce to the myth...it is a cardinal metaphor of contradiction, exfoliating, through associated images and ideas, into a design governing the meaning of entire works...transcendental, tragic, and vernacular..."   – Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (229)

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the noun "sublime" can be defined as follows:

> 1: to cause to pass directly from the solid to the vapor state and condense back to solid form; 2 [French sublimer, from Latin sublimare] a (1): to elevate or exalt especially in dignity or honor (2): to render finer (as in purity or excellence) b: to convert (something inferior) into something of higher worth.

As an adjective, sublime describes something that is:

> 1 a: lofty, grand, or exalted in thought, expression, or manner b: of outstanding spiritual, intellectual, or moral worth c: tending to inspire awe usually because of elevated quality (as of beauty, nobility, or grandeur) or transcendent excellence; 2 a archaic: high in place b obsolete: lofty of mien: HAUGHTY c capitalized : SUPREME — used in a style of address d: COMPLETE, UTTER.

Even the most basic dictionary definition for the term connotes philosophical notions of infinity, reverence, excess, profound experience, and an overflow of information, be it textual, symbolic, sonic, or kinetic. It comes as no surprise then, that the sublime's multifarious definitions and theoretical formulations are just as expansive as the items it is often used to describe.

Longinus first employed the sublime in the year 100 CE to describe rhetoric. Immanuel Kant applied it to transcendental aesthetics in the 18th century, categorizing the sublime as an elevated criterion for beauty in the case of art, and where nature is concerned, as being either mathematical (i.e. the immeasurable vastness of the night sky) or dynamic (i.e. a tornado and other life-threatening forces of nature that elicit self-preservation instincts). Shortly after Kant, Edmund Burke staked the claims that: terror is the sublime's ruling principle, astonishment is the passion that this terror stirs, and beauty is in direct opposition to the sublime. In the technological

sublime put forth by Leo Marx in the 20th century and developed at greater length by David E. Nye and Maurizio Bolognini in the 1990s, monumental industrial achievements and the human capacity to transform landscapes (i.e. with skyscrapers, boats, bridges, world wonders, and world fairs) forcefully occupied the awe and fear-inspiring place of nature. One of the most recent incarnations of the sublime is Jos De Mul's "biotechnological sublime," where "nature becomes a 'second' or 'next nature'" by way of biotechnological mediation, and "the sublime seems to regain a natural dimension" (33).

Since technology is the main object of Reggio's focus, it will be useful to unpack the technological sublime in greater detail to incorporate some of those observations throughout the analysis. To recapitulate then: nearly two thousand years after Longinus in 1964, Leo Marx was first to reposition this rhetorical aspect of the sublime as "the rhetoric of the technological sublime" (195), brought about by the emergence of industrialization and railroads—a 'machine' that started inhabiting gardens and the wilderness. It was, according to Marx, during this period of industrialization that "the awe and reverence once reserved for the Deity and later bestowed upon the visible landscape is directed towards technology or, rather, the technological conquest of matter" (197). Bronislaw Szerszynski reifies the spiritual dimension of the technological sublime in a similar way by saying that it "[exalted] the power to dominate nature, [and] provided a new, non-denominational civil religion to unite a pluralistic nation" (61). Explicit religious beliefs of the old world became implicit consecrated practice of the new world, technology became mythologized, nature became commoditized, and the pre-established order of civilization up to that point was drastically re-arranged by economic production, which became automated and accelerated.

Once continental industrialization shifted to global digitization by the end of the 20th

century, the globe itself would transform into what Marshall McLuhan prophetically called an "electrically contracted…village" (McLuhan 20). The machine would no longer be relegated to the garden, but would instead become mobile and rampant, appearing as talismans in our pockets, by our bedside, at work and home, for business and pleasure, from the lowest subterranean points to the highest zeniths it could reach before exploding from the pressure.

Most notably, with the dawning of the technological sublime, a god-like propensity for creation was placed in human hands that could control these astoundingly powerful machines for the first time. Yet, in every unsuccessful instance of troubleshooting or pressing the 'wrong button,' this technology threatened to spiral out of control, and exist as something independent from the human leash that was supposedly capable of keeping it tame and regulated. The more this god-like technology's margin of error grew alongside the innovations themselves, the more a technologically driven extinction of the planet resonated as a genuine possibility and grim anxiety. Self-governing global surveillance technology, GMOs in food and hygienic products (whose traceable negative side effects might only be discovered decades later), and atomic power are just a few common technological aspects that have taken on a Promethean life of their own.

By the Information Era, the unlimited possibility that came to fruition as a part of the sublime discourse surrounding technology has been domesticated, miniaturized, curated, and customized. The outcome and absurd possibilities are now more outlandish than a toy poodle with zebra-dyed fur, manicured nails, and poofs of hair that resemble topiaries, or more realistically, a microchip-sized camera that captures every micro-second of a person's waking and sleeping hours with razor sharp precision, even if those recorded subjects dull the razor's edge by revisiting only the most banal aspects of the captured footage. It might be a loaded question to ask if the mechanisms of social upkeep have evolved much over the past hundred

years in this respect, but it is nonetheless frighteningly easy to draw parallels between current modes of digital interaction—photos of breakfast, 'selfies,' pets, flowers, drunken nights at a bar, and vacations, all rendered as cultural currency on the internet—and older traditions such as still life art, commissioned portraiture, landscape painting…perhaps even taxidermy and death masks. Although greater in quantity, the current modes of representation are arguably the same in kind. The unlimited possibility of this technology is somehow eminently disposable and indispensable to our habitus, serving as vital life essence and a way to literally kill time.

One thing that has not changed since Burke's formulation of the sublime: terror and astonishment[7] are still the external, often conflicting moods sparked by the more technological formulations of the sublime. Images on a screen might be viewed from the safety of living rooms and theatres, but because of the activistic impetus underlying Reggio's films and their content's grounding in the turbulence of reality, that safe distance from experiencing the terror aspect of sublimity first-hand (like the artistic intention itself) has been ambiguated by technological representation, turning the actuality of the subject matter into cerebral discomfort by way of the viewer's visceral embodied engagement and empathy.

The technological sublime ensnares us in a state of constant resumption and mutability, like a chameleon that seems to take a half lurch back for every step forward, or one of the later sequences from *Naqoyqatsi* where a digital painting restlessly morphs without settling on one image. In this sense, the technological sublime can be seen as a syncretic apex of the term, borrowing as much from Longinus's rhetoric as it does from Burke's psychological probing or Kant's transcendental aesthetics. All of these definitions and interpretations branch out of one

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[7] Under which falls awe, reverence, and respect as lesser degrees of the same emotion (Szerszynski 60).

locus that is encapsulated by Reggio's films: our profound relationship to technology.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the sublime has come full circle since Longinus, as evidenced by the cultural currency of symbolic rhetoric and virtual gestures (i.e. emoticons, abbreviations, viral memes). In another curious prodigal return to older forms and traditions, could it also not be hypothesized that the excess volume of technology can eventually have a similar effect to reverse psychology on even the most tech-savvy denizen of Web 2.0 interfaces, luring them to fall in love with 'old nature' all over again? Could it not be said that the overwhelming jumble of digital information in the 21st century can inspire someone to turn back to old nature as an escapist sanctuary, far removed from the bright lights of technocracy?

Groping around for one definitive version of the sublime can prove to be a futile exercise. Can the theoretical DNA of the sublime not be recombined into a composite form of these earlier natures? Can a great orator or text not still whip hearts and crowds into a state of reverence, despite these speeches and words being transmitted through high definition plasma screens? Can a volcanic eruption, aurora borealis, or typhoon no longer instill varying degrees of awe and fear in the onlooker? Can that sublime quaking of the soul in moments of peril not also be generated by gentler observations or 'interpretations' of nature—how a field of fireflies below seems to map out the stars above? Is it not possible for the vastness and bleakness of an industrialized fixture like oilrigs to drastically rattle perception, for smoke, fog, fire, and sparks to bleed into one another in a way that produces a sublime shock in the rigger that cannot be articulated, despite their cognizant ability to enumerate the elements that produced such a traumatic effect?

With the vast economic reign of niche markets, omnivorous tastes, and flavour-of-the-week fashions, multivalence has indeed become the new specialization. The world has found itself in such a composite state that it is equally impossible to ascribe one sub-label or definition

for the 'sublime' in the broadest global sense, aside from perhaps an evasive tag like "interstitial" or "mutable." The cumulative theoretical evolution of the sublime can only be framed as a compound of inexpressible ingredients that cannot be adequately conveyed in one burst of expression or information.

1.5 Sublime Cinema

"The sublime is a matter of the non-rational, not the irrational. However, to discuss it as if it were an intuition of profound truth, a matter of the cognitive or ethical, is to court irrationality. You may, indeed must, feel the aesthetic as an intuition—but you cannot assert that it is an intuition and expect to talk sense."
<div align="right">– James Kirwan, Sublimity (166)</div>

For all of the reasons mentioned in the previous section, simply "sublime cinema" will be used within the context of this study as a way of relabeling the focal genre, despite Reggio's clear preoccupation with technology. Two other practical reasons for this simplified nomenclature: 1) to not drown out the analysis with different subcategories or taxonomies, which in turn will help shift the analysis from text to texture by replacing the intricacies of rhetorical language with the cogent impressions and poetics of audiovisual media, 2) to grant extra space for the definition to develop, grow outward, and connect with other ideas or films in the future.

By starting with a concrete grouping of progenitor films that best exemplify this mode of filmmaking, it is my goal to give sublimity a practical bearing and discernible countenance in film studies—to provide something resembling a litmus test for the sublime. Framing the technological aspects of the sublime in cinematic terms, in particular, has not yet been attempted beyond very narrow, brief case studies, such as Dale Chapman's treatment of drum and bass music in Darren Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998) as a form of technological sublime ("Hermeneutics of Suspicion"). Before rising up to the confounding challenge of analyzing an entire body of work from a multi-sensory sublime viewpoint, the definition for sublime cinema must be sketched out in more detail with the aid of examples and exceptions.

For the purposes of this study, sublime cinema will generally be interpreted as that which motions towards: holistic unity through excess, a shock to the viewer's senses, visual hapticity (how visual text produces felt texture), embodied spectatorship, phenomenological inquiry, and liminality.[8] Some of the more salient traits that mark sublime cinema are: largely non-verbal content; unconventional formats/structures; virtuosic camera choreography; evocative landscapes; defamiliarizing angles and cuts; a lack of plot and character; transformative special effects; and music that is in flush aesthetic contact with the image which seems to both inform and be informed by it. It is also important to point out the sheer ambiguity of the genre,[9] and how these films are not attempting to assemble clear-cut narratives or draw out interpretations from the viewer with absolute certainty. Although the ambiguity in the texts of these films and interpretations of their textures will amount to a certain subjective undercurrent to the proceedings, this assertion does not mean a lack of rigorous application or analysis. If anything, the scholar is impelled to work even harder to make sense of an ambiguous sublime text in a manner that is actually relevant and meaningful.

Another common trait of sublime cinema to keep in mind is the way the sensory shock it produces can result from the spectator not being able to reconcile opposing aspects of form and content. Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) offers one such example of this when decelerated night vision footage of missiles being launched in Iraq are rendered as terrible but beautiful avenging angels. Potent images like this weave webs of emotional complexity, leaving the viewer transfixed by their formal beauty while shaken by the content's moral ambivalence. The

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[8] The genre straddles a number of binary splits including but not limited to: documentary/fiction; non-narrative/driven intentionality; figuration/abstraction; sublime heights/grotesque transgressions; utopian/dystopian; visceral/cerebral; aesthetic/activistic; celebration/condemnation; old nature/new nature; transcendence/immanence; eternal/entropic.
[9] As well as my own tendentious use of a strait-laced term like "genre" to herd together this group of films.

irreconcilability of opposing vivid emotional effects is a prime trait of sublime cinema.

As a side note, I would like to note that the distinctly technological flavour of the sublime in Reggio's films is not an imbricated pre-requisite in every film that constitutes sublime cinema. Some of the subject matter found in other offerings that I would still include in the genre's pantheon have nothing to do with technology, but are still awe-inspiring in their fresh formal approach to the content, and are equally capable of sparking grandiose ontological questions. Such examples might include the meditative cosmic lens that captures Andy Goldsworthy's micro-art in relation to macro-landscapes in *Rivers and Tides* (Thomas Riedelsheimer 2001), eight countries and cultures worth of riveting gypsy dancing in *Latcho Drom* (Tony Gatlif 1993), and the visceral biographical imprints of choreographer Pina Bausch in Wim Wenders' *Pina* (2011).

The latter is an exceptional twist on the formula of sublime cinema. It serves as a peaen to the creative spirit of choreographer Pina Bosch, communicates primarily through cinematic vignettes of her dance routines, and features periodic cutaway portrait shots of her students in between these conceptualized dance segments, where brief verbal overdubs of their innermost thoughts are heard although the subjects do not move their lips. Despite the glaring differences between the content of *Pina* and that of Reggio's films, I would still consider it to be an example of sublime cinema on the basis of how forcefully it weaves together music with vivid imagery, and kinetic camera choreography with Pina's physical choreography in an unconventional, non-narrative way. Furthermore, there is a complexity to this film's focus,[10] and a clashing emotional

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[10] The viewer is 'guided' through the creative imagination of Pina from beyond the grave by Wenders' direction, the zeal of Pina's students, and excerpts of her recorded voice.

quality between different dance routines that fuels its intractable sublime aspect.[11] What might

have otherwise been a straightforward inspired tribute to a talented choreographer in the hands of

a different director becomes more akin to a mesmerizing séance through the film's creative

liberties with form and content. It motions beyond the surface layer of personal biography

towards the sparkling depths of what germinates creativity and art. In doing so, it seems to

suggest that the vastness of humankind's intrinsic nature can be as sublimely disarming as the

most sprawling external snapshots of nature, or Kant's most aesthetically pleasing art object. It is

a wonder that the sublime is not turned inward more often.

Even the more experimental and equally non-verbal end of fictional narratives like Jean-

Jacques Annaud's *Quest for Fire* (1981) and *The Bear* (1988) contain enough 'real' content to

blur the lines of that fictional element, and render sublime intimations by either producing

feelings of the uncanny (i.e. using real bear noises which sound unmistakably like that of a

human child) or by provoking questions about technical achievement (i.e. how did they

successfully have a cougar and a bear in the same shot before CGI was possible, and how did

they control the flow of the natural elements so that nothing became too dangerous on-set?).

It is not within the scope of this paper to trace out the entire extensive (and ongoing)

history of the sublime's aesthetic and theoretical genealogy, just as it is not within the realm of

possibility to unpack the entire body of films that constitute sublime cinema. I leave those kinds

of extended consideration and new connections up to all the brilliant thinkers out there.

To close on the definition: sublime cinema also resuscitates and evolves the universal

language and communication of early cinema, as if the cinema of attractions has been caught up

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[11] An elaborate primal group number that opens the film evokes oppression and assault in a large stylized sandbox, which contrasts with a playful solo segment of a woman boarding a public bus and choreographing robot noises to her zany attack on a feather pillow.

on the past hundred years of development, given an adrenaline shot, or rebooted entirely. At its best, the consecration of technology serves as a universal means of communication even if we speak different languages. Like those formative films from the early 1900s, there is a utopian impulse at work here whose resonance smacks of both cultural growth and artistic magic, but is not limited by words, intertitles, or linguistic parameters. It takes the kinetic, affective, and 'occult' drawl of the cinema of attractions and infuses it with the sociocultural relevancy of this contemporary technological moment and the cinematographic techniques that have developed over the past hundred years. The non-verbal nature of the *Qatsi* trilogy ambiguates how one can interpret it, while those sharper socio-political teeth remain tucked beneath the gums of this ambiguated representation, and might only become readily apparent and deciphered after multiple screenings. This case study matters because, although the works themselves are non-narrative, they are also emblematic of the entire world's meta-narrative. They exist in the ever-unfolding presence of now as glimpses of the treasure and turmoil that the future might hold.

When viewing Reggio's films, there is a conflict of aesthetic interest similar to standing in front of a giant mural-sized photograph by Edward Burtynsky. In an interview with John Patterson, Reggio articulates this tension and his artistic goal:

> Let me tell you a little story. In animal mythology, the female lion, her cubs are born stillborn, and she roars them into life, to provoke their hearts with that roar. Beauty and provocation's root words in Greek are closely associated, almost identical: beauty is a provocation and my particular provocation is that I want to show the beauty of the beast.

The 'beast' of Burtynsky's oil spills and megalithic dams is framed in an exceedingly beautiful way, similarly to Reggio's poeticizing of massive destructive rockets, hospitalized patients, or Twinkie factory conveyor belts. Unlike the much earlier cinema of attraction, the attraction and camera here are no longer bolted into a linear roller-coaster track and seen by an audience of

passive viewing sponges; the tracks now lead to revelation by way of active spectatorship. The finite ride of the attraction has been charged with the velocity of a stealth bomber and the impact of an H-bomb. The fairground attraction has become a worldwide carnival of the sublime.

1.6   Analysis Structure

With all the relevant theory untangled, the overarching structure and content of the chapters contained in this thesis can be enumerated:

The first four sections of Chapter Two will focus primarily on how special effects can enact a sublime transformation of the image. This sublime visual transformation of the image allows it to become excessively affective, haptic, and synesthetic. I will demonstrate how the sublime is generated when images have been subjected to a technological metamorphosis, and furthermore, how these artificial alterations are counterpointed by the entropic "poetics of erosion" (Morris 125) that suffuse natural landscapes. Familiar objects, structures, and spaces become unfamiliar and jarring, turning puddles, reflections, and vehicles into portals that tap into an overflow of feeling. Jennifer M. Barker and Laura Marks' work on texture and visual hapticity, as well as Drew Leder's notion of "aesthetic absorption" (165) will be integrated as compasses to more accurately articulate points of sublime response. The visual excess in these films is reflective of the cultural excess that spans the entire globe.

The final section of Chapter Two will turn to camera positioning, movement, and the kinesthetic effects of how cinematographic techniques are used to traverse space. The focus here will be on how omniscient subjective point of view shots impact the viewer's proprioception.[12] I will argue that sublime responses can result from the interplay between an omniscient propulsive

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[12] Defined more simply than either synesthesia or conesthesia as a general sense of where our bodies are positioned.

gaze and a fatalistic *schaulust* ("eye-hunger") before ultimately self-destructing. The camera, serving as consciousness, forges mental connections by granting unprecedented access to visual information, and the movements of this camera-consciousness are capable of lifting the viewer to unforeseen sublime vantage points. The velocity of the image interacts with the spectator's kinesthesia in such a way that it can generate sublime stomach butterflies, and revitalizes the basic specular appeal of the cinema of attraction with real-world pathos. If the first portion of Chapter Two demonstrates how a sensuous image can touch us, this final section illustrates how the camera can literally move us.

Chapter Three will examine how music fuses with the image in a way that surpasses a strictly audiovisual register. Rather than music following the image's cues or vice-versa, the two are in flush, mutually reinforcing contact that generates moments of sublime synchronicity. After dispensing some vital biographical details about Philip Glass with the aid of Robert Maycock's comprehensive book of his life *Glass: A Portrait*, I will explicate how the serialism and rhythmic structures at various points throughout his scores produce a trance-like sublime effect which matches the mass proliferation and unfathomable quantity of visual units in the films. When rational thought cannot process or make sense of a quantity that exceeds the whole of the spectator's systematic organizing perception, they are pushed to embody the experience in order to make sense of the excesses that overflow from those clashes of visual and sonic content. Bio-musicological research on the concepts of entrainment (Sager, Clayton, and Will) as well as chills or *frisson* (Grewe et al.; Harrison and Loui) will be used to argue that music gives an emotive voice to the non-verbal diegesis, forging a universal language between sound and image. Music transmutes the horsepower of an image into jet power.

The conclusion will speculate as to what the future of sublime cinema might look like by

adopting Reggio's recently released *Visitors* as a seer's looking glass. Although this film's subject matter tackles humanity's entranced relationship to technology in a different way from the *Qatsi* trilogy, with its methodical and slow-moving series of portrait shots taken against black backgrounds, I will make a case for a distinctly inward-looking, human sublime that reveals itself in the reciprocal gaze. I will end with a heated consideration as to the practical utility and value of sublime cinema.

To help accurately pinpoint and discuss audiovisual content along each film's timeline, analytical portions will refer to the chapter titles of the three DVDs, listed below:

Koyaanisqatsi

1. 00:00:00 – Koyaanisqatsi
2. 00:00:47 – Beginning
3. 00:03:40 – Organic
4. 00:11:16 – Clouds
5. 00:15:46 – Resource
6. 00:22:06 – Vessels
7. 00:29:52 – Cloudscape
8. 00:30:29 – Pruit Igoe
9. 00:37:58 – Clouds & Buildings
10. 00:39:12 – Slow People
11. 00:42:24 – The Grid
12. 01:03:12 – Microchip
13. 01:05:07 – Prophecies
14. 1:13:37 – Ending

Powaqqatsi

1. 00:00:00 – Serra Pelada
2. 00:07:23 – Anthem: Part I
3. 00:15:52 – That Place
4. 00:22:43 – Anthem: Part II
5. 00:29:57 – Mosque & Temple
6. 00:35:51 – Anthem: Part III
7. 00:43:43 – Train To Sao Paolo
8. 00:46:39 – Video Dream
9. 00:48:49 – China
10. 00:52:47 – Africa
11. 00:56:48 – India
12. 01:01:17 – The Unutterable
13. 1:11:40 – Caught!
14. 1:19:50 – From Egypt With Mr. Suso
15. 1:28:47 – Definition
16. 1:29:14 – Powaqqatsi Credits

Naqoyqatsi

1. 00:00:00 – Naqoyqatsi
2. 00:09:08 – Primacy of Number
3. 00:17:27 – Massman
4. 00:31:49 – New World
5. 00:34:56 – Religion
6. 00:43:56 – Media Weather
7. 00:54:08 – Old World
8. 00:56:29 – Intensive Time
9. 01:04:41 – Point Blank
10. 01:17:23 – The Vivid Unknown
11. 01:22:46 – Definition

Chapter 2: Image – "Objects in Mirror are Closer than they Appear"

"Vision may be the sense most privileged in the cinema, with hearing a close second; nonetheless, I do not leave my capacity to touch or to smell or to taste at the door, nor, once in the theater, do I devote these senses only to my popcorn." – Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* (65)

"We are in a relationship of intimate, tactile, reversible contact with the film's body—a complex relationship that is marked as often by tension as by alignment, by repulsion as often as by attraction. We are embedded in a constantly mutual experience with the film, so that the cinematic experience is the experience of being both 'in' our bodies and 'in' the liminal space created by that contact." – Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye* (19)

Special effects like slow motion, superimposition, and time lapse defamiliarize the natural expected qualities of a filmed subject, allowing it to transcend its ordinary likeness and become extraordinary. The novelty of the film apparatus itself was a prominent feature of the cinema of attraction amidst European fairgrounds, while a fascination with capturing bodily actions and gestures in unusual ways predominates the trick film innovations of George Méliès, along with the earliest Kinetoscope parlour offerings such as Thomas Edison's *Fred Ott's Sneeze* (1894). Even pre-cinematic experiments dating between phantasmagoria magic lantern shows in the late 18th century and Eadward Muybridge's stills of a galloping horse in the late 20th century signal an impulse towards unseen realms of visual perception that can only be seized and reproduced through the "magic" of technological defamiliarization. Although today's technology allows the suspended hooves of a horse to be caught in a seemingly levitated state by any iPhone, and expand a sneeze to the length of an entire feature, all stages of technological manipulation and metamorphosis can still unleash the image's awe-factor by defamiliarizing its content. This transformation of familiar subjects into strange textures through special effects feeds into the phenomenological contact articulated by Barker at the top of this section. Those points of contact between the viewer's physical body and the embodied experience that blooms from these extraordinary visions can be reconciled under the umbrella of sublime cinema.

Time lapse photography can convolute patches of a landscape or dots of city light into a smooth blur, conflating the physical boundaries of those objects as if they were appendages of one seamless organism. Slow motion texturizes and 'ripens' the image, allowing hidden qualities to ooze forth from its immanent content. Even the most basic transitional tool of editing—the cut—can fuse disparate geographical spaces together in a way that insinuates time travel, or at the very least teleportation. The efficacy of rapid or jarring editing has not necessarily lost its mystique, but is surely something that has been taken for granted as techniques become conventionalized, and spectators grow so accustomed to widespread conventions that they eventually become jaded time travellers. Furthermore, a skilled cinematographer's concise framing of diegetically occurring distortions within the image (i.e. watery reflections, smog over a cityscape, jets of fire) can also be construed as special effects that take place in real time, while digital manipulation can shatter that template of simply *re*-presenting an image by spawning an entire landscape or synthetic life force of its own.

The sum of these optical transformations intimately relate to the liminality of sublime cinema as it was defined in section 1.5. Sublime cinema is neither anchored to the reality from which an image is plucked, nor strictly devoted to the augmentations that reform the impact such an image can have. By focusing on image as the first base in this trialectic relationship between image, music, and viewer, it is my hope to untangle what Sobchack identifies as the "most privileged" cinematic sensory terrain in order to consider how the inner-workings of vision include affective, haptic, and synesthetic output. The morphing of the image through special effects can extract soulfulness from that proverbial machine in the garden, amplify an image's emotional resonance, and expand the sensual connection that a viewer might have with it.

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To revisit the formalist approach that was previously harnessed and levied against Thompson's theory of excess, all of these effects achieve a sense of defamiliarization that prompts the viewer to "experience an unconventional perception of the world" (Petrić 10). Another way to explicate defamiliarization and relate it directly to the sublime by way of Longinus is Herzog's treatise: "On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth." No stranger to otherworldly images or a transcendent muddling of reality and fiction, he reifies defamiliarization as a work of art's ability to generate something vaster in feeling than the sum of its actual parts by not probing "reality, but a question that lies behind it [beyond; *dahinter*]: the question of truth" (para. 27). The theoretical preoccupation of Herzog's work can also be applied to Reggio's practice, as both retool their work in order access a "deeper stratum of truth––a poetic, ecstatic truth, which is mysterious and can only be grasped with effort [that] one attains…through vision, style, and craft" (para. 28). Without straying too far into semantics, I will oversimplify Herzog's eloquence by interpreting "ecstatic truth" to mean a more holistic "impact" that is in some way (whether emotionally, formally, ontologically, aesthetically) tethered to potent mystery, meaning, and a certain ambiguity that orbits those various layers.

In *Qatsi,* the combined efforts of Reggio's vision, the style of Philip Glass's scores, and the craft of the trilogy's various cinematographers (Ron Fricke, Graham Berry, Leonidas Zourdoumis, and Russell Lee Fine) as well as editors (Jon Kane, Alton Walpole, Iris Cahn) tease back and reformulate layers of reality in order to fine tune the degree of truth that can be produced from the shocking excess of its images and music. As Gilles Deleuze states in relation to how the viewer processes excessive images: "The cinematographic image must have a shock effect on thought, and force thought to think itself as much as thinking the whole. This is the very definition of the sublime" (158). The intractability of this overlap between thinking thought

and thinking the whole is yet another layer of complexity in the sublime equation, and an echo of

the mutually shaping chasm that exists between our bodies and the embodied experience of the

film as articulated by Sobchack and Barker, or between the actuality and the fabulation that

catalyze ecstatic truth for Herzog.

Is it possible then through the identification and analysis of special effects, to boil down

the sublime to an actual unit of visual measurement? An absurd question to be sure, but to locate

where points of stylistic excess and overflow are present during those nearly inexpressible

instances—when cumulative sensory stimulation reaches a critical mass—is an apt way to start

considering how the sublime operates cinematically, regardless of how tinged by subjectivity

those articulations of its coordinates become. This chapter is a hunt for visual instances where

the linear progression of time seems to melt away due to the sweltering impact of the aesthetic

encounter—where concrete representation becomes abstracted into something sublime by

technological or natural diegetic means.

2.1   Slow Motion – "Mosquitoes Trapped in Amber"

"The image is held long enough to transcend its narrative meaning and become significant solely as texture upon our skins. Figure and ground mingle continuously…with the help of cinematic effects that flatten the image into pure surface and texture." – Jennifer Barker (42)

Slow motion is one of the techniques used throughout *Qatsi* that best exemplifies how

images can be milked for their affective and excessive expressive value. Sergei Eisenstein's

original formulations for montage, juxtaposition, and the dialectics of film form begin with

notions of two disparate images striking together, but the metaphorical resonance that ripples out

from this sword-like clashing points more towards a violent form of unification than the

heterogeneous nature of the juxtaposed content itself. Eisenstein affirms the importance of an

"*inner synchronization between the tangible picture and the differently perceived sounds...*the

'hidden' inner synchronization where the plastic and tonal elements will find complete fusion...[where] we find a natural language common to both—movement" (70), which Deleuze in turn interprets as the "harmonics of the image" (160).

The compounded qualities of the image—the fusion of its plasticity, movement, and affective potential—can now occur within a single shot to an exponential degree due to slow motion and superimpositions. One image can be rendered as a visual continuum that is texturized, abstracted, and unraveled by slow motion, and superimposed with other images to further enliven and mutate its metaphorical resonance. Moreover, the perceptual phenomenon identified by Vlada Petrić as the phi-effect[13] naturally occurs at the intervals between two (or more) shots. The illusory superimpositions created by the phi-effect disorient the viewer's persistence of vision, and bolster the kinesthetic impact a shot sequence can have by triggering "a stroboscropic pulsation that has a hypnotic impact" (139). Special effects narrow the distance between juxtaposed images and complicate the relational meaning evoked by adjacent shots, while the phi-effect commands our visceral attention through intervallic optical content, and strikes us with the kinesthetic energy between images. The metaphorical and emotional effects of juxtaposition are no longer limited to the interstices between two images, but rather, are expanded to connect multiple coinciding points (superimposed images) between densely woven visual webs (two or more shot sequences subjected to slow motion).

Rather than hearing a single 'ghost tone' between the two different 'pitches' of static images, and being able to probe that isolated tonal resonance as the metaphor, feeling, or "third

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[13] Explained by Petrić as a stroboscopic optical process whereby "eyes retain a perceived image on the retina for one hundredth of a second *after* an actual perception is completed," thus producing an "illusion that one form is transformed into another, and/or that they exist simultaneously" (139). In his book *Constructivism in Film*, he refers to the "Street and Eye" (XXII) sequence in Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* to elucidate the practical application of the phi-effect.

something" (Eisenstein 17) produced by the clashing of those two shots, special effects allow fainter traces of those ghostly harmonics to ring out between variously decelerated and overlapping images. The perceptual task of simultaneously processing slow motion, superimpositions, and the phi-effect can have a sublime shock effect on the viewer's thought and body. The degree of formal excess in *Qatsi* leads to sensory overload and tonal ambiguity in a technical way that would have been impossible at the time of Eisenstein's writings forty years earlier, but still, the basic construction of its shot sequences adheres to the same fundamental unifying principle of "inner synchronization" (60) that defines basic montage.

Eisenstein explains that: "These 'mechanics' of the formation of an image interest us because the mechanics of its formation in *life* turn out to be the prototype of the method of creating images in art" (21-22). Arguably then, the way the viewer reads or interprets the world around them is by default driven by the same unifying perceptual mechanics that underlie even the most advanced formal analysis of a film; this is what can inspire the viewer's convicted investment and *belief* in the power of images and interpretation. A unified visual understanding of how distinct parts relate to a systemic whole and produce a certain emotional or kinetic effect is present in both the world and the world of a film; the viewer's somatic and intellectual knowledge of the world is a blueprint for what causes an approximation of that effect in the world of a film...especially when that film is a documentary that tackles the world at large.

Slow motion and superimpositions are used more consistently throughout *Powaqqatsi* than the other two *Qatsi* films put together. Reggio explains: "We used slow motion, or very fast shooting, as the norm, and long lenses, not to romanticize the subject, but to monumentalize it so that we could look at it from a different point of view" (MacDonald 1992 388). More specifically, the captured footage was between 36 and 129 frames per second (395), compared to

the usual 24 frames per second playback that has been the norm for the past century of cinema-going.[14] MacDonald goes so far as to draw a parallel between *Powaqqatsi* and "(Muybridgian) motion study" (MacDonald 1988 142) because of the abundant slow motion used throughout.

The opening of *Powaqqatsi*, "Serra Pelada," aptly illustrates how slow motion, superimposition, and the phi-effect overlap in a sublime way.[15] Thick brown mud, water, and sweat stain the strained bodies of gold workers as they carry mounds of dirt out of a mine in bags over their heads. The shot types vary: isolated closeups of exhausted workers looking into or just beyond the lens; medium closeups tilted down above a stream of workers as they climb a ladder towards the lens; medium shots of workers tilted slightly upward from low angles with shallow focus landing on the centre plane of action and row of bodies; and (more rarely) long shots taken from the side of the mine reveal the collective rows of workers in silhouette, their movements bisecting the frame diagonally from the bottom left to the top right. In all shot types, the telephoto lens flattens the workers into the golden brown background of the mine, and makes the clustered layers of their bodies along different planes of action seem more contracted, brought into compositional harmony with each other despite the heavy lifting of the situation. Meanwhile, the frame rate playback ranges between about one half (48 fps) and just over one fifth (129 fps) of standard speed.

On the one hand, the slow motion heightens the workers' sense of physical struggle and labour. This is especially notable during a seven second shot of extreme slow motion where a

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[14] At 16 frames per second or less, the eye begins to discern flickering between frames, and persistence of vision starts to deteriorate.

[15] One of the challenges of this thesis is staking out sublime intersections with full certainty, despite the underlying fact that the postulations belie subjectivity. Despite this challenge, observable technical details give phenomenological analysis a backbone that affords an opportunity for the productive use of such language. After all, even something that is supposedly objective and concrete like the colour red can be discussed subjectively in terms of its saturation, lightness, and contextual meaning.

man exerts all his force to keep a sack hoisted over his head, but then dramatically slams the load

down in sync with the music's halted rhythm before the playback snaps into faster motion, and

sparks a montage of ecological elements: perpendicular aerial shots of zebra herds galloping,

molten lava stewing, a construction site shot from a jackhammer's point of view, forest fires

blazing, other workers in developing nations stocking produce and climbing scaffolding, and

finally, a god's eye view shot of the gold mine workers accompanied by a slow zoom that returns

the viewer to the initial conditions of heavy duty labour. This brief montage forges solidarity

between Brazil and the circumstances in other developing nations, which further engenders the

physical strain induced by these initial working conditions.

On the other hand, the micro-changes that occur in the texture of the natural elements

encasing the workers' bodies throughout the sequence becomes more sensuous, soothing, and

visceral to the eyes when morphed by extreme slow motion. Their laboured actions are rendered

with a graceful beauty, or as MacDonald highlights: "[the workers] look like classic sculptures

and their movements like dance" (141). The sensuous magic of slow motion is its ability to break

down the actions of familiar forms into displays that can either be more staccato or smooth; it

can emphasize the kinetic aspect of the image as much as its seductive fluidity. Slow motion can

reproduce snapshots of reality as the cinematic equivalent to Cubism or Futurist paintings like

Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, no.2* (1912), with the phi-effect making the

intervals between the frames of slow motion all the more alluring.

The sublime can be located in that clashing liminal space between how slow motion

emboldens the seduction of natural elements, and intensifies the exhaustion exhibited by the

struggling workers. The exhilarating kinetic energy and celebratory tone[16] of "Serra Pelada" is at odds with the duress and strain that are also present in the environment, with both halves of the equation being highlighted by a combination of special effects and affective cinematography.

The provocation of Reggio's "beauty of the beast" approach (defined as his mission statement in section 1.5) doubly re-emerges when multiple frontal and side view medium shots of workers are superimposed, right after a collapsed worker, arms outstretched, has been carried off by two comrades in a curious spin on messianic imagery. The ghostly vectoral movements of the workers' bodies across these three superimposed layers merges to form the shape of a wheel, and this slow moving 'body wheel,' in which individual faces are no longer identifiable, gently dissolves to a laterally spinning, multi-faced head in front of a black background.

The combination of pleasing aesthetic textures in this sequence – the cold wetness of water, hot sweat, squishiness of mud, dancing glow of the sunlight, rigid porcelain look of the spinning face – produces haptic responses that are triggered by the viewer's pre-existent sense-memory,[17] while the struggle of these workers, dangerous intensity of the hot sun, and eeriness of the spinning head in front of a dark void bare down on those more seductive tactile aspects with foreboding (kinetic) anxiety, all while the multi-faced head metaphorically reinforces the solidarity between the workers, and serves as a centrifugal point connection and refuge for the facelessness of their superimposed bodies. Further affecting the viewer's reading of the content is how the slow motion also exalts the strength and resilience of the workers, and generates, as MacDonald says:

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[16] A tonality that is especially apparent in conjunction with Glass' lively percussions and major key children's choir.
[17] Most people can relate to profound tactile experiences of water's wetness, mud's squishiness, the sun's rays, and porcelain's chalky softness. That mental wellspring of memories and sensual experiences can be accessed, perhaps unwittingly, by the spectator to better relate to the subject matter and immerse themselves in the film at a fully realized and embodied level.

> A timelessness to the opening sequence that enhances its metaphoric implications [due to the fact that] the kind of labor we are watching has been part of human societies for millennia. In fact, it continues to be a part of what makes *our* lives possible. (1988 141)

Ultimately, the complexity of the viewer's reactions to the beginning section of *Powaqqatsi* is enhanced by slow motion to such a degree that an excess of sensuous visual content becomes one intractable sublime response. This sequence puts into practice how Eisenstein's inner synchronization and Deleuze's harmonics of the image can not only occur at the site of a single sequence, but the conflicting nature of these harmonics—how slow motion can foreground two opposing qualities within a single shot—is what marks these moments as sublime, and simultaneously, works to prove that excess can be a unifying rather than destabilizing salient ingredient. One side of a coin cannot exist without the other; the beauty of the apparent image is never far away from the beast of ecstatic truth.

Perhaps the most iconic sequence to capitalize on gradually decelerating slow motion as an affective additive to the image is the ending of *Koyaanisqatsi*, when Saturn V, the world's first Atlas-Centaur rocket, exploded over Cape Canaveral, Florida after a failed launch in 1962. Here, the sublime response is not so much produced by the way the frame rate foregrounds conflicting degrees of aesthetic pleasure and emotional weight, but rather, by the way the image becomes increasingly abstracted by the slower playback, and as spatial and temporal proportions become elastic as the camera centres on an exploding rocket over a four minute period. Slow motion reshapes the viewer's perspective until a trance-like state emerges from the full volatile arc that this rocket fragment follows.

In this sequence, the rocket[18] takes off full throttle in a medium long shot, and after approximately twenty seconds, the rocket's upper half occupies two thirds of the vertical space in the frame, leaving the jets in the space below. Since the jets burn as bright as the sun but only occupy one third of the frame, while the rest of the rocket occupies the majority of the frame but is a pale grey against the azure sky, the force of visual weight becomes equalized across the frame. As a result, no distinct part of the rocket commands the viewer's focus more; the viewer can choose whether to optically follow the engine or the rocket's top half. Twenty seconds later, one is unsure as to whether the camera is zooming out slightly, if the rocket is simply getting further away, or if both occur simultaneously. The viewer's sense of spatial depth and proportions are thrown out of balance. The entire rocket becomes visible ten seconds after this, tilts to the right, and drifts diagonally across the frame. As it tips more heavily to the right, a tongue of fire begins to leak from a malfunctioning area at the engine's base, intensifying the image as the rocket threatens to capsize. The rocket explodes, pieces of metal debris fly down, masses of grey-black smoke and orange particles consume the entire frame, blotting out the sky. The camera lingers on one tumbling fragment of its engine, which at first spins laterally before going into full off-kilter free-fall. The camera seems to be falling at the same speed, while the visual rhythm of the fragment's spinning entrains the viewer's eyes, giving a sensation of free floating alongside an image that is free falling.

The camera inches closer to the fragment with incremental micro-zooms, as the metal debris seems to crawl towards the camera, revealing stark refractions of light along its chrome plates that contrast against the washed out azure. The object suddenly becomes crisper and more

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[18] Its fiery jets are first seen in extreme closeup at the beginning of the film, but it is only at the end where it becomes *Koyaanisqatsi's* main 'event' and exclamation point over the proceedings.

artificial looking, rendered as a giant goblet of fire falling from the sky, or a rudimentarily fashioned prop hanging from a string in the background of a B-grade sci-fi. Flames periodically subside, retracting inward before shooting outward again. The viewer anticipates that the engine will become perfectly centred in the frame, but it never fully happens. The more in focus the engine becomes, the dimmer the blue-sky background seems, as in an optical illusion involving opposing shades from the colour wheel. The fragment's spinning slows down to a crawl (at least 200 fps), continues to decelerate, and seems to dissolve into the background like a ghostly imprint, or a mosquito trapped in amber. The temporality by this point in the sequence becomes equally distorted by the hypnotic oscillations of the engine until time itself seems frozen.

Cut to an extreme closeup of the rocket fragment, which has now been decelerated to a point of hazy, almost pixelated abstraction. The fragment strikes the eye as a purely visual artifact; an ancient archive; an alien element; an omen; an admonishment; a prayer. At this proximity, the fragment appears to be the size of the entire rocket pre-explosion, and the grain of the film stock is now pronounced and pops out at the viewer, celluloid eroding while the engine gradually stagnates. The debris' infinite free-fall makes us unsure as to whether it is still in the air, or by this point, underwater, where billowing fire and smoke would look indistinguishable from sizzling ash and bubbling jets. As the frame dissolves to a petroglyph of rocket-like objects in front of mountains, the movement of the rocket still lingers on the corneas due to the phi-effect, animating this static illustration with a motion trail of pathos.

The lengthy breakdown of this sequence serves to illustrate how: a) slow motion can generate a sublime degree of optical ambiguity as to what it is the viewer is actually seeing by its ability to seemingly deform geometrical shapes, b) elapsed shot time or long takes can distort the viewer's temporal and spatial sensibility, and c) although *Koyaanisqatsi* is a non-narrative work

by design, fragments, sequences, and images within it and the *Qatsi* trilogy at large can still be assembled in a somewhat teleological way by the efforts of an active spectator, and thus, adhere to a binding internal logic or interpretive 'flow' despite the stylistic excess at work. The rocket might be construed as a mise en abyme of *Koyaanisqatsi*, since the image serves as a framing device for the film, and correlates with the Hopi translations for the film's title at the end: "If we dig precious things from the land, we will invite disaster. On the Day of Purification, containers of ashes might one day be thrown from the sky, which could burn the land and boil the oceans." The motifs that course through the film, and indeed, between the three films, serve to reinforce just how unifying excessive tropes and patterns can be, and how the value embodied by spectators or "cinesthetics" is predicated on their cognitive acuity and investment in the film.

Recurrent tropes in non-narrative work can also repeatedly point to the sublime awe and terror that underlies certain realities. Motifs are, after all, akin to "harmonics of the image" that have been spread out over larger gaps, and can even achieve the same ends as superimpositions that they have simply been parsed and split over numerous sequences and frames that hit similar rhythmic and/or tonal marks. The inclusion of images in *Koyaanisqatsi* of strip mines, vehicles exploding, atom bomb tests in Nevada, a nuclear tankard with E=MC2 written on its deck, a goliath-sized stack of combusting televisions, and finally a failed rocket launch all hint at the dubiety and destructive potential of the sublime aspects that have come to define this technocratic Information Age. Every flash of these fiery motifs is a reminder of the greatest universal mystery: the undying meaningfulness and atavistic fear of mortality and extinction.

These technological indicators for mortality branch off to include the visibly human aspect prior to *Koyaanisqatsi's* ending sequence as well. Again in slow motion, the viewer sees (in sequential order during "Prophecies"): a man dragged onto an ambulance; rundown areas of

an urban centre where mounds of debris litter the ground; a fireman wading through a smoke-flooded area; an elderly person's quivering hand in closeup next to an IV bag as it is squeezed by a caretaker's; a homeless man gazing with glazed eyes at two coins in his palm. In these kinds of shots, slow motion serves primarily to cultivate the emotional gravitas of the respective situations, but they also tie to the cumulative emotional impact that volatile technology, ambivalence, optical ambiguities, and temporal/spatial distortions can have on the viewer.

2.2 Time Lapse – "Blurred Lines"

"I was trying to show in nature the presence of a life form, an entity, a beingness; and in the synthetic world the presence of a different entity, a consuming and inhuman entity."   – Reggio (MacDonald 1988 140)

The image can also now be transformed on a metaphorical level into a 'new image' through time-lapse, as when light from hundreds of cars appears to the viewer as unbroken streams of incandescent blood coursing through the city in *Koyaanisqatsi*. Roads are represented as arteries, skyscrapers as limbs, clouds as halos, their shadows cast by the sun as blemishes on the city's skin, and citizens as cells mobilizing to either ensure the survival or deterioration of the city's body, much like the trillions of microbes inhabiting each human body.[19] With time-lapse sequences, each shot and each spot of focus can become the eye of a hurricane at the heart of modern mechanization.

Koyaanisqatsi's most frenetically paced and edited chapter "The Grid" best demonstrates how time lapse can be used to melt aspects of an urban space together as pieces of one unified organism. While the former example of vehicle lights meshing together as the city's blood

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[19] A special thanks is included for Hilary Harris in the end-credits of *Koyaanisqatsi*, whose avant-garde innovations with time lapsed cityscapes in *Organism* (1975) provides a clear paradigm for Reggio's own use of the technique. That twenty-minute film intercuts between actual blood flowing through human veins and time lapsed images of traffic in New York City "to demonstrate the idea that external reality as created and developed by humans is, fundamentally, a projection of internal physical systems" (MacDonald 1988 146).

during the opening moment of "The Grid" offers one of time lapse's more poetic (and arguably Romantic) effects,[20] the bulk of "The Grid" takes a more microscopic approach to the city's chaotic and frenzied areas of action, namely by focusing on modes of transit, factory spaces, and what keeps the urban sprawl's blood pumping in a dire way. Key sections featured in "The Grid" crank up the velocity and density of the visual action by including time lapsed shots of people funneling onto an underground escalator or cramming themselves into an elevator like swarms of ants, shots from the back seat of time lapsed vehicles that produce a sense of urgency or potential to crash (now from the proximity of a microbe within that seamless stream of blood rather than from the outside looking in), shots of processed meat and Twinkies frantically rushing along conveyor belts in automated factories, food courts that evidence an overflow of trans fat and Western consumerism, and reaction shots of pedestrians, seemingly in reply to the chaos.

Whereas there is a seamless, tranquil quality to the first three minutes of "The Grid" where extreme long shots of whizzing car lights bask in the seductive glow of a full moon, captured with a zoom lens as it plays peekaboo by passing behind a skyscraper, the blurring together of endless people and units (hot-dogs and Twinkies) on assembly lines that follows is more agitating. The unfathomable quantities of people being parallelled with mass-produced consumer products makes the terrifying aspect of the sublime shine through; each individual unit cannot be visually accounted for as time lapse mashes them together into a conglomerate of commodities. The quick inserts of video game sequences reaffirms how time lapse can highlight a sense of commodification, with the Frogger sequence in particular boiling down serious events

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[20] This Romantic depiction of the city is further accented by the soothing low hum of brass instruments on the soundtrack, which counterbalances the impossibly quick visual frame rate.

such as car crashes into a seemingly trivial game that only requires another quarter in order for the user/city dweller to play again.

Another startling shot within this sequence that might invoke a sublime response is of a mother holding her child while surrounded by televisions in an electronic appliance store. The already hyperactive montage intrinsic to television is amplified tenfold here, as time lapsed footage turns the televised segments into indiscernible blips while the mother and child stand in one spot jittering, entranced by images that the spectator can no longer decode. Unlike the smooth frame rates provided by slow motion in *Powaqqatsi*, this instance of time lapse photography disrupts the viewer's persistence of vision due to the fewer amount of frames that are present in the shot, and points their attention to the abrasively flickering, mind-numbing refresh rates of old cathode ray television tubes. The jittery stillness of the mother and child contrasts with the bombardment of semi-abstracted televised content in a way that can leave the spectator feeling winded. A secondary reading of this shot relates to its context within the wider sequence: the placement of this shot in the middle of "The Grid" gives the impression that all the neurotic movements through the urban space have been transmuted/caged into the television boxes as if by osmosis. Even though the televised content is shielded from the viewer, they can just as equally fill in those gaps mentally with the chaotic events that sandwich this shot.

This technique of keeping one static element at the epicentre of a time lapse sequence is used in a very different way in *Powaqqatsi*, especially in its penultimate sequence "From Egypt with Mr. Suso." Kicking the sequence off is a fifty second time lapse shot of a rusty, derelict car planted at the centre of two dirt roads while the phantom trails of innumerable other vehicles speed along both sides of it. This is one of the few sequences in any of the films that also features dead silence before the Islamic "Call to Prayer" begins. Like many evocative shots in

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the trilogy, there is ambivalence about what is being conveyed, but the striking contrast between this disheveled car that is missing all of its vital parts, and the indiscernible forms or 'personalities' of the other phantom cars that pass by hints at the ephemeral nature of technology, and perhaps as a mirror to that, the transient precious nature of human existence. This analogy is doubly reinforced when another low angle shot two minutes later depicts a lame man with a stick leaning on a post in the middle of a busy street. Like a human embodiment of the derelict vehicle, phantom trails of pedestrians pass him by while he stays in crisp focus. "The Call to Prayer" on the soundtrack adds a religious glow to the proceedings, while the shot immediately following the car depicts a series of Hasidic figures praying along the Wailing Wall, and is strategically out of focus to expand on the religious overtones of the sequence.[21]

By dint of time lapse, an analogy seems to be drawn between the reverence for tradition, and how technology has been assimilated in Third World nations. Technologically modified nature is once again framed in a dichotomy alongside the religious tenets of the old world; the secular altar of technology hovers beside the age-old roots of traditional cultural and spiritual practice. The redrawing of this sublime equation begs the question: which side of variables is more meaningful at this stage of the planet's evolution, and which proponent will sooner become obsolete: the car without a motor, or the man who cannot walk without the support of a stick? How much must society progress or deteriorate before pedestrians or traffic really take notice? What set of values nourishes civilization in a more reliable way?

Time lapse is used compulsively throughout the first entry in the trilogy as a way of conveying sheer velocity and the city's operational speed being that of a single breakneck

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[21] Rather than diminish the force of their prayers, this unfocused framing heightens the force of their gestures, lending them an auric glow, and bringing to light the focus of their intention through tactfully softened imagery.

organism, is virtually absent in *Powaqqatsi*[22] with the exception of the previously mentioned sequences, and is extended by the third film in the series to incorporate computer generated graphics and simulated motion.

In *Naqoyqatsi*, two segments bookend the film (during chapters "Naqoyqatsi" and "The Vivid Unknown") that feature time lapsed photography of a starry night, which are rendered in black and white and include a dissolve effect. The motion trails left in the wake of the stars' movements makes them appear as dazzling meteor showers. The already uncommon occurrence of witnessing a meteor shower is further defamiliarized by the fact that a starscape has been morphed into the likeness of a meteor shower; an unnatural and ultimately fraudulent cosmic spectacle is crafted through time lapse, and its saturation level has been diminished to grayscale. Rather than use time lapse as a means to anthropomorphize the landscape, here it transmutes one of cosmology's inherent 'special effects' into a slice of digitized hyper-reality. Time lapse along with black and white rendering simultaneously constructs the spectacle of a meteor shower out of stars, while arguably neutralizing the spectacular impact this unnatural phenomenon has once the spectator mulls over the fact that digital rendering has *created* rather than *captured* the event. The ambiguity of the astrological content on display – its ability to dazzle while being etiolated and falsified by technology – leads to a sublime impasse in the spectator's perceptual deductions. Like the ubiquitous digital manipulation found throughout *Naqoyqatsi* (section 2.4 will treat this at length), the sense-value of these sequences are aesthetically flattened out, and strike the viewer as being worth no more or less than any of the other shots in the film.

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[22] Although the rhythmic speed of Glass' music has an uncanny way of turbo-charging the faster shooting rates/slow motion of the second film so that they might give an illusory impression of faster visual momentum.

2.3   Natural Effects – "It Is What It Is"

In an early analysis of the progenitor city symphony *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*,

Rudolf Arnheim points out that:

> The effect of a landscape is almost entirely dependent upon the lighting. There is a famous shot in Walter Ruttmann's symphony of a great city, Berlin, in which an empty street in the north of Berlin is shown in the early dawn. The curious mistiness of the morning sky, the veiled darkness of the fronts of the buildings—the apportionment of the gray values, in other words—are what gives this shot its charm. The same street and the same camera angle might result in an utterly feeble and ineffective picture. And obviously these differences can be even more pronounced in the studio where the cameraman has the lights under his control. (69)

With these practical observations of what stirs a landscape's cinematic effectiveness, Arnheim

affords the reader a prototype for the kind of sublime analysis that this thesis is also aiming to

explore. Although slow motion and superimposition have built on the initial capacity of

Eisenstein's harmonics by allowing more visual information to be condensed into fewer frames,

and time-lapse allows the micro details of a landscape to be broken down into geometrical units

that spectacularize an anthropomorphized macro landscape, even all the technological

innovations of filmmaking that came in the sixty plus odd years after Arnheim wrote *Film as Art*

have not necessarily reinvented the way that a filmmaker controls and captures lighting. Post-

production effects surely make the captured footage more malleable, but like Akira Kurosawa

who would wait weeks on end for the right poetic configuration of clouds to hang over a

landscape, sometimes patience, the perfect 'performance' of natural elements (whether lighting,

fog, mist, fire, rain, or any fusion of ingredients) and dynamic framing can spark the most

affective sublime responses of all.

The final meditative segment of "From Egypt With Mr. Suso" in *Powaqqatsi* focuses on

a body of rippling water for just over a minute, and is a paramount example of how naturally

occurring optical effects operate to distill sublime meaning from a shot. An anonymous body of water strikes the viewer's perception as immediately mesmerizing; it is a reminder of the 'trippy' beauty that can be found in everyday natural elements when one is afforded the time to slow down and absorb it. The water's diffuse shimmer gives the viewer's eyes a massage, and splinters their focus to no-spot-in-particular. There wind up being an infinite number of focal points, with each refraction of light along each ripple's surface carrying with it a full trajectory that the viewer can trace with their eyes until it slips from their optical grasp. One body of water contains an indeterminable quantity of fractals that are in a state of perpetual flux. The unquantifiability and freedom of sight invoked somehow strikes the viewer as both intractable and soothing.

Since the viewer is not granted a dynamic perspective by the way the telephoto lens flattens and stretches out space, the shot is rendered two-dimensionally, becoming reminiscent of the pure geometrical techniques used in the absolute animation of Walter Ruttman, Viking Eggeling, and Hans Richter, as well as the freedom of vision granted by deep focus despite there being a single flattened slate of images. Since attention is not drawn to any single focal point or quadrant of interest, our eyes can surrender to the raw aesthetic impact of the shot—they can explore and 'touch' it freely. This echoes the aphoristic notion that a person can never step into the same river twice.

After approximately thirty seconds of visual acclimatization, the viewer is bathing in the waters of the entire composition, with each particle of this composition stimulating and tickling their optical nerves. There is a musicality to the way these ripples undulate, and the visual music of this tapestry woven from light and water urges the viewer to dip their toes into its reality, while it simultaneously beckons them to take a step back and enjoy its tiny prisms of light. It is

hard to tell if these sprightly dancing shards of luminous water are moving sideways or upwards in tiny zigzags.

Figures are eventually reflected in the body of water as colourful shafts, and are a gracefully passing procession of blue, beige, white, silver, brown, and red. It is hard to discern whether the source of these reflections is human, or whether the camera is in fact gently tracking laterally to capture inanimate objects and structures. In abstracting these figures and 'melting' them into the frame, water is utilized here as a portal into the existence and constitution of this planet and its occupants—the literal stuff that our bodies and minds are made of. The more eyes stare at the image, the more it becomes a soothing meditation on changing tides; an optimistic coda on transience and impermanence; a beautiful illusion; an incendiary magic that lurks in the foliage of everyday reality; a hidden world that is always there to observe once perception has been re-calibrated to discern fullness from nothingness. The frame fades to black, and the eyes still see the imprints of bouncing light while they adjust to the darkness.

The way this sequence conjures a kind of visual music likens it to more than one sense at a time, and the hapticity of its spectacular images fleshes out its impact to interact palpably on the surface of our skin. While remaining stationary in a body situated in front of the screen, the active spectator's perception and conesthetic[23] manifold are steeped in the sensuality of the image in a way that might also be induced by the classic 'Romantic' sublime trope of being disarmed by the splendor (and at times overwhelming vastness) of a natural landscape. Without using the term sublime, Drew Leder eloquently motions towards this effect in his formulation for "aesthetic absorption":

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[23] To reiterate Sobchack's definition: the proximal relationship between our five senses.

> I open feelingly such that the world can penetrate my senses, my muscles, my
> consciousness. The temporality of the landscape transforms my temporality. The
> slow crescendo and decrescendo of the wind, the stately glide of clouds awaken a
> resonance within my body-mind such that my hurried stride begins to slow, my
> thoughts to glide effortlessly, no longer rushing toward a goal. […] This is an
> experience of bi-directional incorporation; the world comes alive emphatically
> within my body, even as I experience myself as part of the body of the world
> (165)

Leder goes on to unpack the "ecstatic quality" of these moments, which are an emergent

commonality in sublime cinema when active spectatorship is fully engaged, and can at best be

described with similarly evocative prose as that used by Leder in this passage. Whether triggered

by brooding nature or a work of art that compounds those same ecstatic, embodied tenets, the

sublime is simply another grandiose term used to point towards flashes of transformative

ineffability that defy easy description. The broader thematic and kinesthetic implications of

aesthetic absorption will be revisited in a significant way in section 2.5 in relation to camera

movement, but for now it is sufficient to state that the *Qatsi* trilogy capitalizes on aesthetic

absorption as an actual experiential part of everyday reality. One of the deepest rooted powers of

these films is that they wind back to spatial ingredients that are already present in reality; they

hold up a mirror to pockets of culture around the globe and reify an innate magic in the world

that, while some might have thought was lost, turned out to be simply forgotten. The countless

bird's eye view shots of arid canyons, dense forests, savannahs, cloudscapes, and bodies of water

are testament to this ever-present magic. This cross-section between the 'old gods' of natural

sanctuaries, complete with "poetics of erosion" (Morris 125), and the 'new gods' of palm pilots,

rapid transport, and an ever-inflating hub of information is one of the other main hotbeds for

sublime revelations, both in the *Qatsi* trilogy and during first-hand experiences of the world.

Aside from the naturally occurring, gripping majesty of certain shots, it should also be mentioned that editing unhinges the circadian rhythms of nature in interesting ways, similarly to how slow motion and time lapse distort the boundaries of time and space. The most immediately apparent example of this comes in the form of sunrises and sunsets; celestial bodies and circadian rhythms of nature that are present throughout each of the three films. Although the running length of each film unfolds in a linear way, due to their non-narrative nature, when the sun is situated at its lowest points in the sky and bisected by the horizon, the viewer has no way of deducing whether it is rising or setting except by conjecture. The visible ritualistic habits of a culture usually indicate whether a day is beginning or ending,[24] but in *Qatsi*, those temporally affirming establishing shots are only visible at a remove from the shots of the sun itself. Sunrise blurs together with sunset, just as the geographical location of the sun (or virtually *any* event in the films) is riddled with ambiguity, becoming 'any sun' at 'any number of times.'

It should lastly be mentioned that synesthetic potential rears its head in directions other than sight-to-touch or sight-to-sound as well, usually when humans are present in the frame to catalyze such a sensory reaction through the viewer's empathic response, and the spectator's sense of bi-directional incorporation emerges to a fuller degree along an axis of reading a person's body language, rather than the 'body language' of the landscape itself. To cement this observation, Sobchack reiterates an observation put forth by Elaine Scarry that: a "crisscrossing of the senses may happen in any direction" (69), which echoes Jean-Luc Nancy's assertion that "the image is not only visual: it is also musical, poetic, even tactile, olfactory or gustatory, kinesthetic and so on" (4). Although there is not enough space to explore the entire circuitry of

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[24] Something that can immediately be deduced when watching *Man with a Movie Camera*, which tracks a linear 'day in the life' of a composite Russian city.

synesthesia and the crisscrossing of modal perception here, it would be valuable to provide at least one example of how such overlaps emerge in sublime cinema.

One such shot occurs in *Koyaanisqatsi* during "Prophecies" when a man wearing a beret is seen holding a cone of pink ice cream in a shop, emphatically conversing with two workers behind the counter, and then tastes the ice cream as the camera pans right and zooms in slightly to frame his reaction in medium closeup before cutting away to a crowded street. Although the spectator cannot hear what is being spoken due to the organ and choir that suffuses the soundtrack, the viewer can still ascertain what is being conveyed based on their own potential habituation to service industry decorum, ice cream consumption, and the elated expression on the customer's face. The emotion that is apparent on a subject's face, how the viewer reads their micro-physiognomy, becomes the indicator as to how other sensory synapses can fire off. In this particular moment of respite from the masses of slow moving street crowds, a body being hoisted onto a stretcher from the sidewalk, and firemen trudging through smoke-filled ghettos, the viewer is invited to pause and *taste* the ice cream in that diffused sense determined by the man's satisfied body language once he has tasted it first. As has held true throughout this chapter so far, the viewer's own level of engagement with the image determines the degree of sensory connection they will have with it. For cinesthetic subjects and sublime cinema, sight is a cross-modal lightning rod rather than an image vacuum.

2.4   Digital Manipulation – "It Is What It Isn't"

By now the savvy reader has probably picked up on the fact that nearly all of the examples I've included as evidence in this chapter have been drawn from the first two *Qatsi* films. This is because *Naqoyqatsi* complicates the previous formulas by using digital manipulation and computer generated graphics (CGI) to take the aforementioned degrees of

abstraction and aesthetic absorption in more automatized, outlandish, and alien directions. If there is a tendency to frame bodies of luminous water in *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Powaqqatsi* in a manner that abstracts them to a degree of absolute animation, then those tendencies turn up more as white static in the third film with the prevalent inclusion of digital artifacting and 3D-imaging.

Naqoyqatsi has been panned as the 'lesser' of the films in the trilogy due to its adoption of digital representational strategies that might be seen as depersonalizing forces in contemporary Western society. The montage and metaphorical resonance that are present in the other two films are fractured and re-assembled here. *Naqoyqatsi* often moves away from the incisive poetry or ballet between machines, natural landscapes, and trenchant satire towards a kind of visual blank verse and pastiche. It recycles imagery from the other two films and gives them a digital gloss, warps stock footage to suit its collage aesthetic, swaps the more embodied sublime moments from the other two films for the embalming capabilities of media vis-a-vis celebrities and other cults of personality, and skirts around the dangerous topical edges of genetic experimentation, pharmaceuticals, warfare, and cosmetics using digital media as a vessel to navigate the waters of binary and virtual reality. On the *Naqoyqatsi* DVD extras, Reggio in fact describes the process of making this particular film as "virtual cinema."

As a result of this tech-dominated, contemporized approach to the image, the synesthetic sensory overlaps become more ineffable and cannot be cleanly lumped into any one of the basic five categories. What *Naqoyqatsi* lacks in easily discernible sensory triggers and crisscrossing of the senses it makes up for by imbuing certain images with a kind of undecipherable alchemy. For instance, one blip that appears in a sequence of rapid-fire advertisements during "Intensive Time" depicts a pristine woman splashing her face with water in slightly slow motion, and that image immediately dissolves to nuclear incendiary. The peculiar visual hybridization of elements

that digital collage facilitates challenges the viewer to *invent* sensory correlations between drastically opposing forces, rather than dip into a pre-existent bank of sense-memories.

Other textural examples that similarly challenge the viewer's sensuous interaction with the image include: digitally altered giraffes and zebras galloping across a landscape of aqua-coloured grounds and maroon-tinted skies, a computer-generated petting zoo, an x-ray of a human skeleton stroking its face (or perhaps applying makeup), and an outstretched human hand morphed into the elongated shape of an alien's over a cosmic backdrop. Rather than forego relatable sensory experience completely, Reggio's post-modern approach in the third film can instead be seen as an invitation to exercise imagination and fabricate new sensuous relationships. Apropos to these computer-generated sequences, the viewer is implicitly asked: what would a landscape of aqua grounds and maroon skies smell or feel like? What would it be like to touch the fur of computer-generated animals in a fully immersive virtual reality? To what degree can a viewer relate to a skeleton's sensuality?

To help address these provocative questions, I would like to quickly extend on the theories of Laura Marks. Although her brand of phenomenology boldly attempts "to find culture *within* the body" and claims that "phenomenology can account for how the body encodes power relations somatically" (152), I would challenge her on "the fact that perception is not an infinite return to the buffet table of lived experience but a walk through the minefield of embodied memory" by arguing that faculties of imagination, *invented* memory, and slippages between the cracks of actuality and fabrication can be just as useful in making sense of cinematic encounters as those irrefutably embodied sense-memories that dictate how we usually interpret a film's sensory output.

To apply this argument to one of the preceding images/questions prompted by *Naqoyqatsi,* since sense-memory most certainly does *not* (and arguably could never) account for the physicality of what is a quintessentially sci-fi image – the hand of an alien that was once human – the viewer is implicitly asked to invent an intuitive imprint of what such a feeling would be like. Despite how universally these digitized examples might spur unfathomed sensual deductions, they are not unfathom*able* when the imagination is given free reign. In this light, I argue that *Naqoyqatsi* demands the highest level of spectatorial investment out of the three films in order to turn its running time into a fully embodied experience.

Lastly, the digital transformations that images undergo further distort the viewer's perception of chronology and temporality. For instance, some footage in the film is tinkered with in order to render its exposure and style as if it were pulled from the annals of early 1900s cinema. Digital effects then, can now artificially antiquate images, making their age seem out of joint with the reality from which the shot was actually extracted. Experimental filmmaker Bill Morrison accomplishes this in his own thought-provoking body of sublime cinema by going the opposite direction when he assembles old piles of partially decayed nitrate stock footage into new films and ambiguous (non-verbal) narratives accompanied by contemporary soundtracks.[25] Regardless of whether the filmmaker antiquates new footage or goes 'back to the future' with old found footage, the results end up being equally sublime, uncanny, and timeless as temporality is pulled in two opposing directions in service of the image's aesthetic force.

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[25] 2002's *Decasia* and 2012's *The Great Flood* are both prime examples of Morrison's collage innovations with found footage. The former employs an ominous soundtrack by Michael Gordon replete with industrial clangs and whipping noises to complement the severely deteriorated nitrate archive footage, while the latter's score by Bill Frisell accompanies haunting imagery of the Mississippi River Flood of 1927 with slide guitar work that makes the overall effect of the film bucolic rather than disconcerting.

2.5   Camera Movement – "Chasing Cliffhangers"

 "The first person perspective encompasses the mediasphere as extension of self."
                                     – Daniel Barnett, *Movement as Meaning in Experimental Film* (161)

This section will focus on how camera movement, shooting angles, and zooms in *Qatsi*

are kinesthetic techniques that can be mined by the active spectator for trenchant metaphorical

meaning and sublime impact. In relation to chase films, Barker stakes the claim that:

> film is to our bodies like car is to driver: we live through it vicariously, allowing it to
> shape our own bodily image. It becomes our proxy, our vehicle for movement and action,
> as well as the thing that provides us a safe haven from which to experience real danger.
> And yet, despite the lure of safety and vicarious power, the film reminds us that we're *not*
> as competent, fast, graceful, and powerful as the film's body. It thwarts our grasp in a
> number of different ways. (110)

In this passage, Barker highlights the complex relationship between the film and the viewer's

body in a way that provides an apt entry point to discuss how omniscient aerial camera

movement can work in tandem with an underlying sense of fatalism throughout *Qatsi* to generate

a sense of ambivalence in tandem with razor-sharp metaphor. The hyperkinetic aspects of

sublime cinema produce a kinesthetic effect that is akin to a revisionist chase film in which the

viewer/camera becomes that which both chases and flees—the unknown presence behind the

lens is primed by the film's tonal ambivalence to be both hunter and hunted of a nebulous chase

sequence with the collective elements of the mise-en-scene/world.

Without a protagonist for the viewer to identify with in sublime cinema, the characteristic

force behind the camera becomes ambiguous, and subjective point of view shots are subject to

the viewer's phenomenological interpretations and sociocultural biases. If time lapse can

transform the geometry and luminescence of a space to stand for something greater than what it

actually is—to adopt a metaphorical resonance by tapping into an augmented sublime form

concealed within the folds of reality—then the rushing sensation generated by the camera's

movement through that space is what inhabits that augmented reality, and truly gets the landscape's blood pumping, at times to the verge of cardiac arrest.

Koyaanisqatsi in particular is a manically edited dance between soaring god's eye view tracking shots and what Arnheim would have called "worm's-eye view" (104) sequences. From extremely elevated and low angles, the film becomes a dialectical exchange between first person subjective point of view shots that channel a higher consciousness, and a kind of self-destructive divine motor. As with the viewer's somatic relationship to chase sequences, the god-like capacity for seeing vested in the viewer by cameras and technology is not something that can ultimately be mastered or fully controlled, despite them lending an air of omnipotence. All the viewer can do is succumb to the graphical peaks and valleys of the film, and make embodied sense of whatever omnipotence or enfeeblement is conjured by its shot sequences.

The speed at which this god-like consciousness manoeuvres through factories and cities by the second half of *Koyaanisqatsi*—exponentially accelerated by time lapse photography— suggests that it has moved beyond ambivalent observation into perceptual territory that can more accurately be articulated according to Karin Littau's formulation for *schaulust* or eye hunger. Unlike the neutral act of observing, or a more pleasure-charged form of looking such as voyeurism, eye-hunger "is not about gratification at a distance" but rather "emerges in full view as part of the crowd, milling ever closer towards the intense pressure at its spectacular center" (35). Although the omniscient gaze remains a constant throughout the trilogy, the level of omnipotence enmeshed in this perspective ultimately dissolves by the end of *Koyaanisqatsi*, and falls victim to the death wish that such careless eye-hunger seems to be furiously chasing after.

Nowhere is the omniscient gaze depicted as being more fatalistic or enfeebled than when the camera is planted on a conveyor belt in a Twinkie factory during the last two minutes of "The

Grid." Ramping up to this shot, the viewer sees various time lapsed footage of: the human hands and mechanical pistons of production in factories (sewing clothing, assembling blocky computers/televisions/cars), hot-dogs shooting down the mechanized highway of an assembly line (with glitches that periodically pop up like a car crash and require a human hand's intervention), a man holding a baby in one arm while playing an arcade game with the other, a crash zoom into a computer's motherboard, and a spitfire subjective point of view shot taken from the front windshield of a car that is going down a real (as opposed to a mere hot-dog) highway. The camera movement whirls increasingly out of control, the cuts between shots become quicker, and the excessive velocity gives the impression that the 'hungry' camera wants to be everywhere at once, although it does not actually move through space until it emerges at the extreme low angled shooting position of a conveyor belt in a single file row of Twinkies.

No longer soaring over the lush anthropomorphic landscapes featured during "Organic" or "Clouds" – during which the god's eye-view is cemented as one of the film's formal conceits, and untouched nature is exalted as 'god the viewer's' creation, since only their eyes are granted the privilege of bearing witness to its purity – the camera is positioned at this point of "The Grid" in such a way that god/the spectator is hailed as a Twinkie, and is handled like a benign mass-produced consumable by the glassy-eyed factory workers. It is fitting then that the next shot is of the camera weaving incomprehensibly fast through grocery store aisles, perhaps searching for that same Twinkie, with the camera standing in for a commoditized deity that auto-cannibalizes its own tail. The downsizing of god into a Twinkie is poignant enough, but this illustration of impotence is inflated tenfold by the futility of the ending sequence when the ineffectuality of 'god as Twinkie' is amplified back to a macro-level of representation with the (equally phallic) image of a giant exploding rocket.

During "The Grid", the potency of the god-like gaze diminishes in favor of unhinged eye-hunger, whose self-destructive capacity moves the gaze ever closer towards self-eradication. Through the omniscient camera and analogy of the gaze as 'god-the-creator,' the audio-visual trajectory presented over the film's running time paves a road from omnipotent agency, natural wonder, and holy vision to mass manufactured anxiety, fatalism, and subjugation by conveyor belt. If, as Iain Grant argues: "Under self-augmenting technological expansion, space is multiplied by time and consumed as speed" (108), then by the end of *Koyaanisqatsi*, self-augmenting technological expansion has reached a critical mass where both space and time are consumed by the delirious, unhinged speed at which we try to self-augment vicariously through technology. The mangled rocket engine – once a crucial motorizing component of humanity's "shining beast" (Reggio as quoted in *Essence*) – is irrevocably caught in stasis, and hollowed out by the zoom lens until all that remains is voided space, or a visual artifact from a bygone era.

Elsewhere in the first film, before the eye-hunger reaches a fever pitch during "The Grid," the first person camera's identity shapeshifts in other notable ways. During "Vessels," the camera is placed on the back wings of a sandy-beige, camouflage-patterned plane so that its velocity becomes the viewer's proprioceptive centre. The plane blends into the desert landscape below, and contrary to the rapturous sense of flight that this sublime vantage point should give, ends up looking like more of a toy model or simulation than the real thing, dampening the overall effect an aerial shot like this should have. The effect is reminiscent of a negatively exposed and green-saturated image of marching soldiers during *Naqoyqatsi's* "Primacy of Number." The graphical manipulation there accomplishes what the framing does to the beige plane in "Vessels," and renders the soldiers as toy figurines. Although the gravity of a warplane and fully armed soldiers is deadly serious, the way these sequences are represented both trivializes the

grave nature of those realities, and provocatively points out how manufactured the tenets of war can be. The tensions between these layers of meaning are where dynamic sublime responses can emerge. The plane conveys this point through a subjective camera fastened to its back end, and the soldiers by their automaton-like diagonal marching down the frame in front of a static camera, but both flashes of motion generate similar conflicting meaning.

To expand on the 'car crash camera' intimations of *schaulust* with a different example: *Koyaanisqatsi's* "Pruit Igoe" focuses on a failed urban housing project in St. Louis, Missouri. The camera orbits around the buildings that are about to be demolished from a bird's eye view. Although the camera does not enter the buildings (evidently for safety purposes), and mostly presents static shots, a foreboding sense of motion is created by Glass' cascading string section, coupled with the slight movement of stray materials attached to the building. Although the viewer cannot see the demolition coming, they can *feel* how impending it is. In scoping out the buildings, it is as if the camera is trying to warn them of impending danger, seemingly trying to flee from the site of disorder while chasing the *schaulust*-driven heart of the chaos where things literally fall apart. In this chapter of the film and "The Grid," the 'car crash' infatuation of modern culture comes to the forefront as an event that occupies front stage centre.

The stylistic excess and constant contrasting camera dynamics in *Koyaanisqatsi* again prove to be a unifying rather than fragmenting force. In conjunction with time lapse, the somatic impact of these deft camera movements is amplified along with the speed at which the viewer traverses space. There is an underlying anxiety that the camera might unhinge, and become the main car crash event.

Powaqqatsi often inverts the formula adopted as a skeleton key in *Koyaanisqatsi* by using slower, lateral, tracking shots through jungles and villages, and zoom outs that reveal a

wider field of action. The replacement of Ron Fricke with Graham Berry and Leonidas Zourdoumis undoubtedly has something to do with the distinct shift in cinematographic style. There are a greater number of canted camera angles and fish eye lenses (along with the rampant telephoto lenses pointed out by Reggio earlier), which in turn more often distorts the natural proportions of reality. The camera movement itself feels more disembodied, free-floating, and Steadicam-esque than the clear-cut, unidirectional tracking shots featured in *Koyaanisqatsi*.

Most of these smoother tracking shots occur during one of three sections titled "Anthem" in the first half of the film. Some exemplary sequences include being gently led through sandy villages and mud huts, just above water level alongside a small boat that is wedged between a jungle, and aerial shots over villages built alongside waterways in Peru. The slower pace of these tracking shots lets each of their spatial dimensions breathe, and gives the impression that the camera is the viewer's tour guide,[26] as opposed to an actual surrogate vessel for the viewer's body. With more time to breathe in the lush details of these various geographical spaces, the sudden velocity shift that occurs near the end of the film with a lightning fast subjective point of view tracking shot down train tracks becomes all the more jarring.

The moment in question occurs during "Caught!" and showcases a camera that veers down tracks on what appears to be a cliff nested beside a series of linear pipelines. This fourteen-second tracking shot jumpstarts the film's pace, which slows down considerably during the religious rituals featured in "The Unutterable." Although the frame rate playback is still technically slow motion, heading down the cliff 50% slower than normal speed (36 fps), the

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[26] Some of the camera movements here are reminiscent of the virtuosic first person camera work featured in Mikhail Kalatozov's *Soy Cuba* (1964), which arguably shares generic lineage with the city symphony and *Qatsi* trilogy, despite it consisting of three human-narrated narrative strands. It is poignant in the film that a woman's voice actually narrates *from* the point of view of Cuba at the dawning of the 1959 revolution.

extremely oblique, downward-facing angle, darting camera movement, and rambunctious music fuel the shot with an incredible degree of momentum. This gives the viewer an impression of a rustic (and dangerous) rollercoaster, and like a rollercoaster, has a kinesthetic ability to induce butterflies in their stomach. This shot concretizes how a striking mix of content and form can produce a sublime psychophysiological system shock.

With its more ardent focus on the human rather than industrial element of landscapes, *Powaqqatsi* also reformulates how first person subjective point of view shots are employed. During "The Unutterable," the omniscient camera peers down at a little girl for four seconds from a high angle as she stares in awe at moving streaks of neon lights through the rear window of a moving vehicle while the lights are visibly reflected on the window. The next shot adopts the girl's point of view for fourteen seconds and reveals the vertically cycling striations of phosphorescent lights and text *through* the rear window as they are superimposed over skyscrapers at night. Although the omniscient gaze inhabits a specific human vantage point at moments like these in order to slant the viewer's understanding of the content towards a more empathic register, such techniques of 'second-hand embodiment' are used sparingly in order to preserve the characteristic tonal ambivalence of the film, and the omniscient gaze of the camera.

"From Egypt with Mr. Suzo" illustrates a slightly different momentary diving into a human figure's subjective point of view. This time, the camera directly faces a *powaqa* or shaman[27] who stares directly into the lens, and appears to be in a state of intense spiritual ecstasy while wielding a stick as a conduit for the ritual. He is surrounded by a circle of people who also

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[27] A secondary definition for the film's Hopi title is revealed by Reggio in *Essence*: "Powaqa is a black magician, an entity that eats the life of another person ... to advance [its] own life… operates through seduction, through allurement." Aside from the primary translation of "life in transition," Reggio also interprets *Powaqqatsi* to mean "a way of life that consumes another way of life to advance itself."

stare directly into the lens, which amplifies the impact of his own gaze and the commanding nature of his presence as the "Call to Prayer" featured on the soundtrack re-enters the mix. Whereas the use of subjective point of view to slink into the perspective of the little girl in the back seat of a car gave an impression of being mesmerized by the glowing synthetic environment of her urban surroundings (she is, in effect, surrounded and blasted by the technological sublime), being confronted with the *powaqa* instills a sense of reverence for old traditions and esoteric practices, with the precise subjective point of view of the camera being more ambiguous.

The camera's identity here might be interpreted as an apprentice, an innocent bystander, a propagator of Western traditions and industrializing impulses, an out-of-body reflection of the sorcerer himself, a summoned spirit, or any other reading of the camera's vantage point that the viewer can muster. The shot is played back at quarter speed, which further renders it in an eerily beautiful and disarming light. What sets this shot apart from the omniscient gaze that predominates most of *Qatsi* is a similar sense of subjugation that 'becoming' a Twinkie produced in *Koyaanisqatsi*; the viewer no longer feels in control, and has been overtaken by the will of another element in the frame, which is cause for a palpable sense of the sublime.

Going in line with the more active imaginative aspects of the viewer's sense-memory that were treated in section 2.4, *Naqoyqatsi* further complicates these kinds of subjective first person tracking shots by enacting them over CGI landscapes where a giant rocky pyramid rises from a bed of pixels, or the camera jets across a negatively exposed digital roulette table from a ball's point of view in washed out pastel hues during "Religion." The spirit of the first two films still clearly resonates in *Naqoyqatsi* with the ball's point of view shot becoming the new incarnation of the Twinkie, but the completely synthetic and manipulated representational strategies of the film are less prone to produce unbridled kinesthetic reflexes, or make the viewer hyperaware of

their proprioception since their brain is already working overtime in order to fabricate a suitable

embodied response to the content. Kinesthetic responses are more involuntary (something that

will be revisited at greater length when discussing rhythmic entrainment), whereas haptic

responses can be more easily triggered by the sensory brainstorms of a keen active spectator.

To revisit and play devil's advocate with Arnheim, he claims in 1933 that: "One of the

factors that determines the difference between looking at a motion picture and looking at reality

is the absence of the sense of balance and other kinesthetic experiences" (102). One can't help

but speculate as to whether Arnheim would still agree with his own statement shortly before

passing away in 2007.[28] To parry the old with the contemporary on the subject of balance and

kinesthetic experiences, Sobchack states that:

> In its capacity for movement the cinema's material agency (embodied as the camera) thus
> constitutes visual visible space as always also motor and tactile space – a space that is
> deep and textural, that can be materially inhabited that provides not merely an abstract
> ground for the visual/visible but also its particular situation. (151)

In the *Qatsi* trilogy, it might be more accurate to claim that points of view are debunked by

situations of viewing, which can still be further contextualized based on the pairing of camera

movement and depicted subject matter. Even more broadly, any form of optical representation

can lead directly to a sense of physical propulsion although it is illusory. However, illusions are

still powerful enough to unlock the viewer's mental web of multi-modal cognitive functioning

and sense-memory. This is reinforced by the way persistence of vision stitches various

configurations of rods and cones together into shapes that allow a suspension of disbelief. If

persistence of vision and suspension of disbelief can activate broader sensory strokes like

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[28] The 360-degree mobility of Michael Snow's camera in the 180 minute running time of *La Région Centrale* (1971)
comes to mind as a suitable 'dare' to interrogate Arnheim's claim.

hapticity, if audio content is chronically perceived in a holistic and often 'moving' way despite the fragmented nature of its frequencies and wavelengths, then it would take a true stubborn cynic to refute the possibility that the mere visual representations of movement through space cannot give human physiology a rush of adrenaline and inspiration.

In an interview with Michael Gary Dault, Edward Burtynsky says that his often mural-sized photographs of oil spills and water dams are a "body experience" and like a "shard of visual godhead."[29] This strikes an interesting parallel with the previous discussion of omniscient sublime vantage points and Leder's notion of "aesthetic absorption." If a single still photograph can engage the perceiver's entire being, and become a sensual experience despite the cerebral provocations of the content on display, there is no telling how much kinesthetic or affective potential is still bound up in the future capabilities of the motion picture. In the same interview with Burtynsky, Dault takes this assertion about "body experience" photography to mean that: "Burtynsky's widescreen beauty can seduce when it might better have alarmed." There is a common misconception that the seductive and imperative qualities of art are mutually exclusive, which might have to do with the fact that reconciling them into one articulable body/brain experience breaches the sublime territory that has been discussed throughout this chapter. Can it also not be contended that, at times, in order to alarm with content, the viewer must first be seduced by form? Like a pedestrian watching a snake charmer with an ulterior motive, the snake must first be entranced in order to captivate the onlooker's proximal trust so that they drift close enough for the snake to lash out and inject its venom.

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[29] Burtynsky is arguably one of Reggio's creative twin souls. Both of them employ massive image scales, foreground industrialized landscapes, and strive to portray content in an ambivalent but environmentally sensitive way that allows viewers to make their own judgments.

Chapter 3: Music – "Playing with Sonic Sledgehammers"

"An entire world must undergo a transformation into music, must become music."
   – Werner Herzog on staging *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) in a rainforest,
      "On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth" (para. 24)

Philip Glass' music divides listeners into those who revere or revile its repetitive rhythmic structures and bold melodies,[30] much like sublime cinema and the *Qatsi* trilogy divides spectators into those who garner meaningful experiences through active viewing strategies, or who tap out prematurely and lose interest in the subject matter due to frustration with the radical formal approach. The cyclical structure of Glass' music is the sonic equivalent to deep focused long shots and hyperkinetic montage; it allows active listeners to lock into an unbridled engagement with the film, or to simply 'look around' with their ears and float through its streams of repetition.

At a pivotal midpoint in *The Truman Show* (Weir 1998), the main theme from *Powaqqatsi* ("Anthem") emerges when Truman (Jim Carrey) begins to realize that his life has been orchestrated as a reality television show. A revolving door is shot from a canted low angle in medium closeup while Truman continuously walks through it, as the blasts of triumphant brass and rumbling 5/4 rhythmic cycles from *Powaqqatsi* are a literal counterweight for the spinning visual action and Truman's rumination. Later in the film, a melancholic piano piece comprised of rising/falling minor-keyed third notes (titled "Truman Sleeps") plays while the overlord of the

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[30] Two user-submitted Amazon reviews for *The Hours* soundtrack outline this polarizing effect well. One review titled "Enough already!" states that the author "hope[s] that the DVD of the film will have a 'no soundtrack" option', so that we can enjoy the wonderful acting without the constant 'Da-da-da-da, Da-da-da-da' of Philip Glass," while another reviewer champions Glass' emotional resonance, titling their review "Strong, Fragile, Revolutionary" and observe that: "It seems as if such a product could only be made by an eccentric and unyielding mathematician - but when you listen, it has a depth of emotional delicacy that could only be compared to trying to hold onto something you truly love over the edge of the world, with a gradually thinning silver string."

Truman Show places his hand on a giant screen of Truman's sleeping face. The music is seemingly non-diegetic until a long shot reveals a cameo of Glass performing the piece inside of the director's main control room, highlighting to the viewer just how formidably music can manipulate emotions.

Both of these sequences demonstrate how well Glass' music complements visual style in a way that can be interpreted with as much or as little rigor and depth as the viewer is comfortable with. The aesthetic impact of the audiovisual content can either graze the spectator's skin like a passing cloud until the next moment hits, or becomes planted in the core of their emotional and analytical intelligence as a puzzle that needs to be solved. Such sequences also begin to indicate how psychophysiological Glass' music can be; its repetitive cycles have an effect that is equally cerebral and visceral. Strong mental impressions conjured by the music stir how the eye reacts to the image, and how the body reacts to the whole aesthetic experience. The recurrent visual motifs in *Qatsi* induce a state of trance to which Glass' rhythmic cycles add momentum.

In the first section of this chapter I will provide a biographical silhouette of the man behind the music using Robert Maycock's comprehensive *Glass: A Portrait* to chart Glass' endeavours, and flesh out the vital signs of his creative style.[31] The following section will fill in that silhouetted profile with a general consideration of how the *Qatsi* trilogy soundtracks were tailor-made for Reggio's vision, and explore how they fit into the excessive paradigm that has been set up as foundational to sublime cinema. The last two sections of this chapter will focus on how specific sublime audiovisual intersections throughout *Qatsi* can be articulated by

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[31] While I will rely primarily on Maycock's book because it is one of the only exhaustive works on Glass to combine biographical details, in depth treatment of creative process, and candid interviews, for a more personal perspective, I encourage the reader to seek out Scott Hicks' documentary *Glass: A Portrait of Philip in Twelve Parts* (2007) as a supplementary resource.

biomusicological phenomena known as entrainment (the synchronization of organisms to an external rhythm) and *frisson* (chills that are produced by an overwhelming magnitude of sensory stimuli).

3.1   Biography – "Through the Looking Glass"

"I don't really know where the music comes from. It puzzles me."
       – Philip Glass interview with Mark Skipworth

Glass began training his musical proficiency in Baltimore at the Peabody Institute from the age of eight, acquired a bachelor's degree in mathematics and philosophy at the University of Chicago, and attended the Juilliard School of Music throughout his early adulthood where he bolstered his Western composition skills (Maycock 146).[32] Following this, a series of events occurred while Glass was living in Paris during the mid-60s' that would catalyze the "repetitive structures"[33] his style is now famously known for (147). While studying counterpoint and harmony under Nadia Boulanger, he collaborated with radical theatre groups that staged adaptations of Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean Genet: playwrights who deconstructed the audience's identification with a protagonist for the first time (146). Moreover, Glass claims that modernist artists like "Cage and Beckett cleared the playing field and gave us permission to start playing again" (Walls para. 2). Cage's 1961 book *Silence* introduced Glass to Zen koans and Buddhism, which would set him on the path of becoming a Tibetan Buddhist, and drastically

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[32] Although there is no room to elaborate at length on the Western heritage of Glass' compositional style, he declares an outspoken fondness for the more repetitive compositions of Franz Schubert and Domenico Scarlatti, while the texture of Glass' music hovers somewhere between Richard Wagner's towering creative vision, Igor Stravinsky's primacy of rhythm, Olivier Messiaen's exotic inspirations and instrumentation (i.e. Sanskrit, birdsong; the ondes Martenot), and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's tonal colours.

[33] Glass expresses his preference for the coinage "music with repetitive structures" as opposed to the term "minimalism" in a 2012 *Juilliard Journal* interview with Tonimarie Marchioni (para. 1). This is largely due to his discomfort with being pigeonholed, along with the fact that minimalism as a musical genre – characterized by other trailblazing artists such as Steve Reich, John Adams, and Terry Riley – reached its heyday in the 60s–70s' and had already petered out by the mid-80s'.

alter the way he thought about music during the sea change spurred by the 60s' (Tworkov and Coe para. 7).

It is only fitting then that Glass' first attempt at scoring a stage play at this time of fervent artistic experimentation was a 1965 adaptation of Beckett's *Play*. According to Glass, these kinds of theatrical productions took "the subject out of the narrative" to such a level that "there is not even a narrative in the sense of telling a story" (Maycock 26). This pushed him to elongate the possibilities of his own expressive palette. Contrary to this purposeful distanciation in theatre, Maycock observes of popular Western music throughout the 19th and 20th centuries that it "had been about individual, subjective expression" that "put the subject, so to speak, into the narrative" (27). This clashing of expressive tendencies between two different art forms proved to be a milestone challenge for Glass, who had to find a way to reconcile the desubjectivized cutting edge of these plays with the character-driven, Romantic flourishes of Western music.

Around the same time as Beckett's *Play*, an opportunity arose that saw Glass transcribing Indian music for the cult film *Chappaqua* (Rooks 1966) so that European musicians could perform it. It was at this interstitial moment between two practical problems that needed solving – 1) how to write appropriate music for a play without a central character, and 2) how to develop a new system of notation that compensated for the differences between Indian and European traditions and rhythmic structures – that Glass' entire compositional perspective would be retooled. Working alongside sitar legend Ravi Shankar and tabla virtuoso Alla Rakha on *Chappaqua*, he discovered that the notation had to be counted in larger groupings of 16 beats to make up for the rhythmic differences between Indian and European traditions. This odd-metered Indian counting scheme, also known as a *tala*, shattered Glass' preconceptions about how musical structures could be built, since European traditions more often adopt simple duple or

triple meter rhythms. Glass was also profoundly inspired by other differences in North Indian

music, notably its didactic reliance on memory, intuition, fluidity, and the oral transmission of

knowledge (163). These inspirations, along with the cyclical nature of Buddhist teachings and

the raw absurdist truths presented by the content of playwrights like Beckett, converged so that,

according to Maycock:

> If the 'subject' was being expressed through melodies, tonal progressions, crescendos and
> climaxes, then they had to go. The building blocks would be the smallest basic elements
> of music: notes, beats, a tempo. The organizing principle for building with them would be
> rhythm. That idea was all he took [from North Indian classical music] – there was no
> question of his trying to write in an Indian style, and his music borrows none of the
> sounds or melodies or actual rhythms. But it was enough: the missing link. (28)

Prioritizing rhythm and repetition instead of harmony and melody preserved the integrity of texts

that have been freed from the teleological limitations of a main character or story by not

impinging on their tonal ambiguities with 'easy' melodic lyricism. It is inviting to think of this

early stage work as a predecessor to the *Qatsi* trilogy in terms of the formal approaches Glass

was experimenting with. Desubjectification strategies in *Play* have the same relative effect as in

non-narrative films: once character has been usurped by thematic ambivalence, a greater space

for subjective readings is created for the spectator, who can infuse that ambiguated space with

their own subject and emotion.

Another elementary structural building block for Glass' musical development was the

baroque chaconne: a traditional European form of music from the 17th/18th centuries where "a

bass line repeats over and over while overlaying parts are gradually added and varied, forming a

predominant harmonic pattern, which in turn can be varied" (Maycock 41). Glass revivified the

traditional basis of this form by stripping away the preoccupation with harmonic patterns, often

leaving only a thick bass-line as a central ostinato. The grave-sounding, organ-driven title

sequence of *Koyaanisqatsi* is a prime example of Glass' take on the chaconne. More recently, he composed *Partita for Solo Violin* (2011) which includes a "Chaconne" in two parts, further paring down his experimentation with a traditional form, and wedging his more modern artistic attempts between "music with repetitive structures" and classicist revisionism.

With all of these overlapping circles of inspiration locked firmly into place, the output of Glass' career skyrocketed, leading him to incidentally become an opera composer for the first time when *Einstein on the Beach* was written and staged at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1976 simply because all the technical resources, personnel, and visionary scope could not fit into another kind of venue (Maycock 33). Directed by Robert Wilson, *Einstein* became known as an audacious four act opera that took place over a five-hour period, allowing audience members to come and go from the theatre at will. If *Einstein* marked Glass as an opera composer by dint of its staging context, *Satyagraha* (1979/80), which was based on the life of Gandhi, further inflated this trend of unwitting reinvention, and is said to have inadvertently rescued opera from creative stagnation and diminishing returns (35). *Akhnaten* (1983), an opera based on the titular pharaoh, would complete the thematically linked Portrait Trilogy about men who changed the world.

Opera's ability to bridge and synthesize multiple art forms on one multimedia platform falls in line with what German philosopher Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahndorff theorized as *gesamtkunstwerk* (a "total work of art") that combines "the art of the sound of the word, of music, of mimicry and dance" (1) and what Richard Wagner put into practice twenty years later in his essay "Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft" (The Artwork of the Future) to present opera as the greatest example of a syncretic creative union between different artistic forms. Historically ramping up to the intermedia beginnings of cinema in the late 1800s, back when it hadn't yet found its autonomous and independent voice, I propose that the excess of different artistic

practices found in opera intrinsically reaches for sublime heights, and that city symphonies, now reconstituted as sublime cinema, are a way of resurrecting *gesamtkunstwerk* within a cinematic framework.

The cross-cultural fluency and synergy between media evidenced by Philip Glass' creative track record also feeds well into this idea of cross-media pollination, and how that approach can produce cutting edge work. Maycock points out that none of Glass' "music is conceived in isolation; most of it has a dramatic, literary, philosophical or visual connection, and the rest is specifically geared to particular conditions of performance" (158). Glass himself, cross-modal jack-of-all trades that he is, adds that:

> Going from writing a commercial score to writing an opera which is going to be seen by far fewer people, then to writing a symphony which I'm thinking about, […] to writing piano music which I'm always doing, the impact that those different kinds of encounters have on the music is extremely stimulating. (149)

This multivalent approach and yearning for the stimulation of vivid creative contrasts is further reflected by the odd jobs Glass would work to support himself over the years, even after he became a renowned composer. Whether operating a crane to fund Juilliard, working as a plumber while just getting on his feet as a professional musician, or driving a cab at the time of *Einstein*,[34] (147) there is a forthrightness and penchant for urban survivalism to the way Glass coasts through life that is mirrored by Reggio's beginnings as a neophyte monk and street activist. Both emerged from unconventional backgrounds with a creative ebb and flow that is linked to spiritualism, a proactive stance with regards to the large-scale transformative capacity of humankind, and the secular return of religiosity in the form of technology.

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[34] In one of many humourous anecdotes featured in Maycock's book, he writes: "The day after the premiere [of *Einstein*] he was told by a passenger who saw his name that he shared the name with 'a very famous composer'" (147).

After these formative experiences across different countries, in concert halls, modest stages, and giant opera houses, Glass finally scored his first film in 1982 with *Koyaanisqatsi*. Maycock addresses the symbiotic working relationship between Glass and Reggio when he observes:

> The creative dynamic is between images and music and the collaboration between the artists was close to the extent that the film was partly planned to follow the music, which in turn was based on the images in preliminary footage. This is as close to the condition of opera as another medium is likely to get… (40)

This correlation between the sublime cinema of *Qatsi* and opera is especially poignant, as the larger-than-life aspects of opera's form and content, its *gesamtkunstwerk*, provide an apt entry point to discuss the sublime potential of the music used in *Qatsi*.

There is an inherent flexibility to each of Glass' composed pieces; their creative lifespans might begin in one place, and reappear decades later in another form of media. The repetitive musical structures within a piece are reflected by the reified presence of those pieces across various media. What began as sonic accompaniment for the destruction of low income buildings in *Koyaanisqatsi*'s "Pruit Igoe" has the freedom to re-emerge over 25 years later in video games (*Grand Theft Auto IV* [2008]) and superhero blockbusters (*Watchmen* [2009]). As evidenced earlier in this section by *The Truman Show*, certain scored tracks appear in other films with just as much potency, while *non*-score music has made its way into film.[35] Even Glass' soundtracks post-*Koyaanisqatsi* – Paul Schrader's tragicomic biopic *Mishima* (1985), Errol Morris' crime documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), the gentle piano and ethereal choirs of the Clive Barker-based horror film *Candyman* (Rose 1992), Martin Scorsese's treatment of the fourteenth

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[35] One of the main themes titled "Protest" from *Satyagraha* re-emerged in 2002's *The Hours* as a track called "I'm Going to Make Cake", as did multiple solo piano pieces from 1981's composition collections *Glassworks*.

Dalai Lama *Kundun* (1997), new scores written in 1994 for Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) as well as in 1999 for Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) – display an artistic restlessness and nearly schizophrenic range of content that Glass reins in with one distinct musical voice. Although there are many angles from which to approach and dissect Glass' music, none are better than diving into the immediate effects of the scores themselves.

3.2   Aural Excess in Balance – "Reel-to-Reel-to-Reel-to-Reel-to-Reel-to-Reel"

"Music has a powerful ability to tell us what we're seeing."
                                        – Philip Glass, *Essence of Life*

While studying rhythm in Ghana one year before the release of *Koyaanisqatsi*, ethnomusicologist John Miller Chernoff stated that: "Whatever gives the artwork its unity becomes a symbol for the art's communicative effectiveness as the purest representation of an idea or the most expressive condensation of an emotion" (32). What gives the *Qatsi* trilogy its unity is not only an unbridled sense of stylistic excess that fires on all cylinders, but also a deeply embedded emotional component that can move the active listener to 'water' the soundtrack with their attention, and allow the colours of the image to bloom. This link back to excess reiterates how unifying an assault of stylized form and content can be, while motioning towards the emotive, trance-like elements of Glass' music that marks it as sublime. Reggio muses that:

> When you listen to [Glass'] *Music in Twelve Parts*, there's a certain demand on the listener to let go; it's almost like taking acid, which can be a very frightening experience if you're not willing to die. I know I'm being dramatic, but listening to Philip's music can produce a tremendous emotional movement inside the listener. Philip abandoned the twelve-tone Western scale for the inspirational power of Vedic Hindu chants, which are trancelike; they open up the conscious and the unconscious mind to another space, another dimension. (MacDonald 398)

It is as if Glass instills the mind-altering essence of an ecstatic dance or shamanic ritual into his music, similarly to how Reggio infuses his images with glowing spiritualism and social activism.

It is my goal in the remainder of this chapter to better define what kind of distinctive qualities that music has, untangle how those qualities work with Reggio's images, and probe what makes them sublime enough to "open up the conscious and unconscious mind to another space, another dimension."

For starters, rhythmic patterns repeat in Glass' music for long durations with little to no variation, an effect that is agitating for some and hypnotic for others. Melodies abruptly shift without warning or steady buildup, often finding little to no musical resolution according to the traditional characteristics of Western counterpoint and 4/4 time signatures. Electronic organ often accompanies acoustic instruments, with the periodic splash of an exotic or more unusual instrument (i.e. the West African kora in *Powaqqatsi* and mouth harp in *Naqoyqatsi*). Rhythms might unfold gradually before receding, harmonies are virtually absent, and it would be more accurate to call melodies simply "musical lines" for lack of gradual progressions. Maycock suggests how the listener might approach the material, and uncovers two recurrent traits that bind Glass' style together beneath the salient qualities of his music:

> Accept what you are hearing and let it lead you its own way. You can follow the expansion of phrases if you like. You can switch attention from one part to another, you can observe when cycles begin and end or you can absorb the cumulative effect. Do not expect the same subjective emotion that comes from listening to conventionally expressive music. There are no climaxes and no low points. Instead it reveals two unexpected expressive qualities, which emerge after you have been listening for a while. However fast it moves, it develops a *massive calm and certainty*. And however abrasive and in-your-face the sound, it seems to have a character of *quiet inner joyousness*. [emphasis added] (28)

Like the consistent themes and serialized style of Reggio's filmmaking throughout *Qatsi*, this "massive calm" and "quiet inner joyousness" imbue a confidence and playfulness into Glass' music that keeps it gelled to the visual aspect. The seemingly swirling chaos of organ arpeggios, deafening horns, and rumbling timpani at various moments in *Koyaanisqatsi* still end up

sounding even-tempered because of how self-possessed the compositions are as a whole**.** Even under the duress of a fast moving, combustible world, the lack of all-out climaxes and low points keeps the music vacillating in a 'middle zone'; its sonority and cycles set the velocity of the visual content ablaze without overpowering it. The "massive calm and certainty" is an indispensable part of why the music works.

The "quiet inner joyousness" on the other hand is especially prevalent in *Powaqqatsi*, and channeled through major key tonics, exotic instrumentation, and children's choirs. Eastern scales are played on a violin as the free-floating camera tracks a woman who wears a crimson red veil, sitar drones and the tintinnabulation of bells accompanies women who spin pottery wheels, and a harmonium slinks in as the camera zooms out from a waterfall to reveal that it is gushing out from the bottom of a house. This is also rare moment when the ambient noise of a diegetic element is audible (the waterfall), and is heard before it is seen by way of a sound bridge. This allows the spectator's immersion into that space to be more organic as they marvel at the 'reveal' of the waterfall's geographical context, and surrender to it both visually and sonically. These kinds of compositions are the sonic counterpart to the slow motion and telephoto aerial photography Reggio uses "in order to sing the dignity of life in the less-industrialized Southern Hemisphere" (MacDonald 1988 141). Every time the "Anthem" in the film returns, the intensity and depth of its percussions increases and the horns become more triumphant. Moreover, the grace and joy of the music helps the viewer comfortably accept potentially alarming images at neutral face value.

For instance, an early moment involving a submerged horse surrounded by large incoming waves becomes part of the pastoral everyday life of the workers who are trying to remedy the situation, rather than a tense, perilous, or hopeless scenario. The steady synth pulses and

tambourine that drive the sequence forward facilitate a neutralized perspective. This tonal balancing act between the sonic and visual content works both ways as well. During the "India" sequence, a flurry of speedy mallet instruments seem to be whipping a fish-eyed crane shot until it is canted on its left side. The sonic tapestry nearly becomes overwhelming when extremely low brass enters the mix, just as two children are seen holding hands, casually smiling and walking. One glimpse of endearing gentleness keeps the manic pace of the music from ever becoming overly suffocating.

This is a paradigmatic example of the working relationship between Reggio and Glass, and is what the former calls "a hand-in-glove operation" where one medium motivates the timing and feeling of the other (MacDonald 398). Reggio expands on his rapport with Glass by saying: "I'll give Philip a poetic understanding of my feeling, and he'll try to translate it back through composition, through mathematics, which a lot of composition is, so that the *feeling* comes through" (397). Creative synergy between these two individuals is what enables a carefully weighted unity of excesses to shine through as a sublime aspect; they form two halves of the ecstatic dance that drives the films.

In terms of recording procedures, even if Glass can fit an entire ensemble inside of a recording space, he instead chooses to meticulously overlay single tracks and voices to gradually build up the full-bodied sound of an entire orchestra playing in unison. In an intriguing passage about the practical utility of Glass' studio recording procedures, Maycock states that:

> He could write passages that might be too fast for an instrumental section to play cleanly, knowing that the team could make them performable by a mix of keyboards and orchestral instruments. The orchestral instruments might play only some of the notes, but the presence of their tone colour and resonance allowed the ear to believe that they were playing all of them … *Koyaanisqatsi* contains passages that would be too dense and complex to work if played live. (154)

Like the 'magic' of time lapse that is now ubiquitous, the power divested in musicians by

technology might also be considered sublime in its transformative and perfectible capabilities.

The basic functions of automation, quantization, heightened accuracy rates, multiple recorded

takes, and the ability to defy the usual physical limitations of a live performance in a recording

studio reinvent the expressive potential of musicians.**[36]**

  Naqoyqatsi revises this (fabricated) ensemble approach to the material by including the

cellist Yo Yo Ma as a singular voice that courses through the film. The recording process was

flipped on its head in that Glass only had small fragments of preliminary footage to base his

compositions on, despite having spoken to Reggio at length about the content of the film for over

a decade (Maycock 139). So, while *Koyaanisqatsi* was conditioned by the ensemble in the

recording studio, and *Powaqqatsi* was assembled from various on-site world music sources,

Naqoyqatsi feels "like a big symphonic picture for the soloist" that humanizes the digitization of

its visual element (140).

  What makes *Qatsi's* music sublime is its ability to transmute Reggio's provocative images

into evocative compositions that annunciate their emotional resonance and main themes. Glass

intertwines landscapes, humankind, and overarching ideas into leitmotifs, making music the

closest thing that *Qatsi* has to a language along with Reggio's bombardment of semantic content.

Literally speaking, the only discernible words in *Qatsi* are embedded into his compositions: the

mantra-like repetition of the title in each film, the chanting of Hopi prophecies near

Koyaanisqatsi's ending, the Hispanic children's choir in "Serra Pelada," and the recitation of the

Muslim adhan in "From Egypt With Mr. Suso." By choosing to include Hopi and other non-

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[36] Although modern recording procedures strike intriguing parallels with the technological sublime, in order to move
on to the grit of the analysis, further exploration of this intersection must fall by the wayside.

English tongues, and by not providing definitions until each film's conclusion, the textual aspect of these chants also becomes overtly textural, as their meaning and affect can only be apprehended according to whatever direct sensory stimuli they produce.[37]

The trilogy also features the swelling glossolalia of choral voices, urban chatter accompanied by fuzzed out radio signals over the end credits of *Koyaanisqatsi*, and the sound of children playing in the streets in *Powaqqatsi*, but they offer no distinguishable words, and their texture also becomes enmeshed within the wider tonal structures of the soundtracks. Again, text can only be understood as pure texture, and the language that binds these ingredients together is the wider framework of Glass' compositions, and how they synergistically fit together with Reggio's image. To revisit Chernoff's axiom, the "purest representation" of Reggio's ideas are distilled and channeled by the "expressive condensation" of the emotional output in Glass' music. This is what makes the overall aesthetic package unified and sublime; through its meticulously built structures, it *exceeds* the boundaries of form and content in a way that can be deeply embodied.

The universally communicable but ambiguous nature of sublime cinema's visual content is mirrored by the fluidity with which the listener can approach the music itself. Using "Cloudscape" from *Koyaanisqatsi* as a key example, Maycock elaborates:

> If you listen to the music on its own you are not required to imagine clouds as you listen, they are just the reason the musical material is as it is and the track title 'Cloudscape' is there to point you in that direction if you happen to be curious. The music works well enough for listeners who are not aware of the title and that is a measure of how convincing

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[37] A visual parallel for this effect would be the dramatic Balinese Kecak trance ritual featured in *Baraka* (1992) where a circle of men wearing checkered cloth around their waists chant "cak" and sway their arms and bodies in unison as a reenactment of a battle from the Ramayana. Viewers unaware of the ontology and intention of this ritual can absorb the visual content in terms of its striking geometry and whatever elemental sensual responses the chanting induces, but this does not detract from the force of its intention, even if that intention remains shrouded to the viewer.

the artistic decision was. (41-2)

Other examples in *Koyaanisqatsi* function similarly: hovering keyboard textures during "Slow People" might intensify the way we not only see but *feel* smoggy heat waves; the titular chant of the film evokes a haunting ancient space even before the viewer sees the Hopi cave paintings; and cascading string sections are perfectly tuned to the visceral sensation of collapsing building in St. Louis. However, the affective potential of these pieces is not indefinitely shackled to these images, regardless of how seamlessly and ardently they work to emotionalize, empower, and complete them. Although an alchemical marriage is struck between the excessive audiovisual components in *Qatsi*, the music can be untangled from this original context. There is no right or wrong way or context to listen to these pieces, and this nebulous mode of listening combines with the textural excess and rhythmic tug of certain compositions in a way that draws a main artery back to what makes it sublime.

3.3   Entrainment – "Earworms in the Key of G"

"Music organizes time, enabling humans to experience even the most radical occurrences of temporal rupture as embodied feeling." – Dale Chapman, "Hermeneutics of Suspicion" (para. 40)

"The proponents of chronobiology, as it is called, point to the fact that biological or physiological rhythms appear to be essential to life itself." – Martin Clayton, Rebecca Sager, and Udo Will, "In time with the music" (5)

One of the most curious aspects about repetition is that it can make us hyperaware of variations as they occur. This applies to a line of music as much as to quotidian rituals that are interrupted by an unexpected obstacle (i.e. a traffic jam, a machine breaking down). If a person listens to a piece of music for an extended period of time (whatever subjective amount it takes for them go into a trance-like state), they can start imagining that its subtler sonic details are new variations, when in fact the hyper-vigilance of their perception is merely duping them into this

belief. Maycock illustrates these kinds of auditory hallucinations as being part of a practical psychology of listening:

> The ear accepts the illusion that more is present than really is there. The Looking Glass team has steadily become expert in a kind of practical psychology of listening – knowing what the ear will believe, in more and more circumstances. Good orchestrators have always had a feeling for acoustic effect and illusion, beyond the literal note-playing capability of the instruments, and this approach is a conscious extension of their skills. With the rapid development of digital sampling technology, the possibilities have grown ever more subtle. (154-5)

There is a deeper biological impulse at work in the practical psychology of listening and music production that can motorize repetitive musical structures in a way that leads to the biomusicological – or chronobiological – phenomenon known as entrainment.[38] More concretely: "Entrainment describes a process whereby two rhythmic processes interact with each other in such a way that they adjust towards and eventually 'lock in' to a common phase and/or periodicity" (Clayton, Sager, and Will 2). In *Qatsi*, the interlocking rhythmic processes operate in a twofold way: 1) the audio and video lock into one unified field of rhythm (a 'match on feeling' between editing and musical beats), and 2) the spectator's internal clock or body rhythm attunes to the compound audiovisual rhythm of the film. The serialism of Glass' scores work eminently well not only at locking into the rhythmic phases of the image, but also at engaging the spectator's chronobiology.

Entrainment can also take on more mundane and non-film related forms, such as a person tapping their foot to a rhythm, or even more mechanically, the way the pendulum of two clocks will synchronize according to the "sympathy of clocks" (Clayton, Sager, and Will 3) observed by

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[38] While entrainment will be addressed throughout this section in a literal chronobiological sense, I invite the reader to consider these findings in conjunction with a more metaphorical interpretation of the term by way of what Michel Chion calls *synchresis*: "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" (63). The synchronized biological mirroring that takes place between film and spectator during synchresis offers a more figurative companion definition for entrainment.

17th century mathematician Christiaan Huygens. What makes the entrainment of the music in *Qatsi* sublime is how that rhythmic coordination fuses the image and the viewer's experience together to produce an effect known as "synergetics, the theory that is concerned with how the cooperation of individual components of a complex system leads to the formation of new macroscopic spatial, temporal and functional structures" (4). Each individual component of *Qatsi's* complex system – one frame, one beat, one second of attention span – connects with the next until those microscopic details inflate into a macroscopic aesthetic structure like creative chain lightning. Without words or a formulaic story to jerk the spectator's attention away from the sheer sensorial output of these films, the accumulation of tiny details can inundate them to a point that the experience becomes fully embodied.

When entrainment is operating like a slickly oiled rollercoaster, it impacts the spectator's conesthesia (aggregate sensory self-awareness) and proprioception (awareness of the body's spatial positioning), and nudges their heartbeat and kinesthetic sensibility forward. This is what can end up giving the spectator a viscerally palpable impression that they are 'in the action' of the screen, despite remaining nestled in their physical (presumably seated) bodies. A profound sense of pleasurable internal motion can only be stimulated if the spectator is invested enough in the musical style to 'fall for' the entrainment, as if it requires a sonic suspension of disbelief. To provide a rudimentary formula: If active spectatorship leads to a more fully embodied spectatorship, it also leads to a more entrained spectatorship, and a feeling that the spectator is both inhabiting an elevated, active, "ecstatic body" on screen and a retracted, passive, "recessive body" (Barker 19) in their seat. The more acute the entrainment, the more engaged the spectator becomes, the more their "intentionality streams toward the world on-screen" (Sobchack 74) in a

phenomenologically meaningful way, and the more their proprioception seems to inch towards that transcendent ecstatic body rather than their immanent recessive body.

The irregular 5/4-time signature used in *Powaqqatsi's* "Anthem" is a basic example of how entrainment can be hardwired into specific metrical cycles. This piece re-emerges three times in the first half of the film,[39] lasting for approximately 8 minutes each time. "Anthem" is built up from two urgently bassy alternating synth chords, low drums, and vigourous tambourine before adding jubilant brass and carefree woodwinds by the halfway mark of each progression. Once all of the elements in the mix are locked together, the hermetic circular nature of the 5/4-meter crystallizes when two timpani hits right before the fifth beat signals the repetition of the cycle. This concise but unusual compositional structure, capped off by the timpani, gives the listener a sonic impression of 'spilling over' directly into the next cycle and makes them anticipate it kinesthetically. As aerial shots depict women balancing baskets twice the size of their bodies on their heads, men fishing a horse from a waterway, and disarmingly beautiful landscapes from the Southern Hemisphere at sunrise, the music complements the astonishing laboured efforts of these people with a distinctly physical sense of being pulled towards the next rhythmic cycle.

Further cementing the entrainment of this sequence, a counterpuntal call and response develops between the horns and flutes that fills in the sound spectrum's midrange, and reinforces the contrast between the harsh booming synth and the fluttering woodwinds, making the timpani even more affective when it enters as a singular unembellished accent. Each repetition of the phrase implants a greater anticipation for the rhythmic resolution of the following cycle,

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[39] There are slight rhythmic variations between each repetition, with the first version including 10 beats per bar, the second returning with fiercer rhythmic backing at 12 beats, and the third adding an entire choral section and clocking in at 13 beats.

although the quantity of cycles themselves seems indefinite once the spectator is locked into the rhythm. This is the very essence of entrainment when applied in a filmic sense: a narrowing between the visual and aural content that acts as a lure to engage the spectator's chronobiology. Without ever leaving their seat, the spectator feels an internal rushing motion that leads them through the film.

Another pared down aspect of *Qatsi* that can influence the force of the audiovisual entrainment are brief moments when diegetic actions are matched exactly by a beat. This kind of match on action ranges from abstract associations – a legato cello line 'opening up' just as archive footage shows Julia Louis Dreyfus laughing in *Naqoyqatsi* during "Religion" – to more concrete ones, such as when a gun shoots directly at the lens accompanied by a shrill whipping woodwind to kick off "Intensive Time," or a burst of brass synchronizes with a cannon firing into the sky during "Primacy of Number." An elderly lady in *Koyaanisqatsi*'s "Prophecies" exasperatedly taps the bottom of her lighter to get it working again, and the tempo of the re-emergent organ from the title sequence matches the pace of her tapping. In *Powaqqatsi* the most powerful moments of precise synchronization involve tools, such as when a machete chopping a coconut syncs up with the bass drum in "Anthem: Part 2," or when pickaxes and hammers are matched by beats during "Serra Pelada" and "Caught!" Like the two timpani hits in "Anthem," such moments enhance the entrainment due to the dynamic contrast they provide with the more heavily saturated sonic moments. These instances single out microscopic correlations within the macro-entrainment of the 'diegesis,' and render images as something symphonic by putting them in direct contact/communion with the music.

When asked what he would have done differently in *Qatsi*, Reggio reminisces:

In the case of *Koyaanisqatsi*, I feel that the experience was perhaps too intense. At one

point in the film, we were dealing with eleven polyrhythmic musical structures colliding all at once, for twenty-one minutes! That was a bit much. I can remember, having attended many public screenings of *Koyaanisqatsi*, that at the end of that sequence, you would hear an enormous sigh from the audience. Now on the one hand, that motivated me to say, 'Well, we probably did the right thing,' but on the other, I feel I may have battered the audience a bit too much. (MacDonald 396)

This anecdote is a testament to the physiological grip audiovisual content can have. Were it not for the excess of polyrhythms in "The Grid" (the twenty-one minute section in question), the entrainment might still be present, but not to a point of sublimity that engages the spectator's kinesthesia by way of surplus audiovisual stimulation, and leads to responses such as audible sighs of relief or breathy gasps of awe.

Some of the intense polyrhythms in question involve staggeringly fast keyboard and flute arpeggios, low horns that anchor the melody and ensure it doesn't fly out of structural orbit, and bloated choral voices phasing in an out like blimps. All the while people ascend escalators, veer through city streets, get caught in traffic jams, rush through grocery aisles, dance on quintessential 80s' neon disco floors, or stare directly into the camera with expressions that range from humoured, to burnt out, to insulted, as the camera careens through busy urban landscapes at rush hour. The kinesis of the audiovisual content is enough to cause motion sickness and temporal distortion, but it is the pitch-perfect synchronization of these excesses, underpinned by Glass' trademark "massive calm and certainty," that renders the twenty-one minutes as a bearable jolt of sublime entrainment. The mass-produced quantities of units in *Koyaanisqatsi* – whether countless arpeggios or thousands of cars – whir out of control while they somehow stay confidently grounded in the wider rhythmic framework. Sublime cinema can mesmerize while it repulses, always leading the spectator closer to the eye of the hurricane.

The end result achieved by Glass during "The Grid" approximates one of György Ligeti's

techniques, micropolyphony, which Tom Armstrong defines as: "the weaving together of a mass of melodic strands until the musical texture is saturated, obscures the identity of the individual strands resulting in a dense, shifting sound mass" (76). Glass' minimalism achieves the same effect by the sheer volume of its repetition and polyrhythms. The more a phrase repeats and entrains, the more it becomes an auditory equivalent of an optical illusion, until the 'syntax' of the music's language – each frequency of its phrases and motifs – dissolves into momentum; spastically pulsating masses of polyrhythms that drive the representational force of the image. When the searing quality of the rhythm and the quantity of its repetitions can no longer be counted by the captivated spectator, entrainment has moved from rhythmic coordination into the mathematical sublime.

Jos de Mul paraphrases Kant's definition of the mathematical sublime as being "evoked by that which is immeasurable and colossal, and pertains to the idea of infinitude" (34). When entrainment is activated by repetitive musical motifs – such as music in *Einstein* which involves an "apparently endless repeats of the same five chords in gradually changing rhythms" (Maycock 35) – and those repetitions are reflected by an immeasurable visual quantity of units (i.e. time lapsed clouds rushing over skyscraper windows, watery reflections in extreme slow motion, strings of binary code in CGI hyperspace), a point of audiovisual convergence is reached where "the beyondness of sublime metaphysics is captured through the mathematical sublime and its association with the infinite" (Brady 135).

"Train to Sao Paulo" in *Powaqqatsi* is a perfect encapsulation of how entrainment coincides with the mathematical sublime. A seemingly endless number of train carts pass from right to left across the horizon line in a medium-long shot that lasts nearly one and a half minutes. The percussions mimic the punchy triple metered rhythm of a locomotive, quick gusts

of brass and screeching strings emulate a train's horn and whistle, and syncopated shakers that sound like rattlesnakes twist the beat into a polyrhythm. The immeasurable number of train carts and their hypnotic velocity are replicated by the entraining rhythm. What the spectator sees immediately inflects what they hear, and vice-versa, to such a degree that the outcome is one akin to bidirectional synesthesia. In other words: our familiarity with the sonic traits of locomotives immediately establishes a portal of entrainment that uncoils into a mathematically sublime dimension when paired with the visual immensity and speed of the train itself. Although technically the audiovisual units are limited and finite (rhythmic cycles can be notated, every train has a finite amount of carts), they harbour an illusion of infinitude because "The behaviour of the whole system [can] thus be described as the sum of the behaviour of its parts" (Clayton, Sager, and Will 4). The spectator's time perception becomes diffuse, their sensory perception is entranced and overloaded, and they embody the kinesthetic surplus of the shot's synesthetic audiovisual elements more with each passing beat.

These musings on entrainment are beneficial because they foreground the active listener's productive capacity by offering "a new approach to understanding music making and music perception as an integrated, embodied and interactive process" (2) as opposed to two adjacent one way streets. There is still a plethora of research to be done on entrainment despite its primeval nature, as suggested by the discovery that "cyanobacteria, simple organisms that originated at least 3 billion years ago, 'have fully functional circadian clocks' [according to Michael Menaker], which may give support to the suggestion that biological rhythms and their entrainment are fundamental to life in any form" (5). This realization that entrainment can target both the lowest register of biological systems, and produce sophisticated sublime responses when

dynamic audiovisual systems lock into place in a film, makes it a fresh and exciting field of

inquiry.

3.4   Chills – "Fever Pitches"

"Has a chill in response to a dentist drill the same emotional meaning compared to a chill in response to
Rachmaninoff's 2nd piano concerto?" – Oliver Grewe, "Chills in different sensory domains" (2)

If the entrainment of a piece is successful, its psychophysiological effects can reach a point

of stimulation that produces chills or piloerection across the body. However, entrainment and

chills are not mutually dependent, and chills occurring *through* entrainment are only one way

they might manifest. Chills, also alternately examined and reevaluated in different branches of

biomusicology as shivers, *frisson*, thrills, or skin orgasms[40] (Harrison and Loui para. 6-14),

tackle the more ethereal qualities of sublime responses, involve subjective triggers, and are

trickier to discuss despite them unanimously triggering those moments of sensory rupture that

emerge from the upper register (brain and scalp) and shoot down the spine or arms.

According to Oliver Grewe, Bjorn Katzur, Reinhard Kopiez, and Eckart Altenmuller, "no

other known indicator of emotions combines a strong, positive, subjective feeling, and a

measurable physiological arousal response in one reaction" (Grewe et al. 2). Their research

demonstrates that chills can be produced by any sensory stimuli, and can induce positive *or*

negative emotional charges. However, touch, sound, and most interestingly, one's own

imagination and memory bank produced chills most consistently for test's thirty six subjects,

while images produced them the least (14). Furthermore, "sounds and tactile stimulation showed

an additional difference in heart rate" (14). In relation to sublime cinema, this might lead one to

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[40] Although for the sake of direct and easy application I have settled on primarily using the word "chills" throughout
this section, I would add to this list of subtly but inconsistently qualified responses the more colloquial term
"eargasm" which is distinctly linked to the climaxes within a musical structure.

speculate that 1) society is blasted with imagery more often than any other kind of stimulation, and has become desensitized to it, and 2) music and sound are necessary in order to turbo-charge an image and bring chill-inducing capabilities to the surface.

To clarify more of the findings from this study: "Chills in response to pictures were mostly described using the category 'startle/surprise,' chills in response to sounds by the category 'personal recollection,' and chills in response to music by the category 'increased attention.'" (14) If increased attention is the most common consensual criteria for what produced musical chills, and the mind is apparently a force to be reckoned with in terms of the physiological sensations it can spark, then it would also make sense that mindful 'close listening' would produce the highest output of shivers in *Qatsi*.

Philip Glass is an exemplary case study for chills since his music does have the capacity to irritate or even disgust as much as it can enchant or motivate; it is perched between the affective potential of the "delicious frisson" (Armstrong 71) that characterizes Burke's fear-and-awe-fuelled sublime, and the hair-raising-nails-on-chalkboard potential of its excessive qualities. Maycock hypothesizes that:

> The irritation factor [of Glass' music] is undeniable and appears to be caused by the lack of tonal tension and rhetoric. This applies to the minimalist pieces and to the recent concert works alike. It appears, on the basis of many years' experience, to be at the root of critical rejection. If the yardstick of your musical judgment is the Western tonal tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries, then the minimalist music is unacceptable because it rejects tradition, and the latest music is rather tame because it brings back some parts of the tradition in an apparently cautious way, but is insufficient to generate the binding force of classical-style tonal tension. (44)

This lack of tonal tension and rhetoric is precisely what enables the trance-like effect of *Qatsi*, but the more pertinent line of query is: what exactly allows it to produce chills, and can those subjective triggers be measured in any systematic way?

Based on Grewe and company's findings, the trigger for musically produced chills can range from: sudden dynamic or textural changes, threatening gestures, aesthetic awe, the entrancement of a voice, unexpected musical events, or shifts in loudness and contrast between two voices (2-3). The multivalence, subjectivity, and awe-striking nature of chills make it a shoe-in companion concept for the sublime, if not a direct physiological emanation of the sublime. Chills are sublime responses that have been rephrased and qualified in the realm of biomusicology as either "Peak Emotional Responses (PER)" by Grewe et al., or as "Strong Experiences with Music (SEM)" that can produce "a transcendent, psychophysiological moment of musical experience" (para. 5) according to Luke Harrison and Psyche Loui.

Transplanting these findings to the operative aesthetic framework of *Qatsi,* my own postulations as to what might generate chills include:

1) Abrupt and excessive beginnings of musical phrases, especially in combination with kinetic aerial camera movement,

2) Abrupt endings to musical phrases, especially after an extended period of entrainment,

3) Affective silences or quick dynamic changes within the music,

4) Slow, static, and/or haunting drones that make temporality seem more elastic,

5) The clarity of one or more voices entering the sound mix, especially while the camera captures a human subject with equal clarity,

6) Motifs that serve as framing devices.

I articulate these hypotheses with full acknowledgement that they are pseudo-scientific, subjective 'hunches' founded on how and where my *own* peak emotional responses became elevated enough to produce chills during the dozens of times that the *Qatsi* trilogy was screened

in preparation for writing this thesis. There might not be a surefire way of locating where chills erupt, but this peripatetic search for evidence is a sufficient enough starting point.

There is a moment right at the beginning of "Clouds" in *Koyaanisqatsi* when Glass' spacey synth kicks into high gear and the aerial camera soars just above the water level that is perhaps the most direct example of a moment that is prone to cause chills. The more pensive, calm, and mystifying buildup of slow synth throughout "Beginning," and the almost subliminally affective, wandering horns in "Organic" charges the film with tension that ruptures with the introduction of the fast tempo and omniscient camera movement in "Clouds." The first graceful stream from Yo Yo Ma's cello at the outset of "Primacy of Number" in *Naqoyqatsi* follows the more dirge-like, lamenting style of that film's opening in the same way, and provides the same forceful contrast.

On the reverse side of this equation, sudden dynamic shifts from richly layered, extended, and fast passages to sparse, slow, short sections can just as effectively produce shivers. The two eerie minutes of "Microchip" following the twenty-one-minute long overstimulation of "The Grid" is a prime example. The stark contrast from eleven hyperactive polyrhythms to amorphous haunting organ drones that are accompanied by the disturbing and poignant weightlessness of microchip images intercut with satellite photography of city layouts, shocks the spectator's sensibilities, as if flinging them from red hot activity to a cold blue steel landscape. The droning score activates the affective capacity of this visual juxtaposition: its molasses-like tempo complements the slow zoom out which reveals the parallellism and metaphor between image types. This observation also connects back with the previous section in a meaningful way by suggesting that the potency of a chill – how high the PER (peak emotional response) and how

susceptible the SCR (skin conductance response) – is predicated on the duration of previous entrainment.

A similar effect is produced in *Powaqqatsi* when the street congestion and mass of mallet instruments throughout "India" suddenly decelerates into blatant silence, and cuts to a ten second shot of currents rushing across a meteorological map. This feeling of being cut loose from the friction and hustle of city life – of going from multiple instants on crowded streets to drifting away from the entire world in abrupt orbit, like a static-ridden balloon – is a jarring enough contrast to produce chills. It is as if the spectator was previously an appendage of the traffic, and suddenly becomes the dissipation of currents.

Outside of dynamic shifts between Glass' compositions, affective silences can occur within individual segments as well. The horns that trail off during "The Unutterable" in *Powaqqatsi*, and the recitation of the Muslim "Call to Prayer" that is chanted in intervals during "From Egypt With Mr. Suso," are both embellished with acrobatic vocal ululations that include rests between notes/syllables. These silent passages allow the preceding sonic textures to really soak into the visual element, become atmospheric, and linger in the listener's ears. They instill contemplation, and draw fullness out from nothingness. Strategically placed intervallic silences is a paramount example of a compositional technique that can produce chills for some listeners.

Familiarity with a piece or motif can also be effective criteria for the production of chills, and expectancy violation in particular is "strongly correlated to the onset of musical frisson, such that some level of violated expectation may be a prerequisite" (Harrison and Loui para. 19). The simplest example would be exotic instrumentation that is unfamiliar to the listener. Some examples might include a reverb-drenched didgeridoo, a mouth harp**,** kalimba (a thumb piano found in East Central and South West Africa), balofon (a mallet instrument from Central Africa),

and the kora (a celestial-sounding West African lute-bridge-harp). Familiar instruments played in

an unfamiliar manner can also elicit *frisson*, such as during "Old World" in *Naqoyqatsi* when the

cello's shrill vibrato sounds more akin to a weeping rebab[41] than a standard orchestral instrument

as it is unleashed over an alien landscape of giraffes bounding across a turquoise field.

The same can be said of the now-mythic quality of Glass' organ. When the eerie

descending low notes in *Koyaanisqatsi* vibrate for the first time as the blood-red font of the

letters in the film's title ooze downwards at the centre of the frame, they move beyond the

expected qualities of an organ, and tap into something more arcane. The expected Church-like

context of an organ has migrated to "the most important of Hopi ceremonial spaces, the kiva, an

underground chamber legendarily modeled on the houses of the ant people, in which our human

ancestors found shelter in the three cataclysms that obliterated the three worlds before this one"

(Morris 131). Using no more than four notes, Glass' pared down take on the chaconne style

plants ineffable ancient mystery and modern myth as the film's main conceit.

The formalist defamiliarization that was set up in previous chapters is presented here in

terms of musical phrases rather than obtuse camera angles. Not being able to fully process the

stimulation with ears alone, not knowing what to expect after this introductory encounter with

the first film in the trilogy, the surplus affect of 'not knowing' makes the onus of that sense-

making process land on the spectator's hapticity, potentially triggering chills within the trilogy's

first minute. When the main theme re-emerges at film's end with the failed launching sequence

as both a visual ritornello and sonic framing device, the spectator is already familiar with the

mythic properties of the melodic progression, and this bookended return to the core mystery or

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[41] A one, two, or three-stringed instrument without a fingerboard dating back to the 8th century and used in various Arabic and Asian musical traditions.

message of the film[42] is just as capable of generating shivers.

Aside from unusual sonic textures, this sense of sonic familiarity can work more widely in terms of structure as well. One of the craftiest parts about the soundtrack in *Naqoyqatsi* is how well it complements the overtly manipulated nature of the images by half-quoting passages from the other two *Qatsi* films before veering in a different melodic direction entirely. The opening of the film, simply titled "Naqoyqatsi," offers a string progression that seems like it is about to rehash "Cloudscape" from *Koyaanisqatsi*, but refuses to resolve in a major key or oscillate around a series of fifths like that piece. Instead, the cello plunges into a lower octave in the phrase's second half, giving the proceedings a graver sound, and riffing on the listener's expectation for a 20-year old melody before taking a sharp left turn into darker territory. Like the vacant tomb-like building with vaulted ceilings that visually accompanies that introductory musical piece in *Naqoyqatsi*, what the spectator has become familiar with up to this point in *Qatsi* – inhabited, tangible, spatial dimensions and lush, energized music – has been hollowed out, and the dynamic subversion of the listener's expectations can readily lead to chills.

Choral voices can also be an intensely moving, elevating, and sublime part of a score. "Vessels" from *Koyaanisqatsi* is perhaps the most iconic example of choral voices used in a complex aesthetic way. This section of the film focuses on various modes of transit with a key focus on a massive aircraft that is naturally distorted by heat waves, and flattened by a telephoto lens in a medium long shot so that it appears to be slowly gliding towards and bulging at the lens for an eternity. The general salient quality of the choral voices produces an airborne sense of lightness, while the vast quantity of voices and the melodic lines of the sung material—rising and

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[42] Reggio says about the framed nature of *Koyaanisqatsi* that: "I started off with the lift off of this rocket, a metaphor for the celebration of modernity, progress, and development, and then I impose my own point of view, clearly, by including footage of the exploding rocket" (MacDonald 1992 390).

falling in dissonant countermeasures—opposes this with a bloated and chaotic bottom-heaviness. The plane, as a result, is rendered as a swollen, heavy-set, dark avenging angel of technology.

In another false return to a previous theme, during "Intensive Time" in *Naqoyqatsi,* an even more high pitched but morbidly dissonant choir hovers over tinkling glockenspiel and a slowly descending cello during what is one of the most striking all-around sequences in that film. Like the perpetual motion of Yo Yo Ma's cello, a digital painting morphs and undulates between dozens of famous artworks, providing split-second glimpses of canonical artwork by everyone from Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci to Vincent van Gogh and El Greco. In a synthesis of previous shiver-inducing techniques, the restless, polymorphic art piece and polyrhythmic music brusquely end, and the camera land on the face of a crying woman, fuzzed out in black and white pixels, hands extended as if they are surrendering, touching the screen, and trapped in a box. This is the closest *Naqoyqatsi* comes to channeling the ominous unhinged sensory effect during "Microchip" in *Koyaanisqatsi* by including a jarring dynamic switch from overstimulation to voided audiovisual space.

If not by will of contrast or complicated melodic textures, the chill effect of a chorus can be reinforced in another way when a single line of monophony gains a certain auric gravitas when paired visually with a human subject. The effect is especially poignant when that subject looks directly into the camera, generating an unexpected degree of intimate proximity and implicit dialogue with them.

"Prophecies" offers the most extended sequence of this when the Hopi prophecy translations revealed at the film's ending are chanted eight minutes earlier in their native tongue over many high angled medium portrait shots of pedestrians and destitute homeless people. The squalor and exhaustion visible on the faces of these street-dwelling subjects is both inflated by

the chorus, but also mythified to symbolize something larger than any one of their faces can express. Armstrong explains by way of Royal Brown that:

> Film music has a tendency to mythify the 'cinematic object-event' by which he means that the viewer experiences certain moments in the film paradigmatically, transcending time and space as constructed by the narrative. So, at the same time as helping to historicize (convince us as to the reality of), the cinematic object-event music dehistoricizes that event by encouraging a mythic reading of it. (76)

Since the subject of *Qatsi* is a re-stitching of reality, the mythic quality of the chanting used here assumes an additional level of pathos by historicizing *and* mythifying the image while luring the spectator into an intimate state of engagement with its human-sounding and human-looking layers. The prophetic and admonishing nature of the chant becomes a way for the viewer to connect with each of the visible subjects, even if the translation for that chant is not yet evident, and a sonic connective tissue that herds all the filmed subjects into a sense of community. One line of otherworldly monophony becomes the lens through which the spectator reads each street wanderer's facial expressions, and inflects how strongly he or she interprets the direness of each wanderer's living situation. What would otherwise simply be a shot of a derelict man checking his pockets for change, pulling out two quarters, and then gazing directly into the lens acquires an extra world's worth of gravity as the chanting seems to emanate from him, and binds him to all of the other subjects. Audiovisual parallels like this form a non-narrative sensorial discourse between seen and heard voices/subjects, and binds the cosmic universal themes of the films to their shiver-inducing potential.

Chapter 4: Conclusion – "Looking Back"

> "When you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you."
> – Friedrich Nietzche, "Beyond Good and Evil" Aphorism 146 (1886)

> "We're like that frog in the pot of water when it was cold, it's been heating up, we're already inflamed with the ism of technology. Scratch your surface, and it's within us all. We're like the aliens on this planet."
> – Reggio in an interview with Nikola Danaylov ("Singularity")

Some of the most riveting moments throughout *Qatsi* involve human subjects who stare directly into the lens, and express a range of emotions that vary from scorn to curiosity to giddiness. *Qatsi* shuns straightforward scopophilia by removing all traces of a sexually objectified other that is, as defined by Laura Mulvey, indispensable to "obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms" (171) in conventional Hollywood filmmaking. Human subjects confront the viewer directly and nullify the gaze's objectifying capacity by counter-offering a *reciprocal* gaze. Reggio's most recent film *Visitors* adopts this reciprocal gaze as its primary stylistic device. Whereas *Qatsi* reveals humanity's trance-like relationship with technology on a macro-level of landscape, *Visitors* evidences it on a micro-level of the human face and eyes—the supposed window to the soul. Echoing the sentiments of other utopian film theorists in the 1920s, Béla Balázs expounds this cinematic fascination with closeups and the human face and as "'microphysiognomics' [where] the invisible face behind the visible has made its appearance" (76). If the sublime has previously been described as something externally produced by audiovisual synchronization and excessive stimulation, it re-emerges in *Visitors* as a form of sublime that points inward through the eternal allure of sentient gazes, offering an "intensity and…mixed character" which Emily Brady underscores as key emotional components of any sublime response (131).

In a 2013 video interview conducted by Nikola Danaylov, Reggio revealed that he decided to shoot the entirety of the film in high-definition black and white in order to make the images more emotional, and remove the burden of precise representation to which contemporized colour images fall victim. 'Blackgrounds' were used as frames behind each subject to give them an illusion of more dimensionality and presence, and allowed Reggio "to put multiple faces together next to each other in pans and dolly shots *in the editing room*, and without any visual distraction from the intensity of the faces" (MacDonald 2014 para. 33). Lastly, a 4K digital medium this time around alleviated the great expense of having tangible film stock roll for ages. With the exception of segments that feature a rundown Six Flags amusement park and natural landscapes in Louisiana post-hurricane Katrina, *Visitors* is almost exclusively comprised of deliberately paced, long take portraiture of human subjects and one female low-land gorilla named Triska that opens and closes the film.

What *Visitors* lacks in number of shots (it consists of only seventy-four), it makes up for with the boundless depth of gazes and microphysiognomy on display. Sublime ambiguity in this film comes from the viewer's attempt to scrutinize and acutely recognize what these faces are actually conveying and – since the camera was tucked into various technological devices to capture these reactions – what device or event the subjects are interacting with that elicit their emotive facial patterns. Whatever technological activity the subjects are engaging with muddles the viewer's interpretative acuity and propensity for facial recognition, due to the concealed nature of those capturing devices.

Out of the seventy four shots, the most obvious giveaways for what activities subjects are engaging with don't involve faces at all, but rather, sets of hands 'assuming the position' on a computer mouse, trackpad, or video game controller. The actual technological apparatus is

relegated to the shadows in these sequences, and only the subjects' hands are illuminated, which immediately clues us in to what those hand gestures mean while simultaneously rendering the image as more spectral due to the removal of the actual device, advancing the notion that we are truly alien 'visitors' occupying a distant planet.

In order to distill meaning from *Visitors*, the spectator gazes at the subjects as they gaze into the unknown, and through that unknown apparatus – double coded as the camera and whatever vessel the camera is planted inside of – they gaze back at us. The active and fluctuating 'abyss' of each subject's gaze activates the spectator's reaction to that gaze, and determines the kind of internal dialogue the spectator will have with that gaze. Some viewers might become hyperaware of their own reactions and facial expressions,[43] or perhaps even get the (more irrational) sense that their own facial reactions are in some way influencing how the subjects' faces contort and emote, due to how human beings normally communicate face to face. There is an opposite kind of sense-memory at work here compared to *Naqoyqatsi*. In the former, the active viewer is invited to 'fabricate' an appropriate sensory reaction to digitally warped images. In the latter, the active viewer is invited to imagine what event and/or technology has triggered familiar human impulses (i.e. crying, laughing, sneering).

The inherent contradiction in the wake of *Naqoyqatsi* that *Visitors* addresses is that all of humanity seems wired into this ever-expanding mediasphere that allows us to have more digitally-accessible 'friends' than ever while remaining isolated. The fascinating allure and primal tug of something like faces 'calls us back home' to a kind of sublime that has been intrinsic to our nature all along: a human sublime; the mystery of unknowing hand in hand with the brazenness

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[43] Similar in kind to how the entrainment of Glass' music was shown to have an impact on the spectator's conesthesia and proprioception in section 3.3.

of connection. One dynamic look can bare the weight of infinite interpretations and an excess of emotive meaning. In *Visitors*, Reggio's provocative brand of beauty overflows into a congregation of intention spouting from one set of eyes; a legion of angels dancing on a single pinhead.

Technology might have dramatically altered how humankind arrives from point A to B in a never-ending search for knowledge and stimulation with ease of access and nano-sized information, but the tiniest glimmer of the human sublime can override the mesmerism of these technological trappings *even while subjects are engaging with those very same interfaces.* If *Koyaanisqatsi* illustrated a way of life that has been flung out of balance, the reciprocal gaze featured in *Visitors* is to some degree a gateway back into a more rarefied way of looking; a human equilibrium that burns despite all the smothering external influence and paradigm shifts in the world; a communion with previous selves; the embers of past lives shining through the transfixed eyes of a child; the god particle glittering like an Olympic torch behind the eyes of a Gorilla named Triska. *Visitors* is an extended treatment of the same themes Reggio first tackled in 1982, or as he states:

> It is a commitment that I have to the subject matter that motivates me to use this medium or this form, and my commitment is not with grace and gratuity, but like to — and I'll use the word like to — a progressive insane asylum: it gets progressively more focused the older I become. (Danaylov "Singularity")

The effect of having these portraits look back at us not only produces conflicting senses of the uncanny, discomfort, and curiosity, but also allows us to engage in an unspoken internal dialogue with the subjects. Microphysiognomy reconnects the viewer back to his or her own self-possessed humanity, despite each interview subject being filmed from the point of view of the technology they are using, or event they are attending. Although this reciprocal gaze gives

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agency back to the subject, the fact that their facial expressions and gazes are sculpted by the camera's presence in various devices they are interacting with also embosses the 'captured' nature of these moments. Each subject is captured by film on one hand, and captivated by a secondary unknown device on the other. Their state of trance is at odds with the freedom to look back, just as the active spectator's cinema-induced trance *relieves them of their active duty*.

The most productive and optimistic 'reading formula' for *Visitors* might then argue that:

1) The central use of a reciprocal gaze throughout the film courts degrees of active spectatorship that dismantles the traditional gendered and ideological framework of an objectifying gaze in favor of a subjectifying look,

2) This reversal of the gaze gives agency back to the filmed subject,

3) This returned agency produces a sense of communion and non-verbal dialogue between spectator and subject, and

4) This sense of overwhelming (perhaps even alien) communion and intimate contact gets back at the heart of what constitutes the sublime in the first place.

The grander project that is sublime cinema defamiliarizes, deterritorializes, and elaborates on how the spectator usually conceives of the world – what the spectator expects from the world – and reconfigures its elements in shocking ways. *Visitors* in particular renders faces as landscapes via microphysiognomy in the same way that landscapes can seemingly be miniaturized and depicted as anthropomorphic entities in the *Qatsi* trilogy. Ambiguated sensual content allows for an entire rainbow of textural readings, made available through one invisible mediating layer of technology in which one explicit apparatus, the camera, takes shelter. This allows the spectator to take shelter within the space created by their contact with each subject's reciprocal gaze— within the human sublime.

The form and content presented in *Visitors*, and the human sublime implied by the reciprocal gaze highlights how willingly any person, thinker, poet, filmmaker, or activist must embrace contradiction. This is reflected by the intractable mixture of feelings provoked by *any* variation of the sublime, sublime cinema's ability to be both critical and ambiguous in its stylistic approach, and is echoed by Reggio first-hand:

> I felt I had to embrace the contradiction and walk on the edge, use the very tools I was criticizing to make the statement I was making – knowing that people learn in term of what they already know. In that sense, I saw myself, if I may be so bold, as a cultural kamikaze, as a Trojan horse, using the coinage of the time in order to raise a question about the very coinage. (MacDonald 1988 140-1)

With these contradictions in mind, it is easy to see how criticism can be levelled against Reggio's filmmaking approach. *Qatsi* and *Visitors* can be construed as having a proselytizing or admonishing tone, even if there is more of an 'is what it is' presentational mode going on that serves to illustrate opposing qualities (i.e. the natural and synthetic; the grotesque and the beautiful) in equal measure, and to shine a spotlight on points of elevation as often as rock bottoms. The paradoxical and seemingly irreconcilable qualities of these films, just like their excessive aesthetic qualities, are what unify them.

4.1 Manifesto – "Looking Forward"

"These films are based on the premise that the question is the mother of the answer. There's no attempt to provide an answer. First of all, giving people answers does them no service; I found out as a pedagogue that the intrinsic principle of learning is the learner, not the teacher. All the teacher can do is set the environment...I'm hoping that people can let go of themselves, forget about time, and become mesmerized by the experience. Once the experience is had, and held, which is certainly not going to happen for everyone...then the process of reflection can start to take place."
– Reggio (MacDonald 1988 145)

"Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media."
– Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (738)

"Whatever you can do or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."
– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The spectacles of our age take place on the stage of our palms. The paradox of our age is that we are entranced by omnipotent access to information on screens that slow cook the rods and cones of our retinas like WD-40, and that we often use this god-like capacity for sight, discovery, and creation to fracture, automatize, and siphon our identities through programs such as Facebook and Twitter. We have a tendency to pool all of these magical, god-like resources into the stagnant waters of digitized routines. We brush our teeth and speak face to face with other human beings a fraction of the time that we spend checking emails, or losing ourselves to a wormhole of Youtube videos, Reddit threads, news feeds, endless aggregated Top 10 lists, buzzfeeds, and memes until the day is done. We re-represent ourselves, and curate how the rest of the world sees us with the aid of a dozen or so images of us eating breakfast (or simply smearing butter on toast), walking through crowded malls, riding a bus, lounging in front of impossibly majestic vistas (even if they have been Photoshopped), ad infinitum. We fabricate and proliferate these mundane flashes – our digital doppelgangers – in a way that bears a sense of belonging while ambiguating who we really are and what we are truly capable of. We no longer speak for ourselves; we let our fingers do the talking for imaginations that are so

imbricated in a technocratic web, so inundated with pungent images from global media, that they might have forgotten how to feel, perhaps as a defence mechanism.

The schism between the largely non-verbal (Instagram, Facebook, Tinder) and excessively verbose (blogs, reddit, Twitter) digital ways we convey ourselves neither wholly accounts for a unified identity or sense of self. We are left with an uncanny split between our material and immaterial selves, teetering on a fence between the real and hyperreal. Our nature becomes one of schizotypal self-coincidence. Our spiritual selves are now secular selves that have developed amnesia to the spiritualism that laces every routine action. What was once the soul in the machine is now a machine inside the soul.

I might be waxing prose here, but the true truth of our age, what Karin Littau identifies as the fatalistic eye hunger that drives our frenzied bodies closer to the heart of this swirling chaos known as the Information Age, is only reified at large by every giant broadcasted system crash, natural disaster, nuclear bomb test, gang war, or threat from CEOs to privatize water. This fatalism manifests in those smaller instances too: each time someone crosses a busy intersection while the light has turned amber, and stubbornly refuses to surrender until the next green light because they are manic multi-taskers who need to send a text message while swiftly crossing that road towards the amber light without looking up to see the oncoming truck. We live in an age where teenagers put their heads into microwaves and get high off of dead brain cells, while adults admonish this behaviour with a languorous tsk, smoking cigarettes, drinking craft beer inside of condominiums, and watching countless hours of television to kill time.

The spectacles of our age take place between the stage of our palms and behind the sockets of closed eyes and ears. The harried silence of one hundred people on a bus fixated on phones, tablets, and mp3 players has become ubiquitous to such a degree that eye contact is akin to

criminal offence, even at rush hour on a sunny day. Where the borders of the public sphere end is indiscernible from where the stitching of private space begins. We can lead double, triple, or quadruple lives while neglecting to water, feed, and foster our physical bodies. We can be racing through virtual space at hyperspeed, building and destroying alien colonies, or creating massive planetary reforms locked into the grid of a video game...all while not seeing the sun, exercising our muscles, or taking a deep purposeful breath in real life (or as the digifolk say nowadays: "IRL") for days or weeks at a time. We vegetate in the present while enlivening figments of someone else's imagination. Every digital wall we scratch can create new membranes of callous around our soul and break down our capacity for human communication. We are obsessed with abbreviations and condensed packets of information, but the volume and reach of that abbreviated language is increased tenfold by the mediating platforms that court such inane proliferation.

We would like to connect with each other, but are more comfortable doing it remotely a few rooms or miles away. We would like to connect with each other, but at times don't remember enough about ourselves outside of these mediating interfaces to actually connect face to face. The wonders of technology are the worries of our age that keep us too preoccupied to worry. I am a hypocrite furiously typing about non-verbal communication on a laptop with music blaring in the background while waiting for the next email or text message to vibrate through my phone, and whisk me to work in a different direction.

As population has become exponentially denser throughout the world, the number of predominant languages used has shrunken to a fraction of its former size. Technology keeps us sedated and on call 24/7 like doctors gradually suffering from the same pandemic whose name has been safeguarded by a non-disclosure agreement. Reggio's films are not prophetic, they are

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blatant broadcasts of reality that ambivalently demonstrate how caught up in its machinations we have become. The power of these films is that they nudge us out of quotidian observances to regard the familiarity of these machinations from defamiliarized vantage points. Unconscious observance of those quotidian rituals becomes conscious observation of how they operate within a wider sociocultural framework.

More than any other film genre or body of work, sublime cinema captures these prickly conundrums. Even the earliest city symphony in 1921 (*Manhatta*) or earliest offering from the Lumières in 1895 (*Exiting the Factory*) cannot help but promulgate thoughts about the current state of technology and urban grids when viewed in retrospect. Try as we might, we cannot consider art beyond the contextual scope of this technologically mediated moment. These highly kinetic, non-verbal films are an integral part of the ongoing discourse with the wider scope of this tech-dominated world, and warrant further exploration as to what determines their efficacy not only as art, but also cultural artifacts.

For all their kinetic verve and sublime bite, Reggio's films are still life offerings or time capsules of the Information Era. They circle around what can make this era self-destruct, but they also pinpoint what makes it radiant. The remedial northern star at the end of their monochrome rainbow is to not forget to cherish the smaller things that we might have taken for granted while fixated on the big picture; to not forget the bigger picture while cherishing those smaller things; to approach the breakneck acceleration of the world with steadfast baby steps, compassion, heightened awareness, and a healthy dose of scepticism. On an elemental level, sublime cinema is not only about reinvesting cinema with magic, formal possibility, and universal communication, but identifying that those same glowing traits remain fixtures in the world around us at all times. Through the haze of misinformation, fear-mongering, and moral

turpitude of hegemony, there is still boundless connection, awe, renewal, and life-altering creativity to be had.

Sublime cinema is not only a clarion call for active embodied spectatorship, but also for humankind to reclaim its creative birthright, and become active participants, shapers, and inventors of a beautiful/horrifying world in crisis. As de Mul says of this era's genetic and synthetic experiments: "With our attempts to cultivate nature, humankind causes the rising of a next nature, which is wild and unpredictable as ever" (33). This meets McLuhan's "final extensions of man" halfway. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to explore what "next nature" entails, or what Reggio calls the "cyborg state" (Danaylov) that humankind now finds its likeness pressed up against, these notions feed our dreams as much as our realities. The new nature that has distracted us from old nature – that old ecosystem's illusory effacement, especially in urban hubs where gardens are more often than not man-made and manicured – also allows for its potent rediscovery, just like the infinite magnetic encounter with a human face. The more the remnants of old nature are supplanted by the hardwired technological sublime of next nature, the more its capacity to serve as a sanctuary and means of respite from the hustle-bustle of city life is renewed. Those natural vistas and face-to-face human dimensions can be a sanctuary from the depersonalization incurred by technology *even while* that same technology offers access, possibility, and longevity previously thought unimaginable. Nature, like the sublime, chases its own tail with each permutation until it finds itself back where it started.

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